Women’s Conscription in the South Korean Army

Not too long ago, there was an interesting review on the NEO website about women in the armies of the Middle East. Continuing with this theme, the author will talk about women in the military in South Korea outside the Sex and Violence theme.

It’s about two pieces of information. First, in 2021 the idea of women’s conscription in the context of a chronically low birth rate began to be discussed. According to the Constitution, women are not required to serve in the Army, while all able-bodied adult men between 18 and 28 must serve in the Army for 18 to 22 months. But women can join the Army as both officers and non-commissioned officers, and in 2020 the number of women in the military was 7.4%, 0.6% higher than the previous year.

In 2010, 2011, and 2014, the Constitutional Court ruled that male bodies are more fit for combat. Even physically capable women can face problems during training and combat due to their biological nature, pregnancy, or childbirth.

The discussion occurred in April, when MP Park Yong-jin, an unsuccessful presidential candidate who dropped out of the race with about one percent of the vote in the primaries, proposed that the country replace the conscription army with a voluntary one, with both men and women undergoing basic military training for 100 days.

As Park stated, “With women serving in the military, we can shorten the mandatory service period while expanding...
the number of people subject to the service. This can also put an end to the unnecessary controversy on sexual discrimination about whether to give advantages in hiring to those who fulfilled their military service, as well as other conflicts related to service exemptions”.

By benefits, the following is meant. Previously, when recruiting for the civil service, those who completed military service were given extra points. But in 1999, the Constitutional Court made a landmark decision, declaring such an advantage to be gender discrimination. If the country accepts his proposal, the size of Korea’s active military service would be from 150,000 to 200,000, down from 555,000 now, but the troops would consist of an elite force.

Ha Tae-keung, a Conservative Party presidential candidate, also proposed mandatory military service for women. This candidate proposed forcing men and women to do mandatory military service for one year: “genuine gender equality can only be achieved when women are given equal opportunities to participate in domestic defense. The one-year mandatory service by both men and women, combined with both conscription and voluntary recruitment, will enable maintaining 500,000 in the forces, even if the military service is shortened to one year.” According to Ha Tae-keung, it is prejudice to say that defensive power would be impaired if women joined the military. In a 21st-century military focused on science and technology, physical strength and condition don’t have as much influence.

At the same time, a petition that gathered some 300,000 signatures appeared on the Blue House website, suggesting something similar: With the ever-decreasing birth rate, the Korean military is having serious difficulty recruiting troops. According to the anonymous author, “The notion that women’s bodies are not fit for military service, at a time when women are being recruited as commissioned or noncommissioned officers, can only pass as an excuse. Women are not only people who should be protected but can also be reliable comrades defending our country. Therefore, I ask the government to consider instituting a draft for women.”

On June 18, 2021, the presidential office Cheong Wa Dae responded to the petition with a “roundish” rejoinder to the issue should be resolved reasonably after sufficient public discussion and social consensus. “A conscription system for women is not just a matter related to the military manpower recruitment... There should be sufficient preparations and research on the military service environment and gender-equal military organizational culture before the female conscription system is implemented”. Ministry spokesperson Boo Seung-chan also said that “any changes should be decided after a comprehensive review on the military efficiency and social consensus”.

Those who oppose women’s conscription say the debate should only begin once the military has overhauled its male-dominated culture and eliminated other forms of social discrimination against women. For example, Democratic Party lawmaker Kwon In-sook, a women’s rights specialist, partially agrees with Park’s idea, as it would increase the number of female soldiers in the military, thereby promoting gender equality in society. However, it is still too early to talk about conscripting women into the military, as it is an additional duty.

Korean Times experts said changing a male-centric military culture to one that is more female-friendly and equal to that of men should happen before discussing the conscription of women into the military. According to the 2019 Armed Forces Human Rights Survey released by the National Human Rights Commission of Korea, 26.4 percent of female sergeants and officers have experienced discrimination.

Furthermore, Park and Ha’s statements were perceived by the audience as more of a political stunt to gain the support of young people by stirring up gender conflict. For this or another reason, both presidential candidates dropped out of the race after losing the primaries by a significant margin.

Then, amid the sex and violence scandals the author has written about, the debate about compulsory military service for women all but disappeared from the public sphere. But the issue of female conscription is unlikely to go away as long as the country’s record-low birth rate persists, said Hong Hyung-Shik, director of the Hangil Research sociological center. In 2020, the number of deaths exceeded the number of newborns by 33,000, and that’s a trend. Moreover, not all men are morally and emotionally fit to serve.

What does public opinion say? A May 25-27 Gallup Korea poll showed 46 percent of respondents supported the idea, while 47 percent said only men should be drafted. In another survey conducted in May by the newspaper Hankook Ilbo, 78.9% of men in their 20s and 70% of men in their 30s said they believed discrimination against men was serious, including those of military service.

Secondly, the story of Byun Hee-soo, which we have already written about, continues. As a reminder, Byun Hee-soo enlisted in the military as a man. In November 2019, while on vacation in Thailand, he underwent gender reassignment surgery. The staff sergeant then expected to continue serving with the women, but in January 2020,
she was denied by military commanders because the loss of genitals is classified as a physical disability under military law. In addition, military doctors considered the decision to change gender to be a manifestation of mental health issues, adding that there are currently no rules governing transgender service and her dismissal is not a manifestation of “unfair discrimination.” Soon after her dismissal, Byun Hee-soo appealed the decision, accusing the military of being “deeply intolerant” of sexual minorities, but the appeal was rejected. Last March, Byun Hee-soo was found dead at home in an apparent suicide.

On October 7, 2021, the Daejeon County Court ruled in favor of the deceased transgender man, “Because she applied for a sex change in court and reported it to the military, she should have been considered a woman when the military hospital checked whether she was fit for duty,” the court said in the decision. Then, in deciding that the plaintiff was unfit for military service, the military failed to examine all factors, such as special circumstances in the military, fundamental transgender rights, and public opinion. It is emphasized explicitly that loss of genitals is not a good reason to be discharged from the military. Byun supporters and human rights groups welcomed the verdict, saying it will be remembered in history as a “sign of hope.” They also demanded an apology from the Minister of Defense and called on the Government to develop measures to protect the rights of sexual minorities.

On the same day, October 7, Yonhap News Agency reported that the Defense Ministry plans to begin a study on the possibility of transgender people serving in the military. The armed forces said they “respect” the court’s decision, adding that they have not yet reached a final conclusion on whether or not to appeal it. But on October 20, a Defense Department spokesperson told reporters on condition of customary anonymity that the Army had decided to appeal the decision and ask the Justice Department for a ruling.

It did not work. On October 22, the Justice Department ordered the military to abandon its plan: “The court’s ruling is not about allowing transgender people to serve in the military but is saying the military’s compulsorily discharge order against the deceased, who was a woman at that time... is unlawful based on related laws.”

You might think this is a story about the whims of tolerance, but it’s not because the demographics of ROK need a way out. To counter the demographic crisis, the military is already downsizing its armed forces. The military has been reduced from 618,000 in 2017 to 530,000 in 2021, and there are plans to reduce it even further to 500,000 next year to remain at that level.

According to government statistics, about 330,000 of the current 530,000 active military personnel are conscripts. The military needs about 222,000 recruits each year to maintain a military force of about 500,000 with about 18 months of service. Considering that about 10% of those subject to conscription cannot perform military service due to health or other reasons, the number of men in this age group should be at least 247,000.

However, the outlook looks dim as the population in the demographic group in question is expected to fall below 240,000 in 2025, less than 200,000 by 2037, and as low as 146,000 by 2041. By then, a fundamental decision is needed, and a women’s draft or transition to a voluntary basis is already among the proposed ones.

In the meantime, the ROK Ministry of Defense plans to increase the number of female sergeants and officers and the proportion of civilian personnel in the armed forces so that its armed forces can focus more on military tasks rather than administrative work.

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