

A Confucian War over Childcare? Practice and Policy in Childcare and Their Implications for Understanding the Korean Gender Regime

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Abstract

We ask about the development of childcare policies in Korea and what these mean for our understanding of the gender assumptions of Korean governments. Women's labour market participation has been increasing rapidly, with married women now much more likely to be in the labour market. The provision and regulation around support for women's employment, and especially for mothers' employment, is a key issue and problem for Korean women and for governments. A number of policies give the impression that the Korean government is moving rapidly towards a policy for reconciling work and family based on a dual-earner model of the family. But we argue that a close inspection of these policies suggests that the state is still playing a residual role, legislation is not effectively implemented, and government is giving way to the private sector and to the family in responsibility for childcare. Mothers' accounts of their lives centre on a childcare war played out beneath the apparently harmonious Confucian surface, with resisting husbands supported by powerful mothers-in-law, and daily struggles over the management of services. The Korean government and its policy-makers, far from moving rapidly towards a dual-earner model of the family, are still rooted in Confucian ideals.

Keywords

Childcare; Confucianism; Gender; Korea

Introduction

"It's a sort of war! From 6 in the morning to 11 at night and beyond . . . What my husband does in the morning is going to the toilet and reading a newspaper . . . he usually comes home around midnight . . . My job is a never ending story . . . If I didn't give him up, I couldn't live with him any more. It seems to me—except for women who earn 3-4 million a month and can pay a maid, most working mothers in Korea are similar." (Mrs Byun)

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“Emerging situations (prolonged meeting, working in holidays) in my office mean a ‘war’ over care arrangements . . . I have to call here and there, asking people to look after my kids . . . my sisters, aunts, friends and even neighbours, all come into it . . . It’s terribly stressful for me to organize extra childcare.” (Mrs Do)

“Every single day is a terrible war . . . I always feel guilty towards my daughter . . . sometimes I’m too exhausted to take off my clothes . . . despite that I can’t give it up because I have to do it.” (Mrs Lee)

Older systems of support for care—the male breadwinner model in Western Europe and state-supported dual-earner model in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries—are in decline. Everywhere, this brings problems in accommodating care with paid employment. Australia sees a “care crunch”, with increasing demands on families to provide stability in a changing world, while they have decreasing capacity (Hancock 2002). Increasing life expectancy in Europe brings concern about care for elders. Birthrates are in decline throughout Europe, but especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where the population of under-fives has decreased by one-third in the economic and social upheavals of the transition from communism. We will argue that this new Korean war, described by mothers of young children, is an extreme example of this work–life balance problem, widely experienced as women join the labour market, and economies, social policies and family economies assume dual earning. But Korea also has to be understood as different from Western models, as a product of a Confucian welfare state and family culture. The picture given by these war-torn mothers is supported by official data: Korean state expenditure on childcare is low, with parents footing 72 per cent of the bill, compared with 59 per cent in the USA, 47 per cent in Japan and 17 per cent in Sweden (MOHW 2002). The proportion of children in formal childcare is only 7 per cent of those aged under 3, compared with 40 per cent or more in Canada, Sweden, Denmark and Norway, and 26 per cent of those aged 3 to mandatory school age, compared with 90 per cent and more in most OECD countries (OECD 2001). Korea’s working-time regime is also distinctive: traditional long hours are reducing but remain above the legal limit of 44 hours per week, being officially now 51 for men and 49 for women (NSO various years) but unofficially higher still (see below). Fertility is now 1.3 births per woman (NSO 2001), comparable with CEE countries.

Our central concern is to explore the nature of the (South) Korean welfare regime in terms of gender relations, through examining childcare policies. We ask about the development of state policies for gender equality and state policies for care, and about the evidence of these in practice. More broadly, we ask about the implications of these for the nature of the emerging gender regime in Korea. How can we best characterize the logic underpinning childcare policy?

Korean women’s labour force participation has been increasing steadily, reaching 42.8 per cent in 1985 and 48.3 per cent in 2001 (OECD 2001), with married women outnumbering unmarried women since 1990 (Brington *et al.* 1995; Chen 2000; NSO various years; Presidential Commission on Women’s

Affairs 2000; Ministry of Gender Equality 2001). Women seek paid work for economic, social and political independence (O'Connor 1993). Governments see it as a solution to economic and social problems, as well as to gender inequality. Advice on new welfare architecture for Europe argues that this "ongoing gender revolution is both irreversible and desirable" (Esping-Andersen *et al.* 2001: 18; 2002). However, mothers' paid employment brings qualitatively new issues of gender relations and childcare, while undermining the male-breadwinner ideology. The share of childcare between state, market and family has become an essential concern of welfare regimes (Lewis 1992, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; O'Connor 1996; Doorne-Huiskes 1999; O'Connor *et al.* 1999; Crompton 1999, 2001; Gornick and Meyers 2003).

Korea's traditional gender ideology shares much with the West. But social policy in the East Asian tiger economies (Holliday and Wilding 2003) places heavy demands on families, and we should ask about the impact of Confucianism on assumptions about families. What differences might Confucian expectations bring to gender relations and expectations between welfare regimes in Korea and in Taiwan, compared with Western male-breadwinner or dual-earner models? Patrilineal and patrilocal family structures are differentiated by generation and gender, and centre on relationships between fathers and sons. The position of women is represented in the virtue of obedience to father, husband, and son (Chang 1998). The ethics of "filial piety" have imposed heavy obligations upon women (Choi 1995; Byun *et al.* 2002). Hierarchies of family obligation place strong expectations upon young women as daughters-in-law rather than as daughters; but make their own claims to family service and property full of conflict. For young mothers, then, the family may be stronger as a source of obligation than as a source of support (Lee 2002; Sung 2002, 2003).

Here we focus on childcare policy and parents' experience of policy. We use quantitative, mainly official, data to describe childcare provision and labour market participation in Korea, and to make comparisons with other countries. The quantitative data suggest a deep rift between policy rhetoric and policy in practice, with apparently strong legislation for gender equality, childcare, maternity leave and parental leave, dating from the Gender Equal Employment Act (GEEA) of 1987, while comparative data show Korea as an outlier, in terms of women's labour market participation, fragmented by responsibility for children, and very low state funding for childcare. We explore this situation in the qualitative data, asking whether and how Confucian values may impact on policy-making, and on parents' experience of policy. We use qualitative data to understand the Korean regime from the inside, using interviews with key policy-makers in ministries concerned with gender and with childcare. We also use qualitative data to understand the experience of mothers and fathers of young children, described as "policy-takers". We ask how far experience in households is filtered through Confucian values and assumptions, and distant from policy enunciated at the centre. We also ask whether Confucian values affect parents' use of family networks to fill the gaps left by governments, and how this may contribute to the "war" described by mothers. For this inside view of policy-making and policy-taking, we use in-depth interviews with 46 respondents: 13 officials

with responsibility for childcare policy-making, 22 employed mothers, and 11 employed fathers. Pseudonyms were used throughout the study, and the policy-makers are described here as Mr A, Ms B, etc., while policy-takers are described as Mr Hahn, Mrs Yoon, etc. How do childcare policies work for working mothers, in terms of reconciling paid work and unpaid care work? To what extent has the Korean government supported working mothers' needs for childcare, with what implications for gender equality? To what extent can we understand the Korean gender regime as Confucian in its model of state, gender ideology and family? And why do Korean mothers express their experience of childcare in such extreme terms, as a "war"?

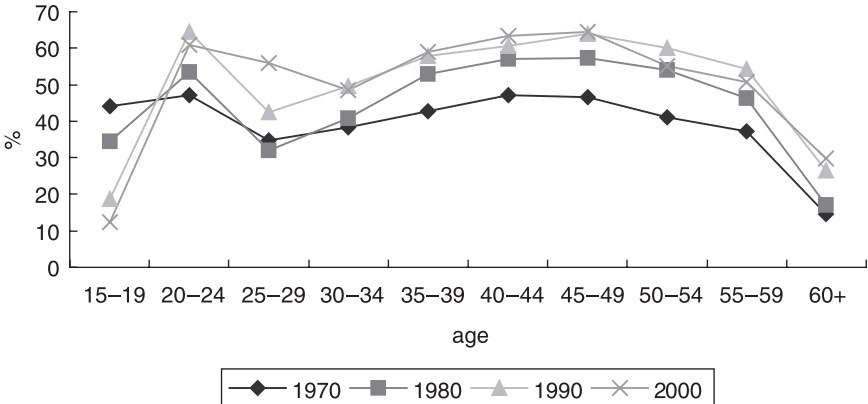
The Need for Childcare Provision in Korea

While married women's labour market participation has been increasing, it remains discontinuous, with careers interrupted by marriage, childbearing and childrearing (Kim 1994; Kum 2000). An *M-shaped curve* has been maintained for three decades: the first peak, in the age range 20–24, reflects high participation before marriage and/or childbearing, and a second peak (age 40–49), represents women's return to employment as their children grow older (see figure 1).

By contrast, male labour force participation shows an inverted U-shape, decreasing gradually from around age 50 (see figure 2). Fatherhood brings especially high rates, over 90 per cent. There is a hierarchy of economic activity: fathers highest, mothers lowest, and men and women without children in between. Motherhood frequently brings withdrawal from paid work while fatherhood strengthens men's role as breadwinners.

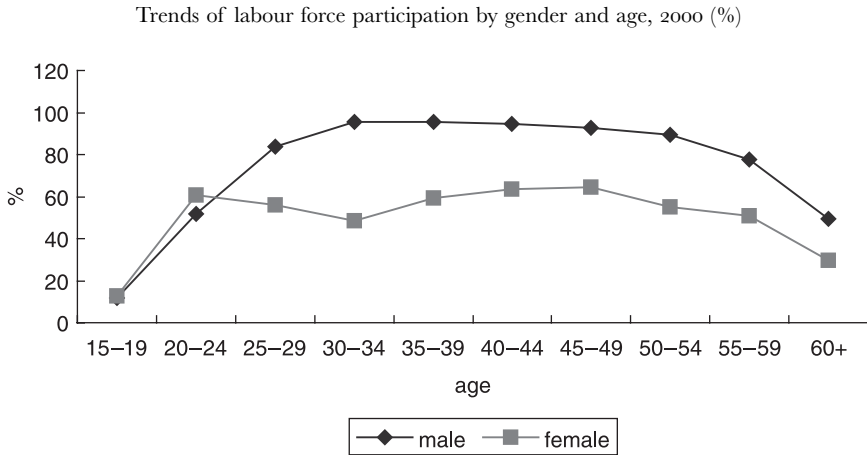
Figure 1

Trends in female labour force participation rate by age, 1970–2000 (%)



Source: NSO (1970–2000).

Figure 2



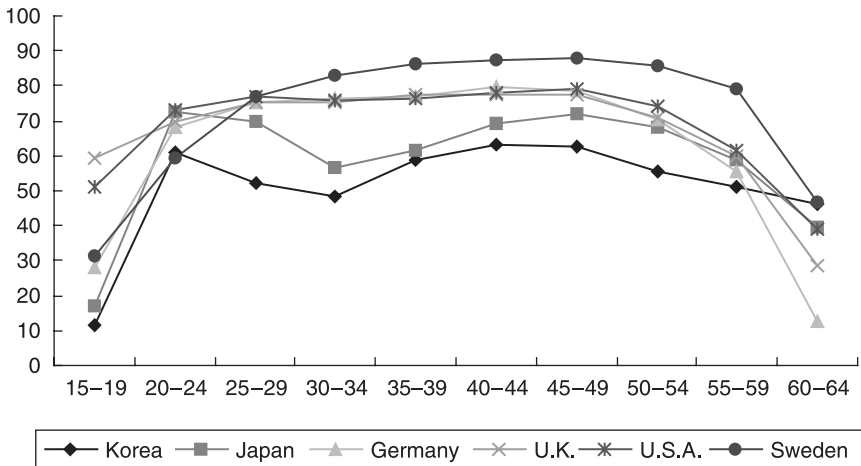
Source: NSO, *Annual Report on the Economically active Population Survey* (2001).

International comparisons show a noteworthy difference between Western countries and East Asian countries such as Korea and Japan (see figure 3). Broadly speaking, there are three curves characterizing female economic activity rates at different ages (European Commission 1999: 16–17). The first is Korea and Japan’s M-shaped curve, with female labour force participation disrupted by marriage and childrearing, followed by return. Second is the Nordic “plateau” curve, continuous employment, similar to men’s employment but at a somewhat lower level. There is also a “left peak” curve, in which labour force participation falls with age. In Korea motherhood interrupts paid work: among women who leave their jobs, 32.2 per cent leave because of marriage and childrearing; while only 0.1 per cent of male leavers cite these reasons (Ministry of Labour 1999; Baek 2002).

Men and women agree the importance of motherhood as a barrier to women’s labour market participation (see table 1). These data suggest that the difficulties working mothers encounter come firstly from childcare and secondly from strongly ingrained cultural traditions. Discontinuity in women’s employment goes with low wages, and restricted promotion, opportunities for education and training, and so on, because married women’s return after having and rearing their children is usually to work with shorter hours, lower status, and lower pay (Rubery *et al.* 1998, 1999). These negative effects of career interruption are more serious in Korea, where personnel management systems are based on years of experience (Kum 2000). Evidence from the UK suggests that weak state policies in this area have resulted in wide gaps in lifetime earnings between men and women: among couples with children—on average—women’s are half those of men. They have also reinforced class divisions, with advantaged mothers—those with higher education and better jobs—able to pay for care and maintain a more continuous

Figure 3

Female labour force participation rate by age in selected countries, 2000 (%)



Note: The rate of labour force participation includes part-time involvement.

Source: ILO (2000); Ministry of Gender Equality (2001).

Table 1

Major obstacles to women's participation in paid employment, 1995, 1998 (%)

	Social stereotype of women	Lack of professionalism of women	Lack of capability of women	Discrimination against women in the workplace	The burden of childcare ¹	Others
1995	24.7	8.7	4.3	9.5	52.5	0.3
Male	24.5	10.8	5.0	9.1	50.3	0.3
Female	24.8	6.8	3.7	9.9	54.6	0.2
1998	28.2	10.0	4.3	12.5	39.9	5.2
Male	28.8	11.9	4.6	11.9	37.5	5.3
Female	27.6	8.1	4.0	13.0	42.2	5.0

¹Includes domestic work.

Sources: NSO (1995, 1998); Presidential Commission on Women's Affairs (2000).

working life, while disadvantaged mothers—those with lower educational qualifications—have had discontinuous working lives, returning to part-time low-paid jobs after childcare, and suffering a huge loss of lifetime income (Rake 2000). Integrated childcare and education services, on a universal basis, and “long-term investment by government” are needed to change this

in the UK (Land 2002a: 12; Land 2002b; Lewis 2003; Rahilly and Johnston 2002). Childcare policies are crucial in Korea too, if mothers, especially low-paid ones, are to achieve gender equality in employment.

Policy for Childcare

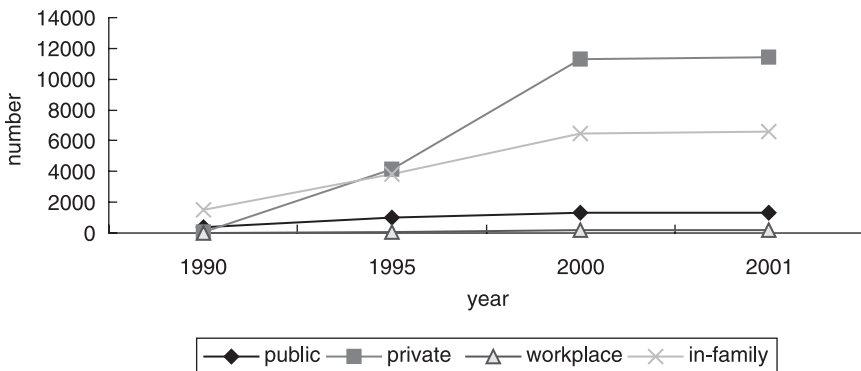
Strong familist traditions have made caring work a basic responsibility for women within the family, with low public awareness of formal care services in Korea until the mid-1980s. Now the move towards an adult-worker model has brought childcare issues to the front of the policy agenda (Sung 2002, 2003). Rapid economic development brought younger people to urban areas, making childcare a key issue in cities, while central government has been pushing responsibility to the local level.

Firstly, childcare services have been covered by legislation in Korea, since the Gender Equal Employment Act of 1987 aimed at securing equal opportunity and equal treatment for women and men in employment (Article 1). Under this and the Infant Care Act of 1991, while childcare services for poor families and children in need may be supported by state and/or local government, parents are responsible for the care of children under 6 years (Article 21). Children in the poorest families, under the Livelihood Protection Act, may receive free or subsidized childcare. Support for childcare functions as a last resort, a “safety net” (Byun 1991).

Second, policy has been to activate the private sector (Presidential Commission for Women’s Affairs 2000). Private nurseries have been encouraged through deregulation and government cheap, long-term loans since 1997. There was an almost threefold rise in private childcare centres between 1995 and 2000, while the numbers of publicly funded and operated centres remained consistently low (see figure 4).

Figure 4

Trends of types of childcare facilities (1990–2001)



Sources: Ministry of Health and Welfare (various years), Ministry of Gender Equality (2001).

Thirdly, workplace childcare facilities have an important role in Korean legislation, through the Gender Equal Employment Act (Article 12), amended in 1995, and the Infant Care Act (Article 7-2). These require employers with more than 300 women workers to establish childcare facilities. To stimulate workplace nurseries, the government has provided varied supports since the mid-1990s. There are direct subsidies for renovating facilities (maximum about £35,000) and staff salaries (around £200–250 per month for each teacher from Employment Insurance). There are also indirect subsidies, tax deductions from income tax or corporation tax to cover some construction costs, and low-interest loans (3 per cent) from the national pension and employment insurance fund (Ministry of Gender Equality 2001). Despite varied government encouragements, workplace childcare facilities have not increased to meet demand. By 1996, of 329 companies with 300 or more women workers, and therefore covered by the legislation, only 5 per cent had nurseries at work (Yang 1997).

Policy for Childcare Leave

The Korean government—like many in Europe (Moss and Deven 1999)—has recognized the importance of leave arrangements for childcare and gender equality and has implemented various leave systems (see table 2). Maternity and childcare leave are significant from several points of view (Kim 1994: 5). They can be essential mechanisms to enhance equal opportunity for women, guaranteeing their jobs after childbirth and childrearing, and allow a balance between work and family. From the employers' standpoint, they may help retain experienced employees and foster commitment to work. For governments, leave systems may help increase the skilled workforce.

Under the Gender Equal Employment Act of 1987, the maximum maternity leave was two months, with employers responsible for maternity benefits, and until 1995 there were no provisions banning unfair treatment or discrimination against women due to maternity. There is now more extensive maternity leave, revised through the Labour Standard and Employment Insurance Acts in November 2001, with 30-days' extension financed by employment insurance. Employed women are now eligible for maternity leave before and after childbirth for three months with full payment. Maternity leave entitlement was widened at the same time, to cover all workplaces.

Legislation to regulate childcare leave has existed since 1987, under the Gender Equality Employment Act. According to Article 11, an employed woman or her spouse "taking her place", with an infant under 1 year, is eligible to apply for childcare leave for 52 weeks maximum (to include maternity leave). Significant reform has come through revision of Employment Insurance in 2001, transforming unpaid leave into paid, with childcare leave benefit financed from employment insurance at 200,000 won a month (about £100). Since 1995, employers have been encouraged to provide childcare leave, through direct payments of 120,000–150,000 won (about £60–63) per person receiving childcare leave (Presidential Commission on Women's Affairs 2000; Ministry of Gender Equality 2001).

Table 2

Maternity and childcare leave indicators in Korea

	Maximum duration (weeks)		Replacement rate		Eligibility criteria
	Previous	2001 revision	Previous	2001 revision	
Maternity leave	8	12	100% of average wages (paid by employers for 8 weeks)	100% of average of wages (paid by employers for 8 weeks/by employment insurance for 4 weeks)	Pregnant female workers
Childcare leave	52	52	Nil	200,000 won in a month (about £100) from Employment Insurance to compensate for the loss and decrease in income • Nil for working women with contributions under 6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working women <i>or</i> her husband with a child under 1 year • absence of provision banning unfair dismissal due to maternity leave (or pregnancy) until 1995 • no coverage for part-time workers (temporary and daily)

Sources: Ministry of Gender Equality (2001); Kim and Kho (2001); Gender Equal Employment Act (revised in 2001); Employment Insurance Act (revised in 2001).

Limited Legislation?

At first glance, there appear to be advanced state measures for childcare, but closer examination uncovers the Korean government's traditional gender assumptions.

Firstly, conventional gender ideology has been embedded in the legislation: the Gender Equality Employment Act (Article 11) stipulated that "a working woman *or* a worker who is her spouse *taking her place*" could apply for leave. The assumption of childcare as a primary duty of mothers, with

fathers supplementing when mothers are unavailable, was thus built into Korea's first gender equality legislation, though this has recently been amended. While childcare policies are implemented in ways that reinforce the traditional gender division of labour, and do little to integrate fathers into caring for their children, they are likely to be detrimental to gender equality: they may create incentives for employers to recruit men over women, rather than facilitate married women's participation and gender equality in paid employment.

A second problem lies in the limitations of the legislation. The key reason why workplace nurseries have remained such a small proportion of childcare services is that the Gender Equality and Infant Care Acts apply only to larger firms with more than 300 women workers. But most women's employment in Korea is in small firms: around 60 per cent are employed in firms with fewer than 100 employees (NSO various years). Few women benefit from workplace nurseries, and the measures may have more to do with political expediency than with working mothers.

Thirdly, the legislation is not implemented. Violation is common: 36 per cent of firms violate the legislation for maternity leave benefits, by not paying entitlements, or by partial payment. The penalties are insufficient to ensure effective implementation, with a maximum fine of 5,000,000 won (£2,500) for childcare leave and 3,000,000 won (£1,500) for maternity leave. Neither is the provision of workplace nurseries enforced, even for firms with 300 female workers, making businesses reluctant to establish them (Yang 1997). Many firms are reluctant to pay for temporary cover for childcare leave, and women who take leave may feel a burden to their colleagues: only 0.7 per cent of working mothers took childcare leave on average, due to financial difficulty and lack of cover (Ministry of Labour 1999).

The relative weight of state, market and family is crucial in understanding the nature of the Korean welfare regime. The government is reluctant to take responsibility for formal childcare provision, assuming that family care is better: the proportion of public childcare facilities is only 16.9 per cent of total childcare arrangements, a proportion which has actually been decreasing over the past decade, from 25.4 per cent in 1992. And the government covers 27 per cent of childcare costs (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2002). Mothers therefore rely on the private sector for formal childcare, but only 10 per cent of demands for infant care are satisfied compared with 76.7 per cent for children over 3 years. Private childcare facilities avoid infants because of the child-to-carer ratio (Kim 1991; Ministry of Gender Equality 2001; Ministry of Health and Welfare 2002). The system produces problems of access for working mothers, especially those with infants, and especially those with low earnings. While the Korean government takes some responsibility for childcare for children in need, financial responsibility for childcare rests on working mothers. This has class implications, with poorer mothers experiencing more broken career patterns and poorer-quality work, often part-time work characterized by low wages, low skill, high turnover, poor working conditions, and limited legal protection (O'Reilly and Fagan 1998; Kang 1999; Kim 2002). The feminization of low-quality work, resulting from poor

support for childcare, may reinforce gender inequality. Since the mid-1990s, deregulation of procedures, from getting a licence to registration for opening and operating, has encouraged private provision. This improves accessibility, but brings problems with quality.

Access to Quality Care?

Regulatory systems are under strain, with severe staffing shortages: a civil servant covers on average more than 50 facilities, and in some urban areas has to monitor around 350 facilities (Ministry of Health and Welfare 2002). This may make quality control a formality. Mr C is the sole official in charge of his city's childcare policy, but acknowledges that he cannot visit private childcare facilities even once a year, while Mr B wonders "if it sounds like a dereliction of my duty . . . monitoring is virtually impossible".

Mothers, on the other hand, are very concerned about quality: Mrs Rho was shocked by the dirt, noise and overcrowding, finding "rather a concentration camp than a care facility". Others make powerful arguments about the need for stronger state regulation:

"I'm really wondering what the government does . . . I am not satisfied with the quality of my son's nursery, especially because it is terribly crowded . . . they let the children watch videos, almost all day . . . doesn't the government have to control the service quality?" (Mrs Ku)

"The most urgent problem is the severe lack of facilities that you can trust. Quality control is an absolute state responsibility." (Mrs Ju)

The consequence for some respondents is to add to their time and travel problems by driving to people they can trust:

"Why do I have to choose my sister-in-law, in spite of higher costs and long commuting distance? I can absolutely trust that she won't provide him with unhygienic instant foods and let him sleep in the dirt." (Mrs Nam)

Or they took them to grandparents, and lived apart. Distance between mothers and their children could be a source of grief:

"After childcare leave for 10 months, there wasn't any way to take care of him but to ask my mother-in-law who lives in Sunchun, which is more than 6 hours away . . . I usually see him once or twice a month . . . whenever I miss him terribly, I listen to nursery rhymes and cry." (Mrs Park)

"My mother-in-law has been looking after my daughter from 3 months onwards . . . naturally, my daughter doesn't like me as much as her grandma . . . I often feel myself an outsider between my daughter and her grandmother . . . On the journey back, I often cry, asking myself 'why should I live like this?' . . . If there were reliable childcare facilities, I could live with her." (Mrs Ji)

Taking Leave

Preference for male workers was taken for granted by male respondents, who counted the costs of leave entitlements:

“Costs for female workers generated from pregnancy, maternity leave and so on can’t be neglected . . . I think their productivity is 70 per cent of men’s.” (Mr Seo)

“Married women . . . don’t make a distinction between private affairs and public responsibility . . . How can I expect them to do something important? Honestly, working with married women annoys me very often.” (Mr Kho)

“Can managements trust those who want to focus on the family rather than work . . . it’s natural to restrain their promotion . . . It’s the way things are!” (Mr Hahn)

Women respondents recounted employers’ negative attitudes towards maternity and childcare leave, which put them under pressure to leave, return early, or compensate for their absence. Mrs Huh described pressures from her boss to work overtime before the birth: *“my boss told me I needed to compensate my leave period as much as I could . . . Until just two days before giving birth, I’d worked until midnight . . . I was extremely exhausted,”* while Mrs Choi described pressure to come back early afterwards: *“I had maternity leave for 2 months, not for 3 months . . . My boss called and asked me to return to work . . . I thought, as long as I stay here, it would not be wise to give him a negative impression through arguing about my entitlement.”*

Taking leave was widely understood as curtailing career prospects:

“As I was at risk of a premature birth, I had sick leave . . . because of that I got a bad performance rating . . . when I argued with my boss, he told me ‘because of your absence for a personal reason, the other team members suffered from sharing your responsibilities . . . I understood your situation but it was also true that you didn’t work for the leave’ . . . it continues to follow me.” (Mrs Moon)

“In the next division to me two pregnant women who had maternity leave were graded D. Their boss always complained ‘why don’t they stay at home and raise their children?’ You know how deadly it is to get the D grade in terms of career . . . if we get two Ds we’ll be asked to resign.” (Mrs Lee)

“In the current organizational culture, we are forced to choose between work and motherhood . . . When I applied for leave, I made up my mind that it was OK for my career to go slow because of it.” (Mrs Yoon)

Men Taking Leave?

No respondents took seriously the idea that men could take leave for childcare. Women respondents such as Mrs Yoon saw this as an economic problem: *“My husband earns quite big money . . . Even if I didn’t work for a*

year . . . there would be no problem at all.” But male respondents were concerned with the implications for their jobs, and their reputations as men:

“Culturally, it wouldn’t be acceptable in Korea . . . men have to be outside the home . . . he would be stigmatized . . . how incompetent is he? And people would respond to his wife somehow cynically, ‘what a capable woman!’” (Mr Hahn)

“My employer would respond ‘why don’t you stay at home forever’ . . . not only in my office, but almost all jobs in Korea. Don’t even think about it!” (Mr Kho)

“For us, taking leave for childcare means ‘I want to resign.’” (Mr Yang)

Regulating Working Time

A culture of long working hours in Korea is extreme. The evidence of our respondents is that the regulations are not enforced, and that working times of 10 or 12 hours a day are common. Men discuss their long hours as absolutely preventing them from taking care of the children:

“I don’t even think about the legal working hours [8 hours] . . . But I desperately want to leave the office at 8 p.m. [12 hours] . . . on weekdays I usually leave home at 7.30, and I’m back around 10 or later . . . even holidays, sometimes I’m required to work . . . how and when can I take care of them?” (Mr Jun)

Women respondents discuss working hours as creating extreme tensions between demands of employers, and demands of their children:

“He is always the earliest and the latest at his nursery . . . he really hates it . . . Even when I leave the office at exactly 6 o’clock, feeling guilty to remaining colleagues and my boss, I can get there almost at 7.30 [when the nursery closes] . . . I know my boss questions my commitment to work.” (Mrs Byun)

“In order to be recognized in our office, we have to work from 8 to 11–12 and beyond, almost 365 days a year . . . it is inevitable that we are ‘weeded out’ in the long run.” (Mrs Lee)

“In terms of organizational demands, such as working hours, my office forces workers to abandon the family . . . at the beginning of my career I was confident that I could be a successful female civil servant, but these days I really doubt whether I can meet the demands of my office.” (Mrs Huh)

But they also bring tensions with carers, especially with mothers-in-law:

“The management want us to work harder, even through the night . . . basically I’ve tried to . . . but sometimes I can’t meet their expectation . . . My mother-in-law really hates me to come back late . . . She can stand until 7 p.m., but beyond then, she can’t . . . Around 6 p.m. I begin to fret . . . I watch the time on and on.” (Mrs Kang)

Confucian Families

The state has strong expectations of family care in Korea, which it uses to justify its own small involvement in provision, funding and regulation. Our respondents' accounts did indeed show how much they relied on family members for care. But they also showed how much this contributed, in many cases, to their experience of childcare as war: a constant battle to manage the gaps between expectations of employers and family members, to manage the gaps between working hours and childcare hours, a war—though often simmering and suppressed—between husbands and wives, and between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.

While there was every evidence of changing gender norms in employment, with mothers fully expected to make their contribution to the family income, there was very little evidence of changing gender norms within the family. Mr Shin and his mother were entirely exceptional here, in accepting men as carers within the family:

“When I was young, I saw my father working in the kitchen very often, so it isn't very strange for me if men participate at home . . . my mother often asks me ‘why don't you take care of your sons?’ when my wife is busy.” (Mr Shin)

Other male respondents saw childcare as unambiguously women's responsibility: *“It's the providence of God which makes them mothers . . . It's a mother, not a father, who is needed by children . . . that means mothers are born carers”* (Mr Hahn). Mr Pyun seems unembarrassed that he visits his child's nursery only for the annual production, and cannot comment on its quality: *“How should I know? I usually go there once a year.”* The breadwinner role is taken for granted—*“For me, being a good father (or a good husband) is to succeed in my career”* (Mr Seo)—while working hours in Korea solidify men's claims to be workers rather than carers: *“Do you know how busy I am? I have to make money for them . . . I'm too busy to take care of them”* (Mr Min).

While fathers everywhere are likely to prioritize paid work over care, these unambiguous, taken-for-granted traditional gender identities contrast with ideas held by young fathers in the UK, for example, whose mentality as fathers brings more discomfort about gender roles and unfairness with partners (Lewis 2001b). Most Korean women respondents were discomforted too, and found men's positions unacceptable:

“They can't give birth, but that doesn't mean they can't take care of children . . . It's totally unfair.” (Mrs Byun)

“They want us to share financial responsibility with them, but they don't share children responsibility with us.” (Mrs Eun)

But in the Confucian family, there are particular difficulties about challenging husbands, and challenging mothers-in-law from younger women's lower position in the Confucian family hierarchy. They are also expected to create harmony. The war, in this case, simmered below the surface, as respondents avoided confrontations with mothers-in-law and husbands:

“To make my husband participate in childcare more than now, I have to keep arguing with him case by case. Actually, I don’t want to do that . . . I need to accept this reality.” (Mrs Ku)

“A reason for being reluctant [to do childcare or domestic work] is that I know my mother doesn’t like it . . . It isn’t natural for her that her son takes part in domestic work when her daughter-in-law is there.” (Mr Yang)

“Whilst my husband tends to be comparatively active—albeit insufficiently—in household work when my mother-in-law is absent, he doesn’t do it at all when she’s present.” (Mrs Won)

Our respondents were as likely to receive childcare support from their mothers-in-law as from their own mothers. While the Korean government expects the family to offer support, Confucian culture makes mothers-in-law more prominent than in Western countries, and there was often painful tension in practice over the realities of children’s needs and mothers’ jobs:

“I’m not comfortable having support from my mother-in-law. I’m continually anxious about her reactions towards my job . . . whilst my mother sympathized with me when I was late home, my mother-in-law usually complains about it.” (Mrs Ku)

Our respondents’ experience of the Confucian family structure and expectations was well described in Mrs Jin’s contrast between herself, sharing a good relationship with her own mother, and her colleagues’ more difficult experiences with mothers-in-law:

“I’m lucky to have such a nice mother who fully supports me, especially in terms of childcare. She wants to see me as a successful civil servant . . . my colleagues whose mothers-in-law look after their children tend to feel far more pressures combining work and care than those whose mothers support them.”

Confucian Policy-making

If Confucian families have distinctive features, which make childcare a war for mothers, policy-makers too gave evidence of the problems of making childcare policy work. They discussed problems about the size and power of departments concerned with gender issues, about the lack of resources for childcare, and the damage that being assigned to gender issues did to their own careers, and for male civil servants, to their identities as men.

Both men and women civil servants saw problems with the position of the Ministry for Gender Equality, and the consequent resistance of other ministries. Ms D explained: *“We don’t have any of our own duties in practice. Rather, our work is virtually meddling in other divisions or departments in the name of ‘gender mainstreaming’. They view demands from us as an unwelcome intrusion into their autonomy.”* And Ms E asked: *“if the MOGE raises a question about a policy made by a certain ministry because of its lack of gender mentality and asks them to change it, how likely do you think that is to happen?”* According to Ms B: *“The policy tools that would enable*

us to make progress are in the hands of other divisions.” Ms F argued that, in the Korean context, only presidential power could bring real power to the Gender Equality Ministry: “In order to overcome the marginality of the MOGE, a special machinery under the direct control of the president could be better than the ministerial form without any substantial power, like the MOGE.”

As noted above, Korean state childcare spending is extremely low by international standards. Male civil servants noted the weakness of a women’s agenda in Korea and its consequences for childcare spending. Mr E acknowledged the “harder situation” as a “reality we need to accept”, while Mr B saw budgetary allocation as “a very political process. In fact, women’s issues are not given high policy priority. That’s it!”

Women civil servants protested about its implications:

“Money does matter for public childcare provision, doesn’t it? But financial ministries are traditionally male-dominated machines. How much do they recognize the importance or necessity of public childcare provision? It seems to me they can’t understand it at all! For them there isn’t any good reason to invest big money in it.” (Ms G)

Women and men civil servants discussed the status of “women’s work” in Korea as damaging to themselves as well as to the prospects for effective implementation of policy:

“The majority of civil servants in the women’s bureaux, including me, want to escape from here. If I worked this hard in other departments I would get somewhere . . . but I have been trapped three times in it because I am a woman . . . Women-related work has been deemed a trifling job . . . Naturally male civil servants, especially ‘high flyers’ don’t want to do it.” (Ms F)

“I worked with male civil servants who continually suffered from identity crises . . . they couldn’t speak in their own voice with self-confidence because they didn’t accept gender equality issues in themselves . . . evidently they can’t persuade counterparts in controversial situations.” (Ms E)

Male respondents confirmed this picture of embarrassment and discomfort in working for women. Mr E’s account was that: “it isn’t a praiseworthy thing as a man, is it?” while Mr A described himself as trapped in an unsuitable position for him: “Honestly, I don’t see myself as a ‘women-friendly’ man. I’ve been trapped into doing it . . . I’m not the right person to do this . . . women’s policy is much more suitable for women.”

Other respondents discussed its impact on their career, and their sense of identity as men, with an openness that astonished the (woman) researcher:

“Isn’t it important for us to manage our career successfully? It is the most crucial interest. I really don’t want to say this, but women’s policy is the last place within government. So taking part in women’s bureaux isn’t a great help for my career . . . I can hardly deny I want to leave here as soon as possible.” (Mr D)

“When I was placed here, I received a few words of consolation from my colleagues and friends. That was probably because they thought it was not a proper job to do

as a man . . . frankly, I do care about the way my work is perceived from the outside and my status inside. It may sound silly (yes, it may to you), but sometimes, if not always, I'm reluctant to give people my business cards." (Mr C)

Conclusion

"Our mothers and even grandmothers were happier than us . . . because they'd never expected to be financially capable wives and good mothers at the same time without any backing." (Mrs Byun)

State policies for childcare in Korea, in response to women's increasing labour market participation, appear to be "revolutionary", aimed at reconciling work and family responsibility and facilitating gender equality.

Legislation dates from the 1980s, and has been recently enhanced, developing and extending a childcare service, regulating working time, expanding maternity and childcare leave, giving the appearance of a shift towards a dual-earner model of the family. But it is particularly important in Korea to analyse the gaps between policy rhetoric and reality. A close examination shows legislation that is limited and gendered, for example with workplace nurseries covering a small proportion of workers, and with care leave allocated primarily to mothers. There are serious flaws of implementation, and the gulf between state policy and the reality measured in mothers' accounts is wide.

The evidence of earlier sections of this article is that legislation has not brought real change in childcare: the Korean state has taken little childcare responsibility from working mothers, and has done nothing to discourage men's free-riding on care work or the ideology of mothers as natural carers. The essential policy logic is that women have responsibility for childcare within the family. Strong dependence upon the family for childcare has important implications for gender and class inequality.

Working mothers' experience is of childcare war, with effective support neither from government nor from Confucian families. Caught in this chasm between legal appearance and practical reality, working mothers in Korea share their childcare burden with neither partners nor the state. Government assumptions about the family as the centre of welfare are unfulfilled for working mothers, whose family obligations are greater than their family entitlements. The evidence of policy-makers was that gender issues were a low priority, with male policy-makers, in particular, resentful of their positions, and reluctant to pursue strategies for gender equality. The model of gender relations underpinning policy in Korea draws on Confucian assumptions of families as patrilineal and patrilocal, family responsibility before state responsibility, a hierarchy of responsibility drawing on generation and gender, and care responsibility resting unambiguously on women. The Confucian family was a necessary source of support, but also a source of conflict and pressure for mothers balancing family and jobs. The childcare war shows the Korean welfare regime as expecting mothers to join the labour market, while holding deeply traditional Confucian assumptions about gender relations.

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