Korean academic women: Multiple roles, multiple challenges*

LINDA K. JOHNSRUD
Associate Professor of Education, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, U.S.A.

Abstract The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Korean academic women regarding their faculty careers within Korean universities. Personal interviews were conducted with thirteen female faculty members as well other informants (administrators, male faculty and graduate students) at three large private universities in the Republic of Korea: Yonsei University, Ewha Women's University and Dankook University. The study focuses on 1) the experience of Western-trained academic women in securing faculty positions in Korean universities, 2) the work load and responsibilities of women faculty within the academy, and 3) the impact of their personal lives and social roles on their professional achievement and satisfaction. Comparisons are drawn between the experiences of these Korean academic women and what we have learned about the experiences of academic women in Western institutions.

The comparative examination of the participation of women academics in higher education world-wide is just beginning. We have little knowledge of the backgrounds and experiences of faculty women who are entering the male-dominated institutions of higher education in modestly increasing numbers. Although the research to date is not cumulative or systematic in approach and is often culture-bound, Marie Eliou (1991) argues that universal patterns are emerging. She suggests that the under-representation of women in the academic profession, the inequity of distribution of faculty women by institutional prestige and rank, and the uneven and hampered careers of academic women relative to their male peers are all aspects of a pervasive pattern of gender inequity in aca deme.

The demographic evidence is accumulating to provide support for this pattern; nonetheless, in order to establish commonalities, we must continue to identify differences. Studies that explore the experiences of academic women within the context of their national and cultural setting broaden our understanding of the experiences of all women. The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of Korean academic women regarding their faculty careers within Korean universities. Broadly, the study sought to address two questions: 1) what are the experiences of Western-trained Korean academic women in faculty positions in their home institutions, and 2) how do these experiences compare to what we have learned about the experiences of academic women in Western institutions?

Perspectives

There is a danger in examining the experiences of women in one culture from the

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vantage of another culture, particularly when the observer has a Western perspective and the observed have an Eastern perspective. It is incumbent upon the observer to not bias the account by imposing her own perspective and/or erasing the culture of the observed (Strathem 1987). To that end, it is important to clarify that the research on faculty women in the USA has provided a perceptual framework for this comparative work. This study is grounded in what we have learned about women’s experience in the academy in the West and other industrialized nations as well as in the broader experience of the changing role of women in Korea.

Women’s experience in western academic institutions

It is increasingly clear that in U.S. institutions, women experience their academic careers differently than their male colleagues experience theirs. Most frequently documented is the difference in salary which persists across all academic ranks (Chronicle of Higher Education 1991). Other, more subtle disparities also distinguish women’s experience. For example, faculty women report greater social isolation (Yoder 1985); spend less time in research-related activities and more in teaching (Finkelstein 1984); spend more time in service to the university (Carnegie 1990); are more likely to have their scholarship trivialized and discredited (Kritek 1984); and receive less return to the quality of their publications than men do to theirs (Persell 1983). Women faculty at one research university report more difficulty with relationships with their departmental colleagues as well as with their departmental chair, and more women who leave their positions cite these negative relationships as a primary reason for leaving (Johnsrud and Des Jarlais 1994). Faculty women report that they feel like “outsiders,” that they do not belong (Aisenberg and Harrington 1988).

In an examination of elite research universities in the U.S., Moore and Sagaria (1991) attribute the marginalization of women academics to professional networks that serve men and exclude women. They argue that the exceedingly small numbers of women in the elite institutions result in their token status within departments and their lack of opportunity for sponsorship and mentorship. In addition, because women serve as the editors of so few of the leading academic journals (of 86 examined, only 15% were edited by women), they play only a peripheral role in the control and dissemination of knowledge.

These findings echo the patterns of under-representation and disadvantage Eliou (1991) identified in studies of academic women in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Finland, Switzerland, Belgium, Sri Lanka and Canada. In her own study of higher education in Greece, Eliou found that faculty women had made few gains in the past twenty years—a consequence she attributes, first, to a highly competitive male academic culture to which women are rarely socialized, and second, to the exploitation of women’s time primarily through family responsibilities.

It is important to note that not all accounts of women academics document a