On March 13, 2022 the South Korean president elect, Yoon Suk-yeol, announced to journalists that the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family had outlived its usefulness and that another more effective state structure is to be created in order to resolve the problem of gender equality.

The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (or, more literally, the Ministry of Women and Families) was established in 2001 under President Kim Dae-jung. The ministry was created in order to fulfil his electoral commitments and its goals included promoting gender equality in society, promoting women’s involvement in public life and combating domestic and sexual violence.

Over the last 20 years or more the ministry has been something of a bone of contention: with each change of administration its remit has been either increased or reduced. In 2008, President Lee Myung-bak planned to abolish the Ministry, but following a wave of protests in 2010 it was decided to reduce its staff and extend its remit by making it responsible for issues relating for families and teenage children. Currently the Ministry is responsible for a range of issues, from gender equality to families, teenagers and demographics.

Right from the beginning, the Ministry’s activities were controversial, with the most common criticisms being:

- That it was openly “biased in favor of women,” a policy that tended to anger young men, who were opposed to what
they saw as its unfair reverse discrimination and gender quota policies. One of the Ministry’s “achievements” was to cancel the system of awarding additional points in job interviews to men who had completed their military service.

- That it was behind the passing of the so-called Cinderella Law, which forbade children under the age of sixteen to play online video games between midnight and 06:00.
- That Korean families are changing, and a new approach to the separate treatment of men and women is required now that gender equality had been achieved. Those problems that remain can be dealt with by the Social Welfare, Labor, Education and Justice Ministries.
- That it failed to respond adequately to a recent scandal involving alleged sexual assault of women by high-ranking civil servants. The Ministry did not comment on the allegations and critics accused it of “ignoring the rights of female victims of sexual assaults and toady ing to Moon’s administration.”
- That it failed to condemn the actions of Yoon Mee-hyang, a close associate of President Moon. NEO has already reported on her involvement in the “comfort women business” scandal: while serving as the head of an NGO tasked with defending the rights of wartime sexual slavery victims she allegedly embezzled the NGO’s funds.
- That it was involved in projects outside its remit, including a 2.5 billion won ($2.2 million) project to support development in Indonesia, at a time when South Korea had more than enough problems of its own to deal with.

The Ministry’s supporters, on the other hand, insist that there is still a real need in the country for a state body that protects the rights of women from disadvantaged families and addresses problems caused by the dominant position of men in South Korean society. As for the Ministry’s effectiveness, they highlight a number of key achievements, including the important role it played in the abolition of South Korea’s outmoded patriarchal family system (which prevented women from being the head of a family), the passing of laws prohibiting domestic violence and sexual trafficking of women, and the expansion of the program supporting women unable to continue with their careers.

If the Ministry was not as effective as it could have been, that is down to the lack of funding. In 2022, its budget was 1,465 billion won, 0.24% of the total state budget, up from 0.22% in 2021. This was the smallest budget of all 18 ministries and other major state bodies. Moreover, most of the budget was spent on supporting families rather than addressing women’s problems - in fact it allocated just 7% of its budget to women’s issues and gender equality projects. As a result the Ministry is in such a difficult financial situation that it is unable to perform its main role, i.e. representing women’s interests.

Women’s rights groups, however, tend to refute the above criticisms - as they see it, the Ministry is being blamed for problems that are due to South Korea’s male-dominated culture. South Korea’s Women’s Party (a genuine political party, but with no MPs) takes the position that the fight against misogyny is the responsibility of politicians, not the Ministry, and that it is not simply a matter of funding.

According to Shin Ji-yeah, head of the Women’s Politics Network, the last 10 years have seen a steady growth in sexual crimes, while the number of murders, arson attacks and other violent crimes has fallen.

The first indication of trouble for the Ministry came on June 9, 2021, when the newly elected leader of the Conservative People Power Party, the 36-year old Lee Jun-seok called for its abolition. Mr. Lee is often seen as representing the views of Korean men in their 20s and 30s. Among other things, he promised to cancel the quota system that favored female candidates during the selection process for party members.

According to a survey conducted in July 2021, 48% of respondents approved the abolition of the Ministry. Significantly, 61% of men and 35% of women were in favor of the abolition.

The debates on the future of the Ministry flared up again in October 2021, when Yoon Seok-yeol, selected as the Conservative Presidential candidate, announced that “the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family failed to properly perform its role to accomplish gender equality, but rather disappointed the public by treating men as potential criminals... I will reorganize the ministry and readjust its tasks and budget so that the renewed ministry can embrace diversity and realize practical gender equality between men and women.”

In response organizations supporting women’s rights accused Mr. Yoon of trying to provoke conflict between men and women in a bid to attract young male voters. But it should be noted that previously Mr. Yoon had, despite the opposition of party leader Lee Jun-seok, made concerted efforts to attract female politicians to the party, among them Shin Ji-yeah.

On January 7, 2022 Yoon Suk-yeol wrote in a Facebook post that “the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family should be abolished.” His announcement went viral, and provoked various different reactions from the main political
On March 8, 2022 Moon Jae-in made what can be interpreted as a veiled criticism of Mr. Yoon’s promise to abolish the Ministry. In his first comment on the subject since it became the subject of debate in the presidential election campaign, he also said that the Ministry was not solely aimed at supporting women, but also vulnerable families, including single-parent families and childcare services.

That was just one day before Yoon Seok-yeol was elected President. As readers will remember, 58.7% of men between 20 and 30 voted for Mr. Yoon, while 58% of women in the same age group voted against him. And now he has announced that it would be better to focus on more specific issues. Discussing the possibility of cancelling the system of guaranteed places for women in state bodies, Yoon Seok-yeol has affirmed that every sphere is important to use the most qualified professionals irrespective of their gender, and that artificially creating separate places for women does not serve to strengthen national unity.

Women’s rights activists have called on the President-elect to step back from his campaign pledge. A coalition of 27 women’s groups held a press conference in which they accused Yoon Seok-yeol of inciting hatred and exacerbating the gender divide.

It is important to look at the possible consequences of the decision and the opportunities it might bring. Mr. Yoon’s administration will find it difficult to wind up the Ministry, since that would require the approval of the National Assembly, currently dominated by the Democratic party. Moreover he is facing fierce resistance not only from women’s rights groups but also from younger female voters. Especially since the Democratic Party, now in opposition, has decided to reinvent itself as the “Party of Women.” Between March 9 and 13 the Party appointed 39,000 new members, 72% of them women, who are “alarmed by the sexism and hatred towards women evident in some of Yoon Seok-yeol’s policies.” The Democratic Party appointed 26-year-old Park Ji-hyun, a high-profile campaigner against Internet-related sexual crime, as the acting head of its Emergency Response Committee.

If the Ministry is disbanded or its functions are split between other ministries then it is likely that the gender equality policies and programs will be cut back - but, naturally, the problems will remain! Of the 38 member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, South Korea has the highest disparity between men’s and women’s salaries - in 2020, women earned an average of 31.5% less than men.

Men, but not women, have to do military service in Korea, they are more likely to commit suicide than women and they have a shorter life expectancy. Nevertheless, those factors do nothing to alter the fact that Korean women frequently suffer discrimination and violence. A clear example of this is the corporate culture that has made pregnancy such a taboo that women feel pressurized to resign as soon as they become pregnant. It is not surprising that birth rates in South Korea are so low. That is why certain experts see the abolition of the ministry as unrealistic and likely to exacerbate gender conflicts and damage Yoon Seok-yeol’s ratings.

In future articles this author shall continue to focus on the battle for the Ministry’s future and the problems faced by women in South Korea.

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