

Trans-Altai Sustainability Dialogue

June 13-14, 2023 Mongolia

Keynote Address

Kim Young-joo, Deputy Speaker
National Assembly of the Republic of Korea

(Check upon delivery)

H.E. Zandanshatar Gombojav, Chairman of the State Great Hural of Mongolia,
Professor Shin Gi-wook of Stanford University,
Mr. Ban Ki-moon, former Secretary General of the United Nations,
Distinguished guests,

It is a great pleasure to be here.

I am Kim Young-joo, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea.

I am honored to participate as a keynote speaker in the Trans-Altai Sustainability Dialogue held in Mongolia, with the majestic Altai Mountains stretching to the west.

The slogan of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), "Leave no one behind," resonates deeply with us. It is a goal that cannot be achieved without the empowerment of women.

In several parts of Asia, however, women still face discrimination in many areas of society, including politics and economy.

In today's dialogue, I will share my personal experiences and those of South Korea in the fight for women's rights and explore ways to promote sustainable development in the Trans-Altai region in which Mongolia is located.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before going into politics, I was an ordinary employee at a bank.

Then one day, I became aware of various forms of discrimination against women in the workplace.

Not only did women's salary increase at a significantly slower rate than men even though they did the same work, but being a female worker was a title in itself, with no opportunity to compete for promotions on an equal footing with male workers.

Women workers had to quit their job when they got married, and of course, there was no maternity or paternity leave at the time.

I could not tolerate not being treated equally to male workers simply because I was a woman, and thus, spearheaded a movement to eradicate gender-based discrimination.

My activities, however, failed to capture the attention of the labor union's leadership, which was mostly comprised of men.

Undeterred, I proposed that all female members leave the union, thus alerting the leadership of the issue of gender discrimination.

Even after convincing the union, it was an uphill battle, but I did not give up.

To eliminate the discrimination between male and female bank workers doing the same job in the same place, I personally sought out legislators to raise awareness of the blatant discrimination in the workplace and requested they amend the law.

Finally, in 1989, eight years after I started working in the labor union, I succeeded in getting the principle of equal pay for work of equal value enshrined in law.

We had managed to break down the wall of discrimination after years of persistent efforts.

This experience made me realize the importance of legislation and inspired me to pursue a career in politics to empower women and create a world without discrimination.

However, it was not easy for a woman to become a Member of the National Assembly in South Korea.

The Republic of Korea granted women the right to vote since the establishment of the government in 1948, but in the 1948 Constitutional Assembly, there was only one female member out of a total of 200, and the number of female lawmakers did not exceed 10 until more than 50 years later, in 2000.

It was harder for the number of female lawmakers to reach double digits than it was for female bank workers to be treated equally with their male counterparts.

In the 2000 election, however, South Korea elected 16 women to the National Assembly, and when I first joined the National Assembly in 2004, 39 women were elected, more than double the number of women elected four years earlier.

This dramatic increase in the number of women lawmakers since 2000 is due to electoral reforms that promote women's participation in politics, such as proportional representation. The National Assembly amended the election law to require political parties to nominate at least 50 percent of their candidates for proportional representation in the National Assembly and local councils, and to recommend candidates falling under every odd number in order of the candidate roll from among women.

In addition, in local council elections, the law required political parties to nominate women for at least 30% of the total number of local council seats across the country.

More than 20 years later, these changes are showing results.

Today, the number of women parliamentarians in South Korea has risen to 57 out of a total of 300, and the proportion of women in local councils has also increased, with women representing 20 percent of members in metropolitan councils and 33 percent in municipal councils.

This is profoundly meaningful because not only has the number of female politicians increased, but women are holding key positions in the National Assembly.

The role of women in government is also undergoing a gradual expansion. I was appointed the first Minister of Employment and Labor in the Moon Jae-in administration in 2017, and at the time, women were appointed to 30% of ministerial positions in the cabinet.

From 2020 to 2022, five of the 17 standing committees were chaired by women, and for the first time in its history, the National Assembly elected a woman to serve as deputy speaker of both the first and second half of the four-year term of the 21th National Assembly.

This is an especially personal matter for me because I was elected as deputy speaker in a fair competition against my male colleagues in the election.

I do not intend to stop here, but will continue to move forward to open a new chapter in the history of Korea.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The experiences I have shared with you about myself and the Republic of Korea, and the recent encouraging results are a culmination of a long, hard fight. It was not *my* fight, but *our* fight.

Today, however, discrimination and unfair treatment of women still persist in many parts of the world. Nevertheless, I believe that true gender equality is possible if we work together to create systems for women empowerment - not alone, but together; not by women alone, but together with men.

And, as the slogan of the SDGs states, no one will be left behind when the systems for gender equality that we have created together are established in each country.

On the occasion of today's Pan-Altai Sustainable Dialogue, I look forward to seeing the elimination of discrimination against women in your countries and around the world.

For that to happen, we will all have to work together.

Thank you for listening.