



Working Papers 2023-03

Women's employment and fertility in Korea

: a literature review

Choi, Sunyoung
Ham, Sunyu·Yang, Yoonyoung·Parelieussen,
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Foreword

This paper is part of a collaboration undertaken with the OECD Economic Department. A Korean-language version of this study was previously published as the report *Women's Employment and Fertility: A review of recent research*(2023). The present English version incorporates revisions and updates to the original, with the aim of providing an accessible overview for an international audience of the empirical evidence and policy discussions emerging from South Korea.

The authors are grateful to Jongseo Park, Soyoung Lee, Yoonjeong Shin, Kitae Ra (all from the KIHASA) for supporting the collaboration with the OECD. In addition, we thank Jiyeon Chang and Jayoung Yoon for their contributions to the initial draft of this report. We also extend our sincere appreciation to Robert Easthope for providing the initial English translation of the original Korean report.

November 2023

Shin, Youngseok
President, Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs

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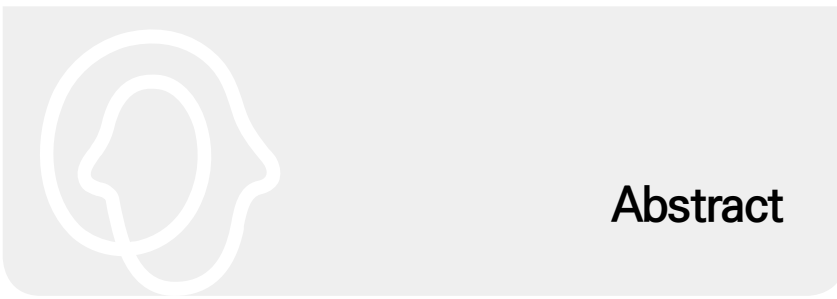
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Abstract

Women's employment and fertility in Korea : a literature review

Project Head: Choi, Sunyoung

This literature review examines Korea's declining fertility rate in the past few decades, seeking to understand the interactions between women's employment, fertility, and associated policies, and making findings from Korean-language literature more accessible to an international audience. It reviews studies covering the demographic process of declining birth rates, women's labour supply, gender discrimination, and the effects of family policies aimed at making it easier to combine women's employment and childbirth. Women have over time gradually moved towards prioritising work over family when facing conflicts between the two. In the decades up until around 2010 women increasingly delayed marriage and childbirth and reduced the number of children over their lifetimes, but almost all women eventually got married and had at least one child. From the 2010s, more women choose to remain unmarried or married and childless. Family policies like childcare and parental leave have not been sufficient to make work and child-rearing compatible in general and have therefore not had the desired effects on fertility and female employment. The effects

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2 Womens's employment and fertility in Korea: a literature review

of policy interventions vary based on factors like women's labour market position and access to support programmes like quality childcare. The analysis indicates that until employment and motherhood can be combined in a reasonable way for most women, the alternative cost of motherhood will remain high and fertility will remain low or fall even further.

Key words: fertility, female employment, gender discrimination, work-life balance, family policy, working condition, social norm



1

Introduction

1 Introduction

The total fertility rate (TFR) in Korea is the lowest in the world. It dropped from six births per woman on average in 1960 to below 1.3 in the early 2000s. After remaining around this level for roughly a decade, fertility declined further from the mid-2010s, reaching 0.72 births per woman as of 2023 (Statistics Korea, 2023a). This is well below the rate of 2.1 which is necessary to stabilise the population over the long term (abstracting from migration), and lower than the OECD average (1.6), Japan (1.2), China (1.2), Singapore (1.0) and Chinese Taipei (0.9). Korea's population is expected to halve by 2082, and fall further to around one-third by 2100 (Yang et al., 2024). As discussed in the 2024 OECD Economic Survey of Korea, this will have far-reaching consequences for Korea's economy and society, as the share of elderly in the population will increase rapidly in the time to come (OECD, 2024).

A low fertility rate does not mean that young people do not want children anymore. Surveys show that people's ideal number of children is far higher than the actual number of children they have. In other words, obstacles are preventing would-be parents from having more children even though they want it and Korea as a nation needs it. The female employment rate in

Korea has increased over time, but remains, at 61.7% (of the population aged 16-64, in 2023 Q4), lower than the 63.4% OECD average. The employment gap to men is among the highest in the OECD in 2022 (Yang et al., 2024; OECD, 2024).

In contrast to the OECD average, the female employment rate by age group is M-shaped, slightly higher for young women than young men before dropping sharply as a share of women drop out of the labour force to marry and raise children in their 30s. Women's employment gradually picks up after child-rearing age, when they are in their 40s, and drops again in their late 50s as they start to retire. This sequencing of career and family illustrates that career and motherhood are difficult to combine in Korea. The gender wage gap is the largest in the OECD, and the proportion of non-regular workers among women is higher than that of men (Yang et al., 2024; Pareliussen, 2022).

The decline in birth rates around the world in the late 20th century is known to be associated with increased female labour force participation and the trade-offs involved when forming a family (Yang et al., 2024). This relationship between childbirth and female employment has been a central topic of research and policy concern in Korea as well. This paper makes the existing literature, which has predominantly only been available in Korean language, more accessible to an international audience. This should be of high relevance to other countries,

which face similar if less dramatic fertility trends.

The primary objective of this paper is to describe and explain the relationship between women's employment and childbirth, with a main focus on developments since the turn of the millennium. It finds that Korean women have over time postponed childbearing and reduced the number of children they had over their lifetime at least partially as a response to the conflict between employment and childbirth. Until at least around 2010, Korean women would generally marry and have at least one child, reflecting the societal norm towards the duty of having children. They would typically give up employment for childbirth when faced with a choice between the two, reflecting traditional male breadwinner – female carer norms. These norms are further discussed in Yang et al. (2024). Since around the mid-2010s, however, married women's employment and fertility choices have become increasingly based on their individual work-family preferences. Family policies have been expanded rapidly, but have not had the desired effects in terms of maternal employment and fertility. A likely reason is that despite these policies, many women are still forced to choose between childbirth and career. As they increasingly prioritise work, fertility has continued to decline. Meanwhile, transfers and in-kind services upon childbirth increase family income, thereby facilitating the staying at home of mothers and reducing the positive effects on mothers' employment from these

policies. However, these effects depend crucially on individual circumstances. Free childcare did for example increase employment for mothers living in neighbourhoods with good access to quality childcare institutions.

The next section of the paper discusses fertility trends and how they can be related to different forces acting such as delayed marriage and declining numbers of children within marriage. The third section describes how work-family conflicts are reflected in women's employment and fertility decisions and some driving forces like gender gaps in the labour market and how women's labour supply decisions have evolved. Government policies to support childbirth and women's employment have expanded heavily since the early 2000s, and their impacts and limitations are examined in section four. Section five summarises the findings and draws conclusions.



2

Fertility trends and decompositions

2.1 1980s–2000s: The number of children
within marriage falls towards one

2.2 2010s and onwards: People increasingly
forego marriage and children

2 Fertility trends and decompositions

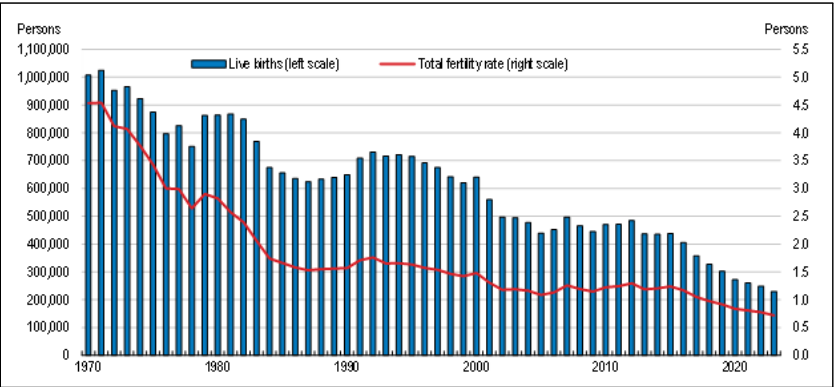
Fertility has fallen rapidly since the 1950s until today, over a period that took Korea from a rural society ravaged by war to a modern, urban society with per capita incomes at the OECD average (OECD, 2024). Falling fertility in the beginning of the period can be related to rising female employment, but also to high population pressure and a wish to escape poverty and active family planning initiatives from the state. The causal relationship between these factors and fertility is unclear.

Korea's birth rate began to decline before the 1970s, but dramatic changes occurred in the 1970s and the early 1980s (Kwon 1997; Kwon and Kim 2002). From 1970 to 1983, it plummeted, with the TFR dropping from 4.5 to 2.1, a drop of 2.4 over just 13 years (Figure 2-1). The steady increase in age at first marriage from the 1960s contributed to the decline in the TFR. Between 1965-70 and 1985, the fertility rate decreased in all age groups (Table 2-1). The fall in fertility rates for ages 15 to 24 can be attributed to the rising age at first marriage, while the decline for ages 25 to 34 can be interpreted as the result of birth control within marriage.

After a period of stabilisation and a temporary rebound around 1990, the TFR continued falling to reach a new low of

1.18 in 2002. This was the first time it had been below 1.3, marking the beginning of what is often called in Korea the era of ‘lowest-low fertility’. It temporarily edged up to around 1.3 in the early 2010s before declining again. It has since stayed at an extremely low level and fell below one for the first time in 2018. By 2023, the TFR had fallen to 0.72, which is remarkably low, both in historical and cross-country comparison (Statistics Korea, 2023a). In 2021, Korea already had the lowest rate in the world at 0.81, followed by Spain at 1.19, Italy at 1.25, and Japan at 1.30 (OECD, 2023). The decline in the number of births is also noteworthy. The annual number of births had stayed above 600,000 before 2000. However, it fluctuated between 400,000 and 500,000 during the first 15 years or so of the millennium, and then fell below 400,000. Since 2015, the decline has accelerated, to 230,000 by 2023 (Figure 2-1).

[Figure 2-1] Trends in the number of births and total fertility rate, 1970–2022



Source: “Vital Statistics Korea”, Statics Korea, 2023a.

〈Table 2-1〉 Age-specific fertility rates, 1955–2000

Period	15–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–49	Total fertility rate
1955–1960	38.0	308.0	335.0	270	194	96	18	6.3
1960–1965	20.0	255.0	351.0	274	189	92	17	6.0
1965–1970	12.0	180.0	309.0	223	134	59	10	4.6
1975	14.3	178.3	263.8	146.1	58.1	20.8	5.0	3.47
1980	12.4	135.9	242.7	114.0	40.2	15.1	5.6	2.83
1985	10.1	118.7	159.1	41.1	8.8	2.2	0.5	1.67
1990	4.2	83.2	169.4	50.5	9.6	1.5	0.2	1.59
1995	3.6	62.9	177.1	69.6	15.2	2.3	0.2	1.65
2000	2.5	39.0	150.6	84.2	17.4	2.6	0.2	1.47

Note: Age-specific fertility rates refer to the number of live births per 1,000 females in each age group.

Source: “Understanding Population”, Kwon & Kim, 2002.

Many developing countries, including Korea, adopted policies to slow population growth in the latter half of the 20th century. The state’s family planning and population control initiatives from 1962 to 1979 aimed to reduce women’s unwanted births through a programme of information, basic maternal and child health services, and the provision of family planning supplies and services. Real-time assessments of the policies vary from being essential for economic growth and modernization and highly successful (Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, 1991) to those lambasting them for violating women’s privacy, eroding their autonomy, and excessively expanding the reach of the state into personal domains, all in pursuit of birth suppression (Lee, 1989; Kim, 1993). More recent literature

questions the narrative that family planning and falling birth rates came as a result of top-down pressure, and proposes that it rather satisfied a latent demand for birth control and family planning (Kwon & Kim 2002; Bae 2012). In contrast to the 1960s, the need for birth control became a widely shared social value, and the ideal number of children dropped to about two. A possible negative long-term effect of the family planning programme is that it may have contributed to the norm that workers are expected to let work take priority over family. The developmentalist population policy pitted economic growth against childbirth and failed to recognise the value and contributions of parenthood (Hwang, 2005). This historical legacy hindered public discourses about these issues even during the 1980s and 1990s, when economic growth and democratisation had been achieved and fertility had dropped well below two children per woman.

2.1 1980s–2000s: The number of children within marriage falls towards one

Since the start of the millennium, a number of studies have decomposed the fertility trend into various driving forces. They all point to marriage patterns and childbearing behaviours within marriage as key forces behind falling fertility rates. Childbearing outside of marriage has only had a very limited

impact, as almost all births occur within marriage. From the 1960s to the 2000s, a reduction in the number of children per married woman and a continuous increase in the age at which women first got married both contributed to the decline in fertility. Before the 2000s the decline in the number of married couples having three or more children lowered the birth rate, while in the 2000s a decline in the number of married couples having two or more children was the driving factor. This period differs from the 2010s, when falling fertility was increasingly driven by married women having no children and women foregoing marriage altogether.

Earlier decomposition exercises pooled age-specific marriage- and fertility rates at a given point in time (synthetic cohorts), thereby inaccurately accounting for the pure cohort effects. These studies tended to conclude that delayed marriage has been the main cause of falling fertility, while falling fertility within marriage has had a relatively small effect (Jun, 2002) or even that the birth rate within marriage increased during this period (Lee, 2012; 2018; Table 2-2).

〈Table 2-2〉 Decomposition of changes to the total fertility rate by changes in marriage rate and marital fertility rate using synthetic cohorts, 2000–2016

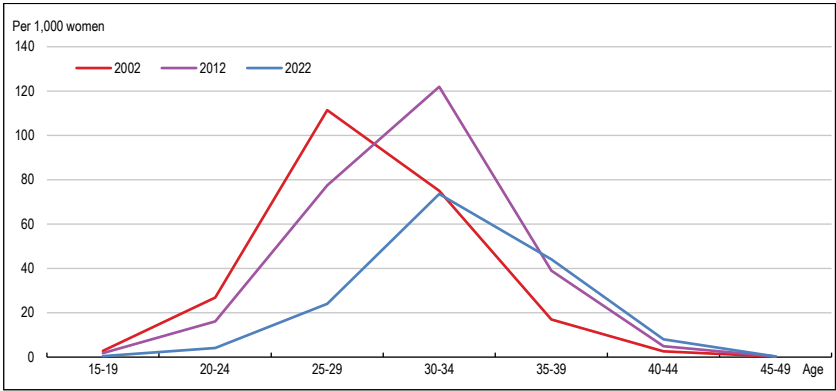
	2000–2005	2005–2012	2012–2016
	Contribution to Δ TFR	Contribution to Δ TFR	Contribution to Δ TFR
Marriage rate	-0.337	-0.334	-0.179
Marital fertility	-0.050	0.438	0.042
Non-marital fertility	-0.003	0.006	-0.009

Source: “Did pro-natal policy in Korea fail?”, Lee, 2018.

Figure 2-2 illustrates why falling fertility could be interpreted as a mere delay when relying on synthetic cohort data in the past, and also why any such misconceptions that women would “catch up” by having more children disappeared with the benefit of hindsight throughout the 2010s. Fertility of women aged below 30 was higher in 2002 than in 2012, while fertility for women above this age was considerably higher in the 2012 synthetic cohort. In contrast, by 2022, fertility was either considerably lower or approximately the same as a decade earlier for all age groups. In general, analysing period TFR based on synthetic cohorts has limitations for capturing rapidly changing fertility behaviours. Breaking down changes in the TFR into components such as delayed childbearing and changes in fertility levels using synthetic cohorts underestimates the actual decline in the TFR, since delayed childbirth in older cohorts can wrongly be interpreted as a temporary delay also for younger

cohorts, while childbirth does not necessarily recover over time within cohorts. This is especially important to understand the decline in fertility rates in Korea and other East Asian regions (Frejka, Jones and Sardon, 2010, as cited in Shin, 2020).

[Figure 2-2] Age-specific fertility rates, 2002, 2012, 2022



Source: “Vital Statistics Korea”, Statics Korea, 2002, 2012, 2022.

Yoo & Sobotka (2018) provide an in-depth analysis of period fertility trends from 1981 to 2015. In line with previous findings, they show that mechanically, without the shift to later childbearing, the TFR would stay higher. For example, the TFR was just below 1.2 in 2002. If there had been no significant changes in the age at childbirth by birth order (the so-called tempo effect), it is estimated that the TFR would have been around 1.7. In contrast to previous conclusions, they highlight that a trend towards fewer children per woman has contributed decisively to lower the TFR. According to their findings, the

tempo-adjusted TFR for three or more births had reduced fertility in previous decades, but had already declined to levels below 0.2 in the late 1980s, and had little impact on the subsequent decline in the overall TFR. The tempo-adjusted TFR for second births remained relatively stable at around 0.9 in the early 1980s, declined slightly until the late 1990s, and continued to decrease steadily from the late 1990s to 2015, to below 0.6. The adjusted TFR for first births sat slightly below 1.0 in the early 1980s, and started to decline from the early 2000s. It dropped further to levels approaching 0.8 in the early 2010s.

Woo & Jang (2018) support these findings by studying the parity progression ratio, the share of married women with a certain number of children who later have an additional child (zero children to one, one to two and so on), with data from the Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Families. They show that the share of women (age 15-49) having at least one child fell only modestly from 97% during the 1965-1983 period to 92% during the 1984-1997 period to 87% during the 1998-2014 period. The likelihood of having a second child has fallen steadily from one time period to the next, while the likelihood of having three or more children was severely diminished already in the 1984-1997 period (Table 2-3).

To overcome the shortcomings of previous studies and give a more accurate and complete picture of fertility behaviour, a number of studies are now focusing on estimating and ana-

lysing cohort fertility rates (both completed and uncompleted) (Shin et al., 2019; Yoo, 2020, 2022; Oh, 2018; 2019; Kye et al., 2022). These studies have all found that since the 1969 birth cohort, the age of women’s first childbirth has steadily increased and fertility levels have decreased (Figure 2-3). For instance, Yoo (2020) showed that while the most frequent childbearing age has shifted from the mid to late twenties to the early to mid-thirties, the fertility levels of women in their early to mid-thirties today do not compensate for the past fertility levels of women in their mid to late twenties.

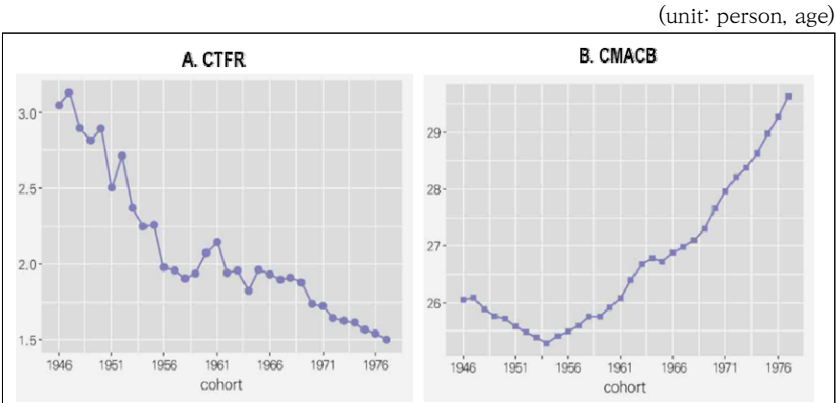
〈Table 2-3〉 Changes in parity progression ratios by period: 1965–2014

year PPR	1965–1983	1984–1997	1998–2014
Childless→First	0.966	0.920	0.866
First→Second	0.932	0.711	0.543
Second→Third	0.614	0.128	0.111
Third→Fourth	0.493	0.095	0.081
Fourth→Fifth	0.412	0.080	0.065
Fifth→Sixth	0.356	0.071	0.056
Sixth→Seventh	0.314	0.065	0.049

Note: Parity progression ratios are defined as the proportion of women with a certain number of children that later have an additional child, measured for the total population of women aged 15–49 in any given year

Source: “Fertility transition in South Korea: application of survival analysis”, Woo & Jang, 2018.

[Figure 2-3] Cohort total fertility rate and average age of childbearing: 1946 to 1977 cohorts



Note: CTFR refers to Cohort total fertility rate and CMACB refers to Cohort mean age of first childbirth.

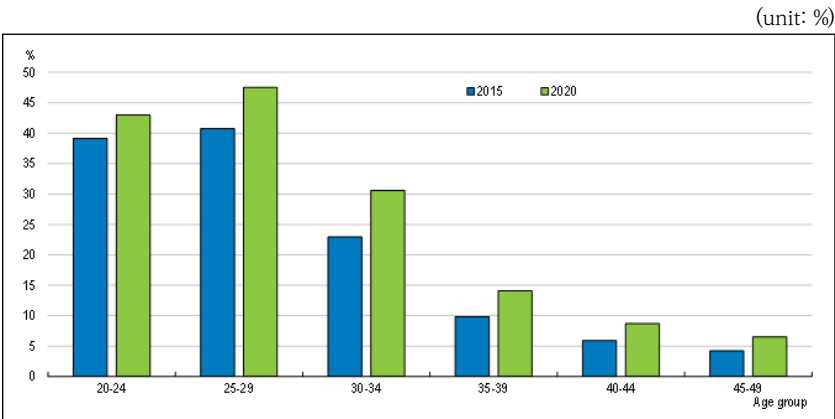
Source: "Analysis and outlook of Korea's long-term trends in lowest-low fertility", Shin et al., 2019.

2.2 2010s and onwards: People increasingly forego marriage and children

It is still too early to study the fertility decline from the mid-2010s until today based on completed cohort fertility rates, as women in childbearing age at any given time span decades of birth cohorts. In the 2000s, fertility was mainly related to the childbirth behaviour of women born from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, while childbirth behaviour in the 2010s is associated with women born between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. There are important differences between these two generations, with education levels among the most obvious.

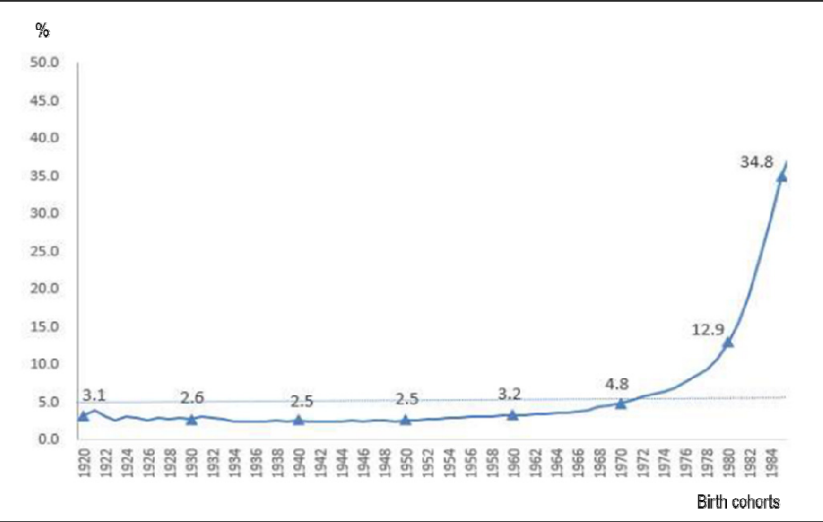
However, knowledge of past patterns and current child-bearing cohorts indicates that fertility continues to fall and will do so in the foreseeable future. First, childlessness among married women is increasing in every relevant age group (Figure 2-4). This trend is also evident from the perspective of birth cohorts. According to the analysis by Park et al. (2019), the rate of childlessness among married women born before 1960 was very low at 2.5%. For those born in 1960 and 1970, the rate slightly increased, but remained low at 3.2% and 4.8%, respectively. However, women in more recent birth cohorts are far more likely not to have children. For instance, in 2015, 12.9% of married women born in 1980 did not have children (Figure 2-5).

[Figure 2-4] Proportions of childless married women by age group (2015, 2020)



Source: “Population Census”, Statistics Korea, 2015, 2020.

[Figure 2-5] Childlessness rate among married women by birth cohort, 2015
(unit: %)

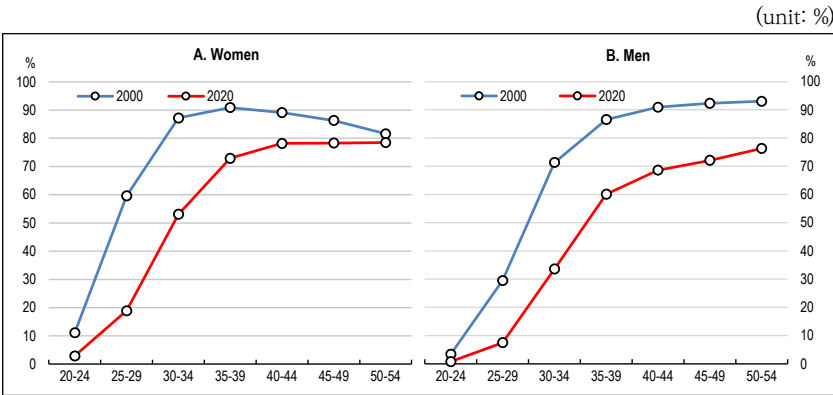


Source: “The characteristics of childless household by marriage duration”, Park et al., 2019.

Second, childbirth outside of marriage remains highly uncommon, and marriage rates keep falling. In 2000, over 90% of men in their early forties and women in their late thirties were married (Figure 2-6). For most of the 20th century, marriage was common in Korean society. However, the portion of married individuals has declined significantly across nearly all age groups from the early 2000s. By 2020, the marriage rate did not surpass 80% even in the age groups most likely to have tied the knot. The reduction was particularly dramatic in age groups where first marriages were most common, namely people in their late twenties and early thirties. For instance, in 2000,

59.6% of women aged 25-29 were married, but by 2020 this had dropped to 18.9%. Over the same period the marriage rate for women in their early thirties fell from 87.2% to 53.1%. The rate for women in their late thirties dropped from 90.9% in 2000 to 72.9% in 2020. For men of the same age, it fell even more sharply from 86.9% to 60.1%.

[Figure 2-6] Childlessness rate among married women by birth cohort, 2015



Source: "Population Census", Statistics Korea, 2015.



3

The work–family conflict

- 3.1 Female employment has increased, but the work–family conflict remains
- 3.2 Increasingly gender equal and dual–income households make different decisions

3

The work–family conflict

While women in the past may have chosen to leave their jobs when they married and had their first child, many women today are making different choices. The share of dual-income households is on the rise, but when facing a conflict between family and work, women increasingly prioritise work. This reflects that women's earnings have become an important part of family income and likely a shift in women's labour supply preferences. Nonetheless, a large gender wage gap still makes the traditional male breadwinner – female carer model a rational choice for couples becoming parents when prevailing institutional settings prevent a dual-earner set-up.

3.1 Female employment has increased, but the work–family conflict remains

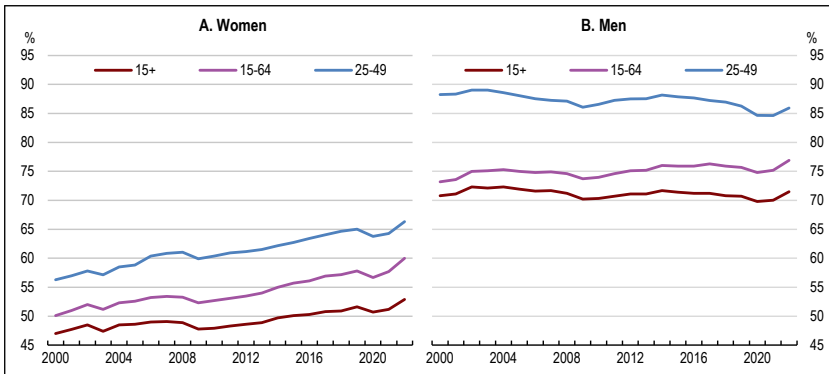
Since the 1980s, the employment of married women increased in urban manufacturing and service industries (Kang, 2007). Between 1985 and 1990, the labour force participation rate of married women rose from 41.0% to 46.8%, whereas during the same period, the participation rate of unmarried women increased only marginally from 44.7% to 45.6% (Lee, 2012), marking a shift away from the previous practice of selectively

employing unmarried women. Both the government and businesses began to recognise the need to utilise the labour force of married women, but public legal and institutional support for pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare was limited. In this situation, where responsibility for childrearing lay with the family, and specifically with women, combining work and childcare was structurally almost impossible. Women therefore tended to participate in the labour force until marriage, after which they exited the labour market. With the improvement in income levels and the spread of middle-class family norms, this reinforced gender-divided roles and responsibilities dictating that women should take care of the home in late 20th-century Korea (Choi & Chang, 2004).

Since 2000, women's employment rates have been on a continuous upward trend, only interrupted by the credit card crisis in the early 2000s, the Global Financial Crisis in the late 2000s and COVID-19 in 2020-21 (Figure 3-1). The employment rates of women aged 15-64 rose by close to 10 percentage points from 50.1% in 2000 to 60% in 2022, while the employment rate of women aged 25-49 rose from 56.3% to 66.3%. Men generally have a higher level of employment than women, and the employment rate of men aged 15-64 has been modestly increasing to reach 76.9% in 2022, despite a clear downward trend for men aged 25-49. In 2000, the overall employment rate for women aged 25-49 was 23.8 percentage points lower than that

of men. As of 2022, this gap had narrowed to 18.6 percentage points (16.9 percentage points for 15-64 year-olds).

[Figure 3-1] Employment rates by gender



Source: “Economically Active Population Survey.”, Statistics Korea, 2023b.

3.1.1 Marriage and childbirth reduce women’s employment

A series of studies analysing women's employment in relation to marriage and childbirth from a life-course perspective emphasise that women's employment over their lifetime has not significantly deviated from the traditional “M-shaped” pattern (Min, 2012; Kim & Park, 2019; Choi & Lee, 2022). This pattern typically involves women entering the labour market after finishing education, leaving the labour market around the time of marriage or first childbirth, and re-entering the workforce after completing child-rearing. While there are variations in the degree and nature of this trend depending on the time period and

birth cohort, the phenomenon has been and remains a steady feature of women's life course in Korea. Employment patterns of mothers also differ systematically according to their quality of employment. This pattern differs from cross-country OECD experience, which shows that since the 1980s, high female employment rates have been linked to high fertility rates (Fluchtmann et al., 2023).

Empirical studies have measured the effect of marriage and first childbirth on employment withdrawal. Yoo & Lee (2020) analysed data from the Korean Labor and Income Panel Study, focusing on women who married between 2002 and 2012. The study examined these women's employment status for a period of seven years, covering four years before marriage and including the year of marriage itself. Using a difference in differences statistical approach, they found that the employment rate of married women dropped by about 12 percentage points in the year of marriage from 82% to 70%, dropped further to 57% after one year and to 45% after six years, a cumulative 37 percentage points drop. Since most women who married in the 2000s had at least one child, the decline in employment after marriage estimated in this study can be understood to include both the effects of marriage and childbirth.

Kwak (2020) used combined data of the Korean Labor and Income Panel Study (1998-2018), to analyse the effect of having a first child on a woman's employment. Kwak found that it re-

duced the probability of a woman being employed by 45% compared to the year before. It is fairly common to leave the labour market in the year before childbirth, with the probability of being employed dropping by 17.7 percentage points between two years and one year prior to childbirth. Starting before childbirth, the trend for women to leave their jobs becomes more pronounced in the year of their first birth and continues for up to five years after giving birth.

Kim & Park (2019) created seven categories of life courses and populated them using individual and occupational history data from the Korean Labor and Income Panel Study (2016). According to Kim and Park's paper, 48.0% of the women could be categorized into either the "M-shaped life" category or the "potentially M-shaped life" category, which means they left their jobs after marriage. This finding indicates that the most typical employment pattern for women across all generations in Korean society is one where they work until marriage (or first childbirth), leave employment thereafter, and then re-enter the labour market after a certain period. Only 8.7% of women were continuously employed both before and after marriage. A significant portion of 17.1% remained in employment while staying unmarried. This study shows that while the share of married women experiencing career interruptions has been decreasing in recent times, life courses that exhibit a balance of work and family are rare.

Studies taking a life-course approach suggest that women born in the 1960s and 1970s did not depart significantly from the traditional M-shaped path of marriage and employment (Min, 2012; Kim & Park, 2019; Choi & Lee, 2022). It appears that during the 2000s and mid-2010s many women had to choose between either giving birth or staying in employment. Women from the 1970-79 cohort did not show a significant difference compared to women born in the late 1960s in terms of how likely they were to leave employment during periods of childbirth and child rearing (Min, 2012). Studies comparing labour supply patterns revealed that women born in the 1970s participated in the labour market more before childbirth compared to women born in the 1960s. However, a greater number of married women in the 1970s cohort withdrew from the labour market immediately after childbirth (Chang & Cheon 2014; Kim 2015; Kim, Park & Shin, 2015). Women with a higher age at first childbirth were likely to be employed until they had their first child, but were not more likely to stay in employment after childbirth (Min, 2012).

Women leaving work during periods of childbirth and child-rearing is linked to the wider issue of women's employment stability. To investigate this issue, Chang (2020) analysed the effect of gender and birth cohort on job stability. This study measured job stability as the risk of job change. Rather than focusing specifically on the timing of first childbirth or marriage

as factors influencing job stability, Chang looked at the effect of starting employment at different periods of life and differences in job stability between the primary and secondary labour market. The former is characterised by stable employment, good working conditions and the opportunity for internal promotions, and the latter by insecure contracts and poor working conditions. The study looked at the effects of gender, birth cohort (1960s, 1970s and 1980s), and the starting point of employment (early twenties, late twenties and early thirties), to explore whether job stability among more recent birth cohorts had changed. The results showed that job stability for the 1980s birth cohort improved compared to previous cohorts and that the security of women's jobs notably improved for those in their late twenties and early thirties. However, job stability for those in their early twenties had deteriorated. The gender gap for job stability was greater in the primary labour market than in the secondary labour market and job stability in areas predominantly occupied by women has shown no significant improvement over the past 30 years.

Choi et al. (2020) used a panel fixed-effects model to examine the differences in the probability of labour market withdrawal between women with and without children according to their position in the labour market. They categorized those positions into a primary labour market including regular employment in the public sector and large corporations, and a second-

dary labour market, characterised by insecure employment status, non-application of severance pay and low wages. For women in the secondary labour market, the probability of leaving the labour market increased as their children grew older. It began to fall somewhat when the child reached the age of 9 or older. The authors observed that the likelihood of women exiting the labour market increases by 15.6% when children are between 4 and 9 years old compared to women without children.

For primary labour market workers, no statistically significant difference in employment withdrawal was found compared to childless women for children under 9 years of age. However, a 14.3% withdrawal probability was observed when children were over 9 years old (Choi et al., 2020). In the primary labour market, outside the public sector, even employees with regular contracts (Jeong-gyu-jig) may not have high job security. Additionally, as job responsibilities and workload often increase with higher positions, the time pressure can be higher for older age groups. Furthermore, if the spouses of women are regular workers in senior positions in the primary labour market, this can further strengthen the pressure on women to exit the labour market. In practice, while the long working hours for women in managerial positions did not affect their husbands' career breaks, having a husband who worked long hours increases the likelihood of women in managerial positions leaving their jobs, a finding supported in other

research (Cha, 2010). For public sector and large corporation workers, Choi et al.'s (2020) only statistically significant finding was a 10.6% increase in the probability of leaving the labour market for those with children under 3 years old, compared to childless workers.

Other recent studies have corroborated these findings. Oh & Kim (2021) found that the risk of career interruption after marriage is lower for highly educated individuals and that married women with higher employment stability are less vulnerable to career interruptions. Contrary to Min (2012), Oh and Kim suggested that the risk of career interruption after the first childbirth decreases with age. Jung (2023) conducted a cluster-centred trend analysis of the employment trajectories of women who experienced their first childbirth between 2005 and 2012. The study categorized these trajectories and examined factors affecting employment continuity, finding that women in lower income brackets were more likely to leave employment after having their first child. Maintaining regular employment requires access to various types of caregiving resources, and both caregiving support from family and the use of public childcare were associated with maintaining regular employment.

3.1.2 A large gender wage gap can perpetuate traditional gender roles

Employment discontinuity leads to gender disparities in years of service, and re-entering the workforce after a time away puts people at a disadvantage in terms of receiving appropriate wage levels. There are also large gender disparities in terms of employment conditions, including occupation, industry, and type of employment. All these factors are manifested in Korea's gender wage gap, which is the highest in the OECD. However, empirical research shows that such objective differences between men and women workers only account for a minor share of the gender wage gap. The large unexplained residual points to gender discrimination, which can be a combination of pure discrimination based on gender, and statistical discrimination, the practice that employers invest less in the careers of young women than men, in anticipation that they will leave their job to care for children. In a situation with higher male than female earnings and an incompatibility between work and child-care, a rational couple will adhere to the traditional male breadwinner – female carer model, thereby reinforcing statistical discrimination.

Kim et al. (2021) analysed raw survey data from the Ministry of Employment and Labor covering 2002 to 2020 in order to calculate and analyse the gender wage gap. According to their findings, the total average monthly wage in 2020 was KRW 4.1

million (appr. USD 3 300) for men and 2.7 million (appr. USD 2 200) for women, which makes the gender wage gap 33.7%. When monthly wages are divided by total monthly working hours, the hourly gender wage gap is only slightly less pronounced, at 29.2%. The gender gap in monthly wage has fluctuated somewhat. Starting at 37.2% in 2002, it decreased to 36.1% by 2006. However, the disparity rose and fell, before peaking at 37.5% in 2015. From that point, the disparity declined until 2020. The gender wage gap in hourly wages also fluctuated over the years. There was a notable fall between 2015 and 2020 from 34.2% to 29.2% (Kim et al., 2021).

Kim et al. (2021) decomposed the reduction in the gender wage gap between 2002 and 2020, with changes in the composition of explanatory variables, such as the increase in the proportion of women in higher education, high-wage industries, and occupations and changes in the price structure. Their results suggest changes in the composition of explanatory variables accounted for 65% of the reduction in the gender wage gap. At the same time, the practice of paying women less than men under the same conditions pushed the wage gap in the other direction.

Age-specific analysis is key to understand gender discrimination in Korea's labour market, given how significantly age affects employment rates and labour market positions for women in the country. Kim (2017) analysed the gender wage

gap across different generations using raw data from the August Optional Survey by Types of Labour section of Statistics Korea's Economically Active Population Survey. Kim categorized respondents into three age groups: 15-29, 30-54, and 55+, established wage functions for each group, and analysed the magnitude of the gender wage gap and the components contributing to this gap. The results showed that the gender wage gap in the 15-29 age group was smallest, but the proportion of the gap attributed to unexplained discrimination factors was the largest, at 185.6%. For the over-55s, however, factors including education level, job type, and company size accounted for 55% of the total wage gap. In the age group of 30-54, these factors only explained 30% of the wage gap, with the remaining 70% attributed to unexplained discrimination.

The gender wage gap includes not only direct wage discrimination but also differences in human capital and labour market positions, which have developed rapidly over recent decades. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between direct wage discrimination and wage differences caused by other factors. For example, the gap in education levels between men and women is almost non-existent in recent generations entering the labour market. The question of how changes in the balance of human capital affect the gender wage gap has been addressed by a number of studies. First, Yoo (2017) analysed the wage difference for two- and four-year college graduates at the

time of labour market entry. According to this study, female college graduates earned only 78% of what their male counterparts received upon labour market entry. The contribution of human capital to this wage gap was relatively small (7.1%), direct wage discrimination accounted for 32.1%, and 62.1% was attributed to differences in labour market positions such as occupation, industry and company size.

Kim & Oh (2019) reached similar conclusions. They conducted an analysis that controlled for observable human capital, including specific majors and the university attended, to explain how differences in labour market positions contribute to the gender wage gap. According to their findings, even with the same school, major, and grades, women in the early stages of their careers earn 17.4% less than men, which suggests that gender differences in choice of major or occupation cannot explain the overall gender income gap. The authors argue that women are excluded from the hiring and job allocation process, which explains the gender wage gap. They also found that public sector jobs such as government officials and teachers, which have strong legal controls in the hiring process, show almost no gender wage gap.

Kim & Oh's research shows that the disadvantages women face in the labour market are not solely due to employment interruptions (career breaks). However, it cannot be concluded that the discrimination women experience in recruitment and

job allocation as they enter the labour market is unrelated to women's typical employment patterns over their life course. Women's careers often feature breaks during pregnancy, childbirth and child-rearing periods, which can lay the ground for statistical discrimination by employers. This issue is addressed by Choi & Bang (2018). They identified a gender wage gap of about 10%, even at the early stages of labour market entry. They also found that the wage gap widens significantly for women in their late twenties, for groups both with and without career breaks. This suggests that the increase in the wage gap over time is not a direct effect of career interruption but rather a result of employers acting on their expectation that women will take career breaks ("statistical discrimination"). Such wage gaps can influence the specialisation of roles between spouses during childrearing years and entrench negative expectations and biases about women's labour market participation among employers. The vicious cycle of statistical discrimination cannot be easily resolved without public intervention, as rationally behaving employers and employees will tend to cement existing gender gaps, thereby also reducing the effectiveness of policies supporting work-life balance.

3.1.3 Women's education and employment status impacts marriage and childbirth decisions

Marriage patterns conditional on education and employment status have changed considerably over time, with patterns for women becoming more equal to those of men, while the share of unmarried individuals has increased in all categories. Traditionally, Koreans usually got married for the first time at so-called "marriageable age", the age considered socially appropriate to get married. About 80% of individuals born before the 1960s married within an age span of 7-8 years (Choi, 2020).

In birth cohorts born before the 1960s, employment status influenced the first marriage for men, but had no direct impact for women, except in the case of some professional jobs (Eun, 1995). Men's marriage behaviour continues to depend on variables related to socio-economic status such as education, employment status, occupation and income, and it is relatively well established that higher socio-economic status correlates with higher marriage rates (Yoo & Hyun, 2010; Yoon, 2012a; Choi and Min, 2015; Raymo et al., 2015). The already strong correlation between the likelihood of a man getting married for the first time and his employment status is even more pronounced for birth cohorts born since the 1970s (Kim, 2017).

Although there was an increasing trend in the employment rate of unmarried women, a high proportion of women born before the 1970s married immediately after graduating from

their final school and without any work experience. Park et al. (2005) also found that during 1990-97, women with higher levels of education had higher rates of first marriage, married within a shorter period of time after graduation, while occupational status did not affect the timing of marriage. Women born in the 1970s have different marital behaviour from older generations. Employment and job security had a positive correlation with getting married, suggesting that the life course of the majority of women was changing. Women with regular employment contracts (Jeong-gyu-jig) had a 17.3% higher probability of getting married than those who were not employed. Marriage probabilities were highest for those with secure employment, lower for those with insecure employment contracts, and lowest among unemployed women (Kim, 2017).

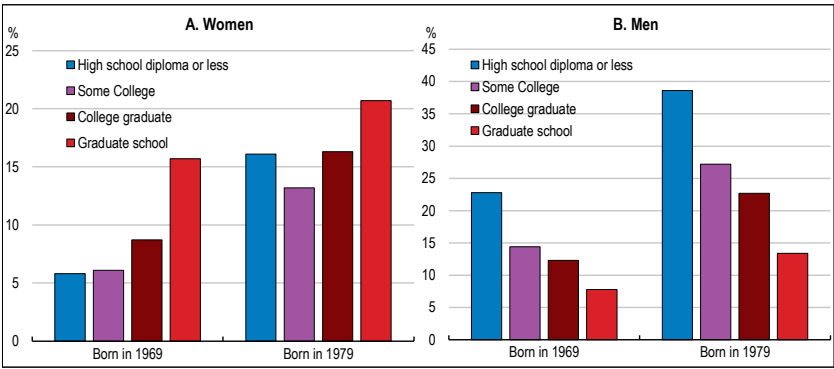
The decline in first marriages is also confirmed by the increasing number of people staying single for life. Comparing the education level and marriage status of people born in 1969 and 1979 at the age of 40 (Figure 3-2) reveals some important trends. More people from the 1979 cohort remained unmarried than those from the 1969 cohort regardless of education level. Among men, there is also a clear and continued correlation between lower education levels and singlehood. For women, unlike for men, higher-educated women born in 1969 were more likely to be single. But by the time the 1979 cohort reached 40, the percentage of women with a lower education who were un-

married had increased significantly faster than for highly educated women, even though higher educational attainment remains associated with lower marriage probability (Hwang, 2023). This remains contrary to for example the Nordics, where higher educated women have the same or more children than women with lower levels of educational attainment, as they can combine work and family life in a more gender equal environment (Bertrand et al., 2021).

Nam & Kim (2016) used the Korean Labor and Income Panel Study (1998-2015) to construct an unbalanced panel of women aged 20-40 in order to analyse the hazard rates of marriage (share of population marrying in a given period of time), first birth conditional on marriage, and second birth conditional on the first. The results indicate that women's employment negatively impacts marriage, first birth, and second birth. While education has a negative effect on the marriage hazard rate, it positively affects the first birth conditional on marriage, and shows no distinct effect on the second birth. The authors emphasised that the hazard rate gap between birth cohorts is significant. The differences in marriage, first childbirth, and second childbirth among these birth cohorts are only partially explained by education and employment status. They note that the remaining 80% can be interpreted as being 'caused by factors that have a common impact on women within the same generation but independent from the rise in education or em-

ployment’. These findings are in line with OECD (2019), which investigated how various labour market factors correlated with having a first and a second child based on data from the Korean Labor and Income Panel Study, 1998-2016.

[Figure 3-2] Percentage of unmarried people at the age of 40 from the 1969 and 1979 cohorts



Source: 1) “Population Census.”, Statistics Korea, 2020.
2) “Population Census-20% Sample Microdata.”, Statistics Korea, 2022.

3.2 Increasingly gender equal and dual-income households make different decisions

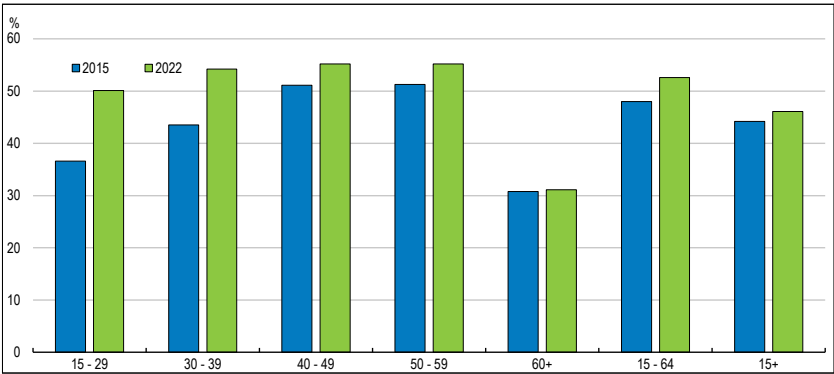
The fact that women with education and high labour market status are becoming more attractive as spouses is reflected in the rise of the dual-income family, where women’s income is increasingly an important part of the family economy. Married women's labour supply has in the past been largely determined by their spouse's income, and has been very sensitive to the

level of their own wages. These relationships have weakened considerably from the early 2000s to the mid 2010s. While within-couple fertility increases uniformly with men's income, the relationship with women's income is U-shaped. In general, couples with low incomes are reluctant to have children. Couples on mid-to-high combined incomes have lower fertility the more total family income depends on the wife's income, as this increases the alternative cost of motherhood. This alternative cost seems to decline as the wife's income surpasses the median. This could reflect a higher ability to combine work and family for high-income women, for example through a combination of more secure employment status and having the economic means to procure childcare and other domestic services in the market.

The pattern of livelihood support in married-couple households is shifting from sole male breadwinner to dual-income support, largely driven by couples in their twenties and thirties (Figure 3-3). In 2015, 48.0% of households made up of individuals aged 15-64 had two incomes, meaning both spouses were employed. This increased to 52.6% by 2022. It is noteworthy that after rising considerably since 2015, the share of dual-income couples among those in the childbearing and childrearing ages of 15-29 and 30-39 are no longer significantly different from the average across age groups. Moreover, this appears to be directly related to a rise in the

employment rate of married women with children. The percentage of dual-income households with children under 18 increased from 47.2% in 2015 to 53.3% in 2022, with a particularly notable increase for households with children aged 0-6 (Figure 3-4). These developments stand apart from the period from the 1990s to the early 2010s, when dual-income households were also on the rise. In this earlier period, the pace of change was slow and gradual (Chang & Cheon, 2014) and largely driven by middle-aged women re-entering the workforce after career interruptions (Kim, 2015).

[Figure 3-3] Share of dual-income households among married couples



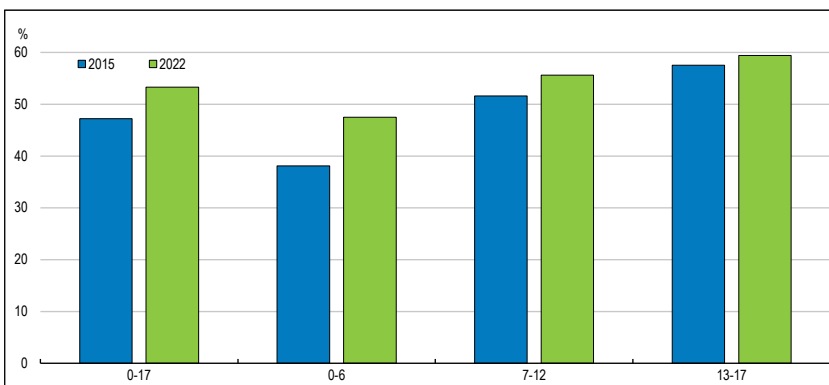
Source: "Local Area Labor Force Survey", Statistics Korea, 2015, 2022.

The recent rise in dual-income households seems to indicate that having preschool-aged children does not have as negative an effect on employment as previously. This is supported by Kim (2018), using household survey data. Kim compared the

female employment rate for women with children in 2006 and 2016, finding that having children under the age of four or between four and six reduced women's likelihood of being in employment less severely than in 2006. However, Kim also found that while the effect of having elementary school children was not as great as having children of pre-school age, the negative employment effect of having elementary school-aged children had increased during this period.

While Yoon (2012b), covering 1998-2007, and Chang & Cheon (2014) found that the labour supply of married women remained largely determined by their own wage and husband's income level, more recent research indicates that the factors influencing the labour supply of married women have evolved, with clear differences emerging based on socioeconomic status.

[Figure 3-4] Percentage of dual-income households among married couples



Note: Y-axis is the proportion of dual-income households (%). X-axis is the age range of youngest child.

Source: Source: "Local Area Labor Force Survey", Statistics Korea, 2015, 2022.

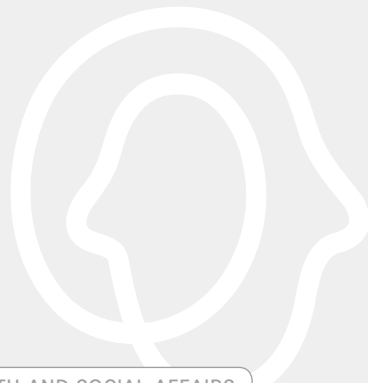
Jung (2019) suggests that the labour supply pattern of married women has changed since the 2010s. Analysis using data from 2001 to 2016 shows that the elasticity of married women's labour supply in response to their own wages has been decreasing since the early 2000s, falling from 1.98 during 2005-08 to 0.7 during 2013-16. The labour supply elasticity in response to spouses' income also significantly decreased after the financial crisis. Even when categorizing spouses' income into upper, middle and lower classes and calculating the elasticity to wages, the decrease in labour supply elasticity suggests a diminishing influence of wage and income effects on the work decisions of married women. This trend, where women increasingly choose to work regardless of their own and their spouses' wage levels, points towards a labour supply pattern among married women which is increasingly resembling that of men.

However, Jung also notes that explaining this decrease in labour supply elasticity solely in terms of changed preferences has its limitations. It could be influenced by policies supporting continuous employment for women or due to the characteristics of women's jobs. With these caveats, the finding that married women's labour supply is less affected by wages and spouse's income seems to imply that the traditional norm of the man as the main breadwinner and the woman as the main caretaker in couple households is weakening, and that women increasingly base their labour supply decisions on their own

work-family preferences. However, more research is needed to establish this as a fact.

Nam & Kim (2016) demonstrated how the alternative cost of motherhood is higher and fertility lower if the wife's income constitutes a large share of total family income. They analysed how birth numbers changed from 1998 to 2015 according to a married couple's combined income, and solely the husband's income. Their analysis showed that the number of births fell faster among couples with a joint income from around the median to the top 20% than in the lowest 20%, but that when only the husband's income was considered, the decrease was sharpest among those with incomes in the lowest 20% and middle 20% (compared to the top 20%).

Ham (2020) analysed the impact of employment on childbirth by looking at the relationship between how many children couples had and men's and women's wage percentiles. For men, the higher the wage percentile, the higher the likelihood of having children and the higher the average number of children. For women, however, the relationship between wages and births was U-shaped: up to the median wage, the higher the wage percentile, the lower the number of children, but beyond the median wage, the number of births increased with wages.



4

Family policies and their effects on fertility and female employment

4.1 Publicly financed childcare and home care

4.2 Parental leave

4

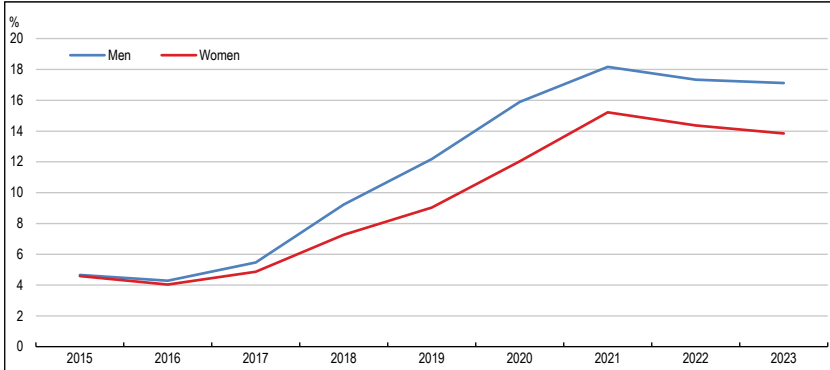
Family policies and their effects on fertility and female employment

OECD countries have expanded policies and programmes aimed at raising women's labour participation and fertility rates. This includes childcare services, parental leave policies, cash transfers and drives to foster family-friendly workplace cultures (Yang et al., 2024). Korea is no exception and has seen a variety of policies introduced and expanded since the early 2000s, and the number of people making use of them has been sharply increasing. Policies such as publicly financed childcare and paid parental leave are designed to make it easier to combine work and motherhood, but any cash transfer or subsidised service provided in-kind will increase a household's disposable income. As is the case with spouse's income, this income effect will disincentivise female employment, and the overall effect will depend on individual situations and preferences. To illustrate the point with an extreme example, a stay-at-home mother who already has her child enrolled in childcare while it is payable will not start working if it becomes free. On the contrary, the savings on childcare expenses could enable her to stay at home longer than what would otherwise be the case. Likewise, mothers prone to enrol their children and increase their labour supply if childcare became cheaper would only do

so if quality childcare was available and conveniently located. These mechanisms can help explain why such policies are not always as impactful as expected and why the effects vary based on individual circumstances.

As discussed further below, empirical evidence shows that parental leave and childcare support, two key family policies, have had positive effects on fertility, but limited effects on women's employment rates. This appears to be because, even after returning from parental leave, practical considerations make it difficult to balance work and childcare. Korea has some of the longest working hours in the OECD, and an inflexible working culture, where workers are expected to be fully committed. Further reduced and more flexible working hours should make work and family more compatible. In 2018 legislation to limit the maximum working hours per week to 52 hours was introduced through an amendment to the Labor Standards Act. Then in 2019 revisions to the Equal Employment Opportunity and Work-Family Balance Assistance Act made provisions allowing workers to request reduced working hours for a variety of reasons, including family care, personal health issues, preparation for retirement (for workers aged 55 and above), or for education. Alongside this, flexible work arrangements have been on the rise, especially in the context of COVID-19 (Figure 4-1).

[Figure 4-1] Use of flexible work arrangement



Source: "Use of Flexible Work Arrangement by Gender", Statistics Korea, each year.

Flexible work arrangements are more common among men than women. This could be because more men work in large corporations or have secure long-term contracts, contexts where flexible work arrangements are used more and more frequently. While the utilisation of flexible working arrangements has a positive effect in helping women with children to continue working and maintain their jobs, it is a risk that if women use flexible working arrangements more than men in the future or if both men and women utilise these arrangements according to gender norms, it could ultimately widen the wage gap and performance disparity between genders (Chung, 2019). Shin & Lee (2021) selected 30 companies where flexible work arrangements were common and conducted interviews with their human resource managers. They found that flexible work arrangements prevent career interruptions for women,

increase job satisfaction and improve employees' ability to concentrate on their work. However, using flexible work arrangements also increased the risk of scoring low on performance evaluation, or made workers anxious about this possibility. Users, conscious about this, felt the need to prove themselves.

4.1 Publicly financed childcare and home care

In Korea, childcare support and the parental home-care allowance are core, universal policies to support working parents. Since 2013 all preschool-aged children have been eligible for free childcare, regardless of parental income. If parents opt to care for their child at home, they are provided with a parental home-care allowance (Home Childcare Allowance). Common to the two policies is, as mentioned above, that any monetary or in-kind transfer increases families' disposable income, and this income effect will reduce female labour supply when seen in isolation. Apart from this, these two alternatives give parents diametrically opposite incentives. Childcare support is an almost direct subsidy of women's labour participation, while a parental home-care allowance increases non-labour income for households conditional on caring for your own child, thereby directly subsidising staying at home to care for children (Cukrowska-Torzewska, 2017; Giuliani & Duvander, 2017; Chang, 2011).

There are differences in the use of childcare facilities and the receipt of home-care allowances according to household income. According to Noh (2016), 12.2% of the households in the lowest income quintile do not use childcare facilities, compared to only 3.5% in the highest income quintile. The age of the child also affects the relative rate of receiving the home-care allowance. The rate of receiving the allowance for children aged zero is overwhelmingly high at 83.8%, but it drops significantly to 29.2% at age one and decreases to less than 10% from age three onwards (Table 4-1). This is believed to be due to the increasing utilisation of childcare facilities after the age of one.

〈Table 4-1〉 Childcare allowance and use of childcare facilities by child age(2018)
(unit: persons, %)

Child's age	Number of cases	Home childcare allowance	Childcare facilities enrolment rate			
			Public childcare	Private childcare	Public kindergarten	Private kindergarten
0~5	3775	26.8	10.1	36.2	8.0	18.9
0	803	83.8	2.1	14.1	0.0	0.0
1	540	29.2	10.9	60.0	0.0	0.0
2	568	14.0	17.6	68.1	0.2	0.1
3	650	8.8	11.7	39.7	9.1	30.7
4	549	6.0	11.8	24.1	18.0	40.2
5	665	8.6	8.8	22.0	19.9	40.7

Note: The percentages are weighted values, and the number of cases represents the actual number of respondents.

Source: "Home child care allowance users vs. daycare users", Kim, 2022.

The uptake of childcare and the home care allowances varies by the age of the child and parents’ income quintile. The rate of receiving the childcare allowance for infants aged zero and one is higher in the bottom three income quintiles than in the fourth and fifth quintiles (Table 4-2). However, there was no consistent pattern for pre-school children aged two and above. In other words, the tendency to provide childcare at home and differences in behaviour by household income level mainly relates to children aged zero to one.

〈Table 4-2〉 Household income, childcare allowance and use of childcare facilities(2018)

Child's age	Household income quintile	Number of cases	Home childcare allowance	Childcare facilities enrolment rate			
				Public childcare	Private childcare	Public kindergarten	Private kindergarten
0~24 months	1	425	67.4	5.5	27.2	-	-
	2	185	70.0	3.6	26.4	-	-
	3	260	64.0	4.4	31.6	-	-
	4	285	48.6	9.4	42.0	-	-
	5	183	51.4	5.2	43.4	-	-
24~60 months	1	643	7.6	13.4	41.0	18.1	19.9
	2	254	11.6	12.1	40.0	11.8	25.5
	3	515	6.7	12.8	40.5	10.1	30.0
	4	606	8.4	11.7	36.5	11.4	32.1
	5	405	14.7	10.8	30.6	7.6	36.4

Note: The percentages are weighted values, and the number of cases represents the actual number of respondents.

Source: “Home child care allowance users vs. daycare users”, Kim, 2022.

4.1.1 Childcare subsidies and female employment

Given that these two systems with diametrically opposite incentive structures were introduced at roughly the same time in 2013, it is impossible to untangle their effects. However, prior to 2013, childcare fees were provided primarily for low-income strata. This setup has allowed extensive research on the impact of childcare support on employment among low-income groups. The overall picture is that there is no conclusive evidence that the introduction of publicly financed childcare has increased female labour supply. Evidence from a 2007 reform show a negative female labour supply effect from childcare subsidies. There is tentative evidence that the 2013 reforms taken together indeed increased women's labour supply. There is also evidence that childcare subsidies increased labour supply for some groups of women conditional on the availability of high-quality childcare.

When childcare services were institutionalised through the Child Care Act in 1991, selective support was provided only to low-income families (Lee, 2010; Lee, 2012). In 2007, partial childcare fee support was expanded to working households in urban areas with below-average monthly incomes. Choi (2011) used the tenth Korean Labor and Income Panel to examine how this affected women's labour participation in the Heckit model, where wages were estimated and then incorporated into

the labour supply model. Choi found that an increase in household childcare support had a negative impact on labour participation among women. Byun & Heo (2014) examined the same policy change's impact on women's working hours, using data from the 2004 and 2009 Time Use Surveys. The results showed that the working hours of women in middle to lower-middle-income households with preschool-age children decreased, while the time spent caring for children increased. However, it is worth noting that the regression coefficients only had a low level of significance, at 10%.

Lee (2016) examined the impact of institutional changes after 2007 on the labour supply of mothers with young children using mothers of elementary school children aged 7-9 as the control group. The results showed that while there was no significant change in labour supply between 2007 and 2010, there was a significant increase in both the labour force participation and the number of hours worked by mothers between 2010 and 2013, when the universal free childcare policy began. However, the results should be interpreted with caution, given that infants and school-aged children require different levels of care, and the mothers occupied varying positions within the labour market over the analysis period.

Kim (2018) utilised data from the Korean Labour and Income Panel Study spanning from 1998 to 2016 to ascertain whether there was a significant increase in labour supply among groups

benefiting from two different childcare support payments, one subsidising childcare suppliers directly and the other subsidising parents to pay for childcare. The Basic Child Care Subsidy provided direct support to childcare facilities for infants, based on the number of children in the facility. The Parental Child Care Subsidy provided selective support to parents in certain income groups to cover childcare expenses. This study found that the Parental Child Care Subsidy increased the labour force participation rate of married women by 3.5 percentage points, while the effects of the Basic Child Care Subsidy on female labour supply were insignificant. Also, neither of the subsidies had a significant impact on the weekly working hours of married women who participated in the labour market. However, these results may not solely reflect the receipt of childcare support, as the variable was only whether or not individuals were eligible for the programme, and as such did not directly measure the programme's effects.

Kim (2022) suggests one reason why the effects of the childcare fee support policy might appear negative. For the childcare fee support to have a labour supply effect, a change in caregiver is required; if children are already attending childcare institutions, paying for childcare merely reduces household expenses, creating an income effect without necessarily increasing the incentive to participate in the labour market. Based on whether mothers were providing direct childcare or

were employed before the policy implementation, Kim distinguished between four groups and analysed the labour supply of married women with preschool children before and after the policy's introduction, using data from the Korean Labor and Income Panel Study. The results confirmed that there was no increase in the labour participation rate among the group providing childcare at home – the exact group the policy had targeted. Instead, Kim's results show a decrease in working hours and labour participation among employed women. Kim interprets these results as indicating that the decrease in labour supply due to the income effect was greater than the potential increase in labour supply that could be facilitated by increasing time available. Even though it could be argued that welfare improved once a portion of childcare costs were taken up by the public purse, the outcomes were limited in terms of economic activity.

Min & Lee (2020) pointed out that the policy of childcare fee support does not guarantee access to quality childcare services. There are regional differences in the level of care provided by daycare centres and kindergartens, and such disparities hinder the policy's efficacy. They found that in areas where there is good access to childcare facilities, childcare subsidies encouraged women with more than one child to maintain a career. According to their results, the subsidy did not affect career maintenance among mothers with one child in a dual-income

household, or help mothers who had not previously worked to enter employment. However, the findings suggest the reason many studies have been unable to detect a positive influence on career maintenance from childcare subsidies could be linked to childcare facilities being too few or of insufficient quality.

4.1.2 Childcare subsidies and birth rates

There is only limited research on the impact of universal free childcare on birth rates. Min and Lee (2020) examined birth rates before the policy was expanded (2009–2011) and after (2013–2016), region by region. The results showed that in areas with a high supply of childcare facilities or public daycare centres, the birth rates among women aged 30 to 49 increased after free childcare was introduced. Lee (2022) used National Health Insurance big data to explore whether the policy had different impacts on childbirth depending on the supply of public childcare facilities by city, county and district. The findings indicated that the higher the possibility of enrolling in public daycare centres, the higher the birth rate. This effect was stronger at higher income levels up to, but not including, the top 20%. Both studies indicate that the success of childcare subsidies as a policy tool to increase birth rates is directly related to the availability of adequate childcare services, both in terms of quality and quantity.

4.2 Parental leave

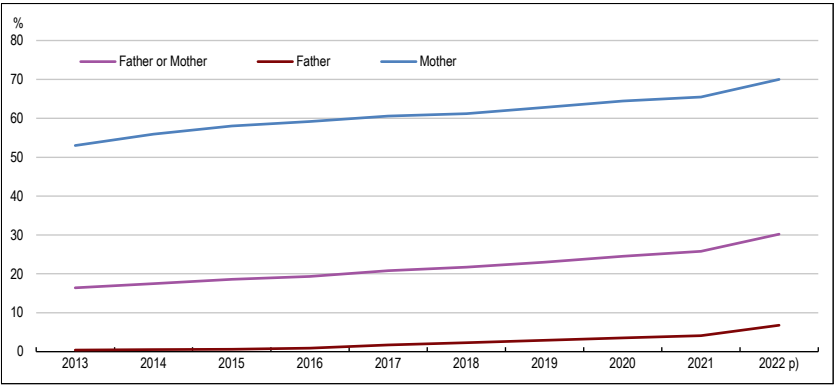
Maternity, paternity and parental leave systems are designed to secure working parents employment during times of childbirth and child-rearing and compensate for the loss of income through benefits. While leaves of absence might have a short-term negative impact on career progression, they are expected to have a positive effect on women's employment in the long run by maintaining attachment to the labour market and employer-employee matches (Mari & Cutuli, 2018). However, the parental leave system can have two effects on women's childbirth decisions. First, if returning to one's original place of work is guaranteed by the parental leave system, the opportunity cost created by career gaps associated with childbirth and child-rearing can be reduced. At the same time, parental leave benefits compensate for income loss. Both effects would encourage women to have children, but their relative sizes are uncertain, and the income effect from parental leave benefits could mean that increased fertility comes at the expense of female labour supply. Studies outside of Korea have not always shown that parental leave policies have a positive impact on women's participation in the labour market, nor do such policies always encourage mothers to return to their original jobs (Budig et al., 2015; Cukrowska-Torzewska, 2017; Misra et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2024). Empirical research from Korea in-

icates that increases in parental leave benefits encourage couples to have children, while they reduce job retention of mothers, contrary to their objective.

Maternity leave was formally guaranteed for 60 days under the Labour Standards Act introduced in 1953, but there was no provision for paid leave during this period. The Parental Leave System introduced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Law in 1988 remained unpaid until a monthly allowance of KRW 200,000 financed by employment insurance was introduced in 2001. Since then, there have been efforts to make more workers eligible and increase the age of children for whom parental leave can be taken. In 2011, Korea introduced a policy according to which 15% of parental leave payment would be paid to workers who return to their original job and continue to work for at least six months from the date they completed their period of leave. As the system has been expanded, more and more people have made use of the system. In 2007 less than 20,000 people had started receiving parental leave benefits, but that figure stood at 58,000 in 2011, and 110,000 in 2021 (Ministry of Employment and Labor, Korea Employment Information Service, 2008, 2013 and 2023). The parental leave usage rate, which refers to the percentage of eligible parents per 100 who utilise parental leave, has also increased from 16.4% in 2013 to 30.2% in 2022. To address the gender gap in how the parental leave system is used and encourage men's participation in

caregiving, Korea has been providing additional incentives for fathers taking parental leave since 2014. As hoped, the share of fathers taking parental leave has been rapidly increasing, even though it remains only a fraction of that of women (Figure 4-2).

[Figure 4-2] Parental leave uptake rate among parents of newborns



Note: Uptake rate calculated by dividing the number of parents of newborns who used parental leave in a given year by the number of parents with newborns in that year who were eligible for parental leave.

Source: “Parental Leaves Statistics”, Statistics Korea, each year.

4.2.1 Parental leave and job retention

Despite improvements to the system and increased uptake rates, a considerable number of studies have found that the Korean parental leave system is not effective at encouraging workers to return to their original job or preventing career interruptions. Only about 70% remained in the same job just one month after returning from leave, falling to the mid to high

50% range after a year, despite a significant increase in the up-take rate since 2002 (Table 4-3).

〈Table 4-3〉 Use of maternity and parental leave and employment retention rates after returning to work(2002~2013)

(unit: persons, %)

Year	Maternity leave finisher	Employment retention rate			Parental finisher	Employment retention rate		
		1 month	6 months	1 year		1 month	6 months	1 year
2002	27,440	94.8	85.7	75.2	5,182	84.1	75.7	70.3
2003	34,828	94.9	86.5	75.8	7,663	81.0	71.2	65.2
2004	39,664	95.0	86.8	75.2	9,971	78.3	68.7	62.4
2005	41,513	94.7	86.0	73.5	11,374	77.3	66.3	59.8
2006	50,481	92.6	82.7	68.1	15,676	74.3	62.6	56.6
2007	63,284	92.4	82.9	67.9	24,275	73.4	61.2	54.4
2008	68,194	92.1	82.9	73.2	31,088	72.3	60.0	53.5
2009	72,989	92.3	83.8	75.2	39,014	71.1	58.9	52.5
2010	83,242	92.8	85.1	77.1	48,691	71.1	60.6	53.8
2011	89,367	92.7	84.9	76.6	63,831	69.9	60.9	54.3
2012	96,057	92.8	85.7	78.4	72,333	71.2	63.7	57.3
2013	87,984	93.3	86.8	79.6	76,400	72.6	65.5	59.4

Note: The employment retention rate (that is, the rate of workers returning to the same place of work) for women using maternity leave is calculated by dividing the number of workers remaining at the same job by the number of workers who finished maternity leave. Cases of split use and cases where the business at which the worker was employed has changed ownership are excluded. Maternity leave finishers include workers who applied for and used maternity leave, even if they did not use the entire requested period. The employment status information for workers who finished maternity leave one month, six months, or one year on from December 2014, was not available at the time of the original study, so the figures for 2014 are not presented.

Source: "Utilization of maternity protection policy during childbirth and child-rearing period and its impact on women's career interruption", Oh & Kim, 2021.

Kim (2008), an early study on workplace attachment among people who use parental leave, examined female workers' con-

tinuity of employment using data from the Korea Labor Institute's 2003 survey on parental leave use. Kim investigated whether there were differences between mothers who used their parental leave after maternity leave and those who did not when it came to returning to work and their intention to remain with the same employer. The results showed that using parental leave had a negative impact on whether mothers returned to their original workplace, and the longer the duration of parental leave, the lower the rate of return to their original place of work. Kim also found that those who utilised parental leave exhibited a lower willingness to continue employment compared to those who did not. The biggest influence on women's willingness to return to their original workplace, and even on their willingness to continue employment at all, was not the workplace environment, or the use of parental leave, but rather the level of childcare support provided by the mother's family.

Similarly, Lee (2009) used the Employment Insurance Database from 2001 to 2006 to examine whether parental leave influenced the duration for which employees stayed at the same place of work. Lee found that parental leave users stayed with their employer for a shorter duration than those who did not use parental leave, suggesting that using parental leave encourages mothers to leave their jobs and not return to their original workplace. These results should not be interpreted as causal evidence of an independently negative effect of parental

leave. Lee points to a number of potential causes for this correlation, including individual preferences for family and negative career consequences for parental leavers upon their return. Mothers already more inclined to leave their jobs could self-select into taking up parental leave, while women who are in a position to and/or have stronger preferences towards combining family with continued work could self-select into other arrangements.

More recent research examines whether changes to the parental leave system to provide an incentive to return to the original employer have had a significant impact. Yoon (2019) investigated whether the post-payment system, which involves paying a portion of the parental leave payment six months after employees return to work, had any impact. The system was implemented in January 2011, then in July 2015 the conditional proportion of total leave pay was increased from 15% to 25%. The system also created a group unaffected by the upper and lower limits of the parental leave payments. Using this design, the study examined the difference in employment retention (at 8 days, 190 days and 370 days) between two groups: those affected by the reform and those unaffected. The results did not show a significant effect on the rate at which mothers returned to their previous place of work. In an earlier study, Yoon and Hong (2014) used the Employment Insurance Database to look at how a 2011 change to parental leave affected workers in dif-

ferent income brackets. The change in question was a shift from a lump-sum to a fixed rate that entitled users to 40% of their normal salary. The 2014 study indicated that this change, too, had no impact on the rate at which parental leave users returned to work with their original employer.

Jung & Yoon (2020), who also utilised the Employment Insurance Database, also found that as the duration of parental leave increases, the probability that people return to their original workplace decreases. Their study examined the influence of being employed at large corporations and having high wages on the use of parental leave and subsequent return to work. The results showed that although the usage rate of parental leave was higher in large corporations, the rate of return to the original workplace after parental leave was lower compared to small and medium-sized enterprises. Meanwhile, the likelihood of utilising the parental leave system was lower for high wage earners, but the probability that they would return to their original workplace afterwards was higher. These findings could be interpreted as indicating that, first, while large corporations provide relatively favourable conditions for using parental leave, the competitive organisational culture and long working hours may make balancing work and childcare less feasible. Second, the usage rate of parental leave among high earners is low and the return rate is high because of the system's low benefit ceiling.

There is also research suggesting that the use of parental leave has had a positive impact on preventing career interruptions for mothers, but these studies suffer from weaknesses casting the results in doubt. A distinctive feature of these studies is their reliance on survey data rather than the Employment Insurance Database. For instance, Oh & Kim (2021) used the raw data from the 2015 National Fertility and Family Health and Welfare Survey and found that the parental leave system has a positive impact on employment continuity. However, the design of this study creates endogeneity because parental leave users are on leave during the six-month period covered by the survey, and so career interruptions are unlikely.

Park et. al (2018) suggest that the availability of the parental leave system has a significant impact on career maintenance. It uses data from the Korean Women's Development Institute's Longitudinal Survey of Women and Families from 2007 to 2016, in which only about 100 respondents indicated they had actual experience using the maternity and parental leave systems. Rather than actual use, the study examined the impact of the respondents' perceived availability of the system on job retention. As such the results should be understood to indicate that workplaces where the system is implemented have characteristics which exert a positive effect on women's career maintenance, rather than this being a direct effect of the system itself.

Qualitative studies can help understand better the barriers preventing parental leave from facilitating job retention as it was intended to, even though these results based on very limited samples cannot be interpreted as causal and representative. Yang et al. (2021) interviewed a small sample of 12 parents who took parental leave in a qualitative study, they found that women faced various challenges, for example looking after their children when they had to stay home from school. They also experienced difficulties in adapting to organisational changes that were made whilst they were on leave, faced uncomfortable scrutiny, and scored lower on work evaluations. These findings are supported by Seo & Kim (2016), which focused on eight individuals who resigned after their parental leave period ended. They found that women who had originally intended to return to work resigned after experiencing disadvantages at work and a strong attachment to their offspring.

In principle, the expansion of parental leave could intensify statistical discrimination against women, potentially reducing the demand for labour, as argued by Mandel & Semyonov (2005), who stress that as parental leave policies are used more by mothers than fathers, employers are incentivised to avoid employing women. This does not seem to be the case in Korea. Using data from the Workplace Panel Survey spanning from 2005 to 2019 (rounds one to eight), Kim (2022) performed a

panel analysis to examine the impact of the parental leave system and other maternity protection policies on the employment of female workers. The results showed that the introduction of the parental leave system in workplaces significantly increased the proportion of female workers within the company, in particular a substantial increase in the number of non-managerial, entry-level female employees. These findings suggest that companies adopting the parental leave system may have shifted to a more favourable stance on the employment of women. The introduction of the parental leave system could also have led to a decrease in female turnover and affected corporate preferences. In other words, the expansion of parental leave policies does not necessarily lead to employers reducing the number of women they are employing as a result of discrimination. However, the study said nothing about how parental leave use affects the gender wage gap, which is likely also affected by gender gaps in parental leave-taking. Further research seems to be required in this area.

4.2.2 Parental leave and childbirth decisions

Parental leave benefits have kept rising since the system's introduction, and studies have examined the impact of these policy changes on women's childbirth decisions. Bae & Cheon (2018) utilised data from the fourth to the nineteenth Korean

Labor and Income Panel Study to analyse the interval between marriage and the birth of the first child and the likelihood of childbirth within three years of marriage. They found that married women in paid employment who perceived there to be a high possibility that they could use maternity and parental leave and return to their previous employer afterwards were more likely to give birth to their first child than the average. However, as noted above, in empirical terms the effect of parental leave on the rate at which women return to their original workplace has been limited.

Research by Kim et al. (2022) and Kwak (2022) investigated the effects of switching parental leave pay from a lump-sum to a fixed rate in 2011. They distinguished between two groups, those whose predicted wages were above 1.25 million won and those whose predicted wages were below 1.25 million won. The latter group did not see a rise in parental leave payments due to the policy change, whilst the former did. Both studies found that an increase in parental leave benefits had a positive effect on the probability of having a child. Kim et al. (2022) calculated the difference in the share of women in childbearing age becoming pregnant during a given period of time before and after the policy change between the control group and the treatment group using National Fertility and Family Health Survey data from the years 2006, 2009, 2012 and 2015. They found that the policy change increased pregnancy rates by be-

tween 2.3 and 2.5 percentage points. Kwak (2022) used the same research design on data from the Korean Labor and Income Panel Study (2007-2014), taking into account movement between the control and treatment groups and that only those enrolled in employment insurance are eligible for the parental leave system. The results showed a 2.1 to 2.5 percentage points increase in fertility.

4.2.3 Optionality between parental leave and the work-hour reduction system

Currently, parents with children under the age of eight can either utilize parental leave or opt for a work-hour reduction system for childcare. The work-hour reduction system reduces work hours and compensates for the reduced income. This appears to encourage parents to stay in employment. While the system is universal, the optionality in existing family policies is utilised differently by parents in different income brackets and employment situations.

Employees of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) tend to use the work-hour reduction system for childcare, whereas employees of large corporations are more likely to use the parental leave system. As of 2022, 49.4% of those using the work-hour reduction system for childcare were employed at workplaces with fewer than 30 employees, and notably, those

from workplaces with 5 to 29 employees accounted for 36.8% of all users of this system. On the other hand, the proportion of parental leave benefit users from businesses with fewer than 30 employees was only 28.4%, and those from workplaces with 5 to 29 employees made up just 19.6%, which is lower than the utilization of the work-hour reduction system for childcare.

This suggests that the conditions for making use of the parental leave system vary depending on the workplace environment. According to the 2021 results of the Work-Family Compatibility Survey conducted by the Ministry of Employment and Labor, 92.3% of respondents from workplaces with 300 or more employees stated that there was an atmosphere where one can "apply for parental leave at any time without worry", whereas only 59.3% of those from workplaces with fewer than 10 employees and 68.3% from workplaces with 10 to 29 employees responded the same. The same survey revealed that in terms of the management difficulties caused by implementing parental leave, 28.2% of enterprises with 300 or more employees reported "no difficulties," while only 9.1% of workplaces with 5 to 9 employees and 7.7% of those with 10 to 29 employees reported the same, indicating that management difficulties vary according to the size of the enterprise. When asked about the primary management issues, 37.0% of workplaces with 5 to 9 employees cited "difficulty in finding replacement staff" as the top issue, while only 26.9% of those with 300 or more employ-

ees reported this issue (Jeon, et al., 2022).

These results indicate that the environment at smaller businesses is not conducive to taking parental leave. Consequently, the impact on labour supply and childbirth is expected to be heterogeneous. This aligns with the findings of Jung and Yoon (2020), who showed that while the usage rate of parental leave among SME workers is low, the rate of return to work after using parental leave is high.



5

Summary and conclusions

5 Summary and conclusions

In Korean society, the dynamic between women's employment and childbirth often forces a choice between one or the other. The compatibility of work and caring for children, or lack thereof, directly impacts on childbirth decisions. The salience of this conflict depends on specific circumstances such as individual employment conditions, household income levels, access to quality local childcare services, family caregiving resources and the environment at the workplace. The average number of children to each married couple has declined from one generation to the next since the 1960s, as the alternative cost of career interruptions has increased. Gradual but significant changes have occurred in the way women with spouses and children participate in the labour market. Getting married and having at least one child was an almost universal norm until around 2010 and, when forced to choose, Korean women would generally give up employment for childbirth.

There are indications that a step-change occurred in the early 2010s, after which it has become far less likely that women will give up work for childbirth when a conflict arises between the two. Spousal income and own wage level have become less important in married women's labour supply decisions. This

indicates that married women's employment and fertility choices are increasingly based on their individual work-family preferences. Cohort-specific empirical evidence implies that childbirths and fertility rates will continue to decline in the years to come unless the work-family conflict is significantly eased.

Despite these changes and increasing female educational attainment, Korea still exhibits significant gender disparities in employment rates and extensive career interruptions related to childbirth and childrearing. The gender gap in average monthly wages exceeds 30%, is concentrated to the private sector, and remains largely unexplained by observable factors such as work hours, education, tenure, industry and occupation. This points to discriminatory practices in hiring, wages and promotions as a main culprit. Gender gaps are to an extent self-perpetuating, as rational households maximise their incomes following childbirth if mothers rather than the higher-earning fathers reduce their labour supply to take care of children. These behavioural patterns in turn form the basis for continued statistical discrimination against women by employers. Korean workers (men and women) have legal rights to parental leave and flexible working arrangements such as teleworking and temporarily reduced work hours, but do not necessarily use these rights due to the existing working culture, and commonly report negative career consequences of exercising such rights.

A wide range of policy interventions have been put in place and strengthened over time, but the sum of interventions has not so far eased the conflict between work and family sufficiently to allow birth rates and female employment to rise in tandem. Research shows that many family policies seem to have had only a limited positive impact on women's employment rate. Among the surveyed policies, only free childcare is proven to have had immediate positive impacts on female employment, and only in cases where quality childcare was available in the vicinity. This paper has identified differences in the utilisation rates of home-care allowances, childcare support payments, parental leave and reduced working hours depending on income level, employment conditions, size of company and the age of the child. Understanding these unintended stratification effects better would help to identify policy combinations able to support households in diverse circumstances so that both parents can pursue their aspirations to form a family and to participate in working life.

These less-positive-than-expected results from family policies reflect challenging conditions, such as long working hours, societal norms and a competitive corporate culture, which make it difficult to juggle work and childcare. A number of gaps in family policies, long hours and rigid working norms, as well as gender discrimination in the workplace can help explain why this is the case.

Childcare services are not yet available for children of all ages. The lack of care service provision for elementary school children under ten years old has been a longstanding issue. Recent research has shown that while the employment rate of women with infants and toddlers has increased, the employment rate of women with elementary school-aged children has decreased, directly demonstrating the negative impact this gap in care services has had on women's employment. Out-of-school-hours childcare services ("Neulbom school") are being rolled out across the country as of 2024, which may alleviate this problem if these services do indeed become widely available for those who need it and at a sufficient level of quality.

Disparities in access to parental leave and reduced working hours remain. The current system only covers parents eligible for employment insurance. This gap is unlikely to be easily resolved without fundamental changes to eligibility criteria and funding of the parental leave system. Additionally, the ability to use substitute labour varies depending on the size of the company. This leads to differences in take-up between employees of large corporations, who tend to utilize parental leave, and employees of small and medium-sized enterprises, who may rather opt for reduced working hours.

More detailed research is required into the impact of cash transfers related to childbirth and childcare. Starting in 2023,

the introduction of a parental allowance means that households with children under the age of 1 received KRW 700,000 (USD 560) a month, increased to KRW 1,000,000 (USD 800) as of 2024. In addition to these central government policies, various local governments provide cash benefits connected to childbirth. The government also plans to increase the upper limit of parental leave benefits to better compensate for income loss. Based on existing evidence, such cash policies would increase childbirth on the margin, but may have a negative impact on women's employment participation through income effects. In order to fully compensate for the lost life-time income associated with motherhood, such benefits would have to be very high. Continued improvements to childcare provision combined with policies to make working life more family-friendly and reduce gender discrimination therefore seem to be superior policy options in terms of net benefits to society.

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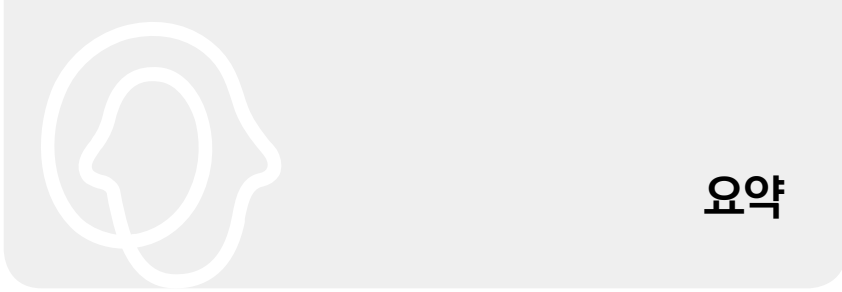
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요약

본 연구는 한국의 초저출산 현상을 보다 체계적으로 이해하기 위해 2000년대 이후 축적된 여성 고용과 출산의 관계에 관한 한국어 연구문헌을 검토하였다. 특히 2010년대 중반을 전후한 변화에 주목하여, 여성 고용과 출산의 대체 관계가 출산율 하락에 미친 영향이 어떻게 변화해 왔는지를 분석하였다. 아울러 2000년대 후반 이후 본격화된 일-생활 균형 정책이 고용과 출산 간의 갈등을 완화하는 데 기여했는지, 그 한계는 무엇인지 검토하였다. 이러한 분석을 바탕으로 심각한 초저출산 상황을 개선하기 위해서는 여성 고용과 출산이 상충하는 구조를 근본적으로 재편할 필요가 있음을 제기한다.

연구 결과, 한국 사회에서 여성들은 오랜 기간 고용과 출산 중 하나를 선택해야 하는 대체적 관계에 직면해 왔으며, 2000년대 초반 출산율 하락은 첫 출산 시점의 지연과 둘째 이상 출산의 축소로 나타났다. 그러나 2010년대 중반 이후에는 비혼과 무자녀의 증가, 첫 출산 포기 증가, 생애 전반에 걸친 일·돌봄 조합 방식의 다양화 등 보다 적극적이고 구조적으로 다른 인구행동이 확산되고 있다. 이는 노동시장 성평등, 장시간 근로 완화, 기업 수준의 일·가정 양립 친화 문화, 남성의 돌봄 참여 확대 등 노동시장과 돌봄 체계 전반의 재구조화 없이는 출산율 회복이 어려움을 시사한다. 특히 소득지원 정책이 여성의 고용 지속과 충돌할 가능성에 대한 고려가 필요하며, 경력단절 예방과 양육 지원이 모순되지 않는 방향으로 정책의 정합성을 강화해야 함을 강조한다.

주요 용어: 여성 고용, 출산, 저출산, 일-생활 균형, 일-가정 양립