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**Work-Family Balance, Traditions,
Gender Discrimination – Obstacles
for Women at Work in South Korea**

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Abstract

Gender discrimination and crimes against women at work have been reoccurring in South Korean media reports and got more attention since the Me Too movement in 2018. Despite rapid industrialization after the Korean War and becoming a modernized country, Korea ranked high in terms of gender inequality. This paper identifies the types and causes of gender disparity in the professional sphere and explains the reason of changed life choices, such as “non-marriage” by South Korean females. By looking at the history and shift that women went through in society and work life, the discrimi-

mination can be explained by Confucianism and patriarchy that influenced the labor structure and social norms, making it hard for women to establish a professional career and to balance the demands of family and work life. This paper also shows that the Korean government implemented positive changes in the past, but currently lacks the necessary policies and female lawmakers to eliminate gender discrimination at work and to relieve the social pressure on women.

Introduction

One of the major topics in modern South Korean society is ‘non-marriage’ (Korean: 비혼, *Pihon*). It is a neologism that describes a person’s marital status to be “willingly unmarried.”

South Koreans wish to live up to the expectations of the society’s social standards. For example, the social expectation of a person can be graduating from school before their mid-twenties and getting a job, marrying before mid-thirties, and becoming a parent before it is too late. This usually stems from a traditionally structured culture, and most do not consider other options. Especially in regard to women, women are often considered to be inferior in society if they aren’t married or had children. Women who chose this path are perceived as unusual and peculiar.

Traditionally, in South Korean society in the past, women were dependent on men and existed only as playing their designated role in their families, such as fulfilling their roles as dutiful daughters and wives. In the 1980s and 90s, South Korea achieved rapid economic growth. Women were given the same education as men, and young women gradually established their identity through jobs in society. Women who experienced self-realization through careers began to reject the stereotypes given to them in the past. Daughters grew up seeing their mothers living in a type of captivity. Their

pursuit of higher education made them determined not to lead the same lives as their mothers.

Recently, opinions among the younger generation have emerged that having a job is essential and that marriage is optional. Marriage became one of the many options now. They got the freedom to live as individuals. It takes tremendous courage to assert such an option in patriarchal South Korean society.

This paper examines the development of women’s roles in society and mainly the job sphere from pre-industrialization to current times to explain why more women choose to stay unmarried. The occurrence of the *Pihon* phenomenon can be attributed to the unequal labor structure for women rooted in the Confucianist ideology. This unequal labor structure creates a problem in which stereotypes and social atmosphere are intricately intertwined. This research paper will look into the disadvantages of South Korean women in the labor market, in modern history, the current problems, and the stance the current government is taking. The choice of staying unmarried is a result of discrimination at the workplace and a disadvantage compared to men, originating in traditional views creating stereotypes, the society’s gender role perception, and the lack of female lawmakers as well as supporting policies.

How Confucianism affected South Korean Society

Confucian ideas have been influential from the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897) to the present. Their ethical norms still prevail in current society. In Confucianism, the role of women plays a subordinate role to men and represents patriarchal, authoritarian values. Women had to follow their husbands, practice the virtues of filial piety to their parents, obey, and have no freedom to exist as individuals (Sung 2003, 346). These traditional roles and expectations of South Korean women remain to this day, affecting the consciousness and life of modern women. This subordinate position was internalized by the woman herself, and she recognized herself only as being a part of the family. The formation of an autonomous self was impossible. Women's social status and honor were decided by their families, thus making it impossible for women to have individual egos.

As a result, the maintenance of paternal lineage has been deeply rooted for a long time in South Korean history. And still, to the present day, many South Koreans regard it as important to succeed the family name and continue the legacy through sons. For this reason, the strong preference for boys led to abortions of girls through illegal fetal screening. The gender ratio of births was 115.5 boys to 100 girls in 1993, when the gender disparity was most extreme (Kwak et al 2017, 131).

The transformation of women's perception of themselves

away from Confucianism did not come overnight but is the aggregation of gradual change throughout the last decades. Western Christian missionaries first introduced modern schools as the country opened up to the outside world in the late 19th century. Upon their foundation, the education of women was a specific goal created and achieved by some of these schools.¹ Through their education, women participated in artistic and religious activities and came to enlighten other women eventually. Along with men, women also participated in the independence movement against Japanese imperialism. With the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948, women acquired the constitutional right to pursue equal opportunities in the social sphere. After that, during the period of industrialization, female labor force contributed to the rapid economic growth achieved by South Korea.

As economic development progressed and the living environment of Koreans improved, the educational background of women also increased. Since the re-industrialization after the Korean War (1950-1953), the rate of economic participation by women has also steadily grown. With the rising number of working women, the government passed the 'Equal Employment Act' of 1987 to prevent discriminatory practices against women workers in relation to employment and promotion.

Women as Workforce during the Industrialization

South Korean women began working in factories within the labor-intensive light manufacturing industries from the 1960s and 70s as export-led industrialization grew. Throughout the economic development of South Korea after the Korean War, women formed a cheap workforce and were represented in the export-oriented industries in equal numbers. Statistics show that 55.2% of women worked in the electronics industry, 72.4% in textiles, and 52.4% in rubber footwear. In the 1960s, the number of women in the secondary sector was at 6.4%, while in 1990, it grew to 28% (Choi 1983, 83-84). The high number also resulted from the fact that women engaged in this work until they could marry, leading them to tolerate the poor working conditions and having shorter careers than

men. They saved the money for their dowry and invested it into becoming more appealing and finding a desirable husband. Also, considering the limited labor force options compared to men and society's unfavorable view of married working women, most preferred the exchange of housework and motherhood in return for financial support from a husband (Kim 1996, 558). Marriage remained the goal for numerous young women allowing an escape from the discriminatory job market and fulfillment of the female duties dictated by the Confucian society.

Married women, therefore, found it the hardest to find employment. The most desired employees were young single

¹ "Women's Role in Contemporary Korea," *Asia Society*, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/education/womens-role-contemporary-korea>.

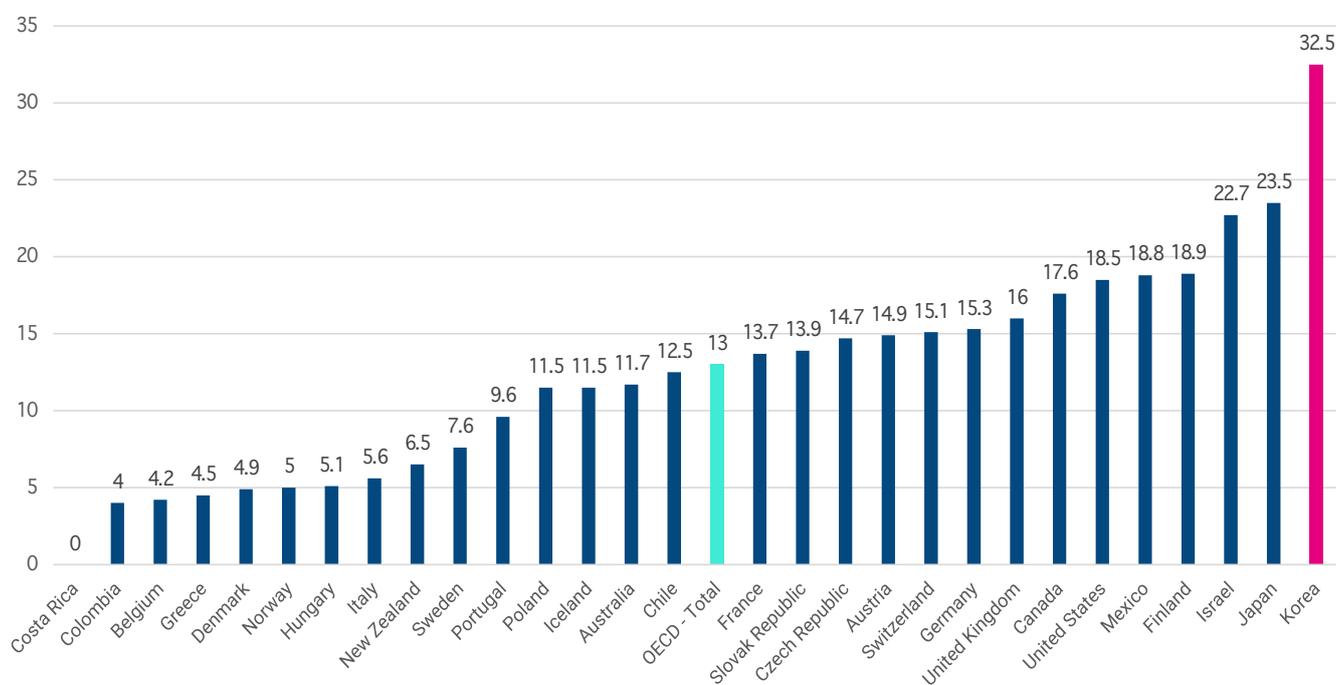
women, who could move freely within the limited job opportunities for females, mostly in the secondary sector. Therefore, the jobs that espoused women were hired for were while low paying, due to financial need, their only option. Being "economically and politically marginalized by competing demands from work and family" and confronted with the "crashes (...) [of] prevailing cultural expectations" (Kim 1996, 556) the job options for married women were limited and reduced to simple and undesired professions with a low payment, which forced them to form a separate labor market. If married women decided to come back to the factories to compensate for the insufficient salary of their husband or to save for the future, they were pitied by the single women for having to work, blamed by everyone for keeping the wages down, scolded by

their husbands for this decision and blamed themselves for neglecting their roles as wives and mothers (Kim 1996, 560).

Despite the newly won access to the workforce, the patriarchal system continued to exist and was reflected in the "labor market segregated by gender and sharp wage differentials between women and men." Industrialists "exploit[ed] the pre-existing gender division of society (...) and newer social trends" (Kim 1996, 566) This way the country benefited from the fast economic growth by employing a cheap workforce in the form of women and especially married women that were ready to work overtime for a small paycheck due to the restricted opportunities to find a new job.

Gender wage gap

Employees, Percentage, 2019 or latest available



Source: OECD (2020), Gender wage gap (indicator). doi: 10.1787/7cee77aa-en (Accessed on 30 August 2020)

Employment Types and Segregated Job Market

Since the industrialization in South Korea, women have been increasingly represented in the workforce and even accounted for the majority of employees in specific sectors, mainly crucial export industries. From 1972 to 1990, women's employment rate growth in the manufacturing industry exceeded the rate of males in several years, with an annual rate of 7.2% compared to men with 5.6%. This amounted to 28.1% of female workers in 1972 and 43.2% in 1990 (Seguino 1997, 106). Looking at the wage, there has been a disparity that even worsened over the years in male-dominated export in-

dustries like transport. Even though productivity growth has exceeded the manufacturing average in specific female-dominated sectors, the wage growth stayed low, contrary to the male-dominated industries (Seguino 1997, 108-110). Besides the state's intervention to reduce production costs and the general pressure on companies to meet export targets and hold down labor costs, there are other reasons for the gender wage gap and employment patterns that play a role even today (Seguino 1997, 110-111). We want to shine a light on these reasons in the following.

The job market in South Korea is segregated and therefore determines the type of job and wage of females. Women are often concentrated in a few industries, thus creating an over-supply, or in low labor productive industries, which leads to lower wages (Seguino 1997, 111-112). "Women were horizontally separated from men and centralized in restricted job categories, vertically occupying lower levels" (Kang, Rowley 2005, 214). Women were found in unsecured lower paid job categories compared to men, who enjoyed stable employment with high salaries. According to National Statistical Office's data in 2003, women were mostly employed in daily jobs (66.5%), followed by temporary (45.9%) and regular jobs (33.3%). For comparison, males usually had regular jobs (58.8%) and were less represented in temporary (26.4%) and daily (14.8%) jobs. Women are also more likely to take part-time jobs, 39.4% compared to men with 11.8%, but are barely represented in management-level positions.²

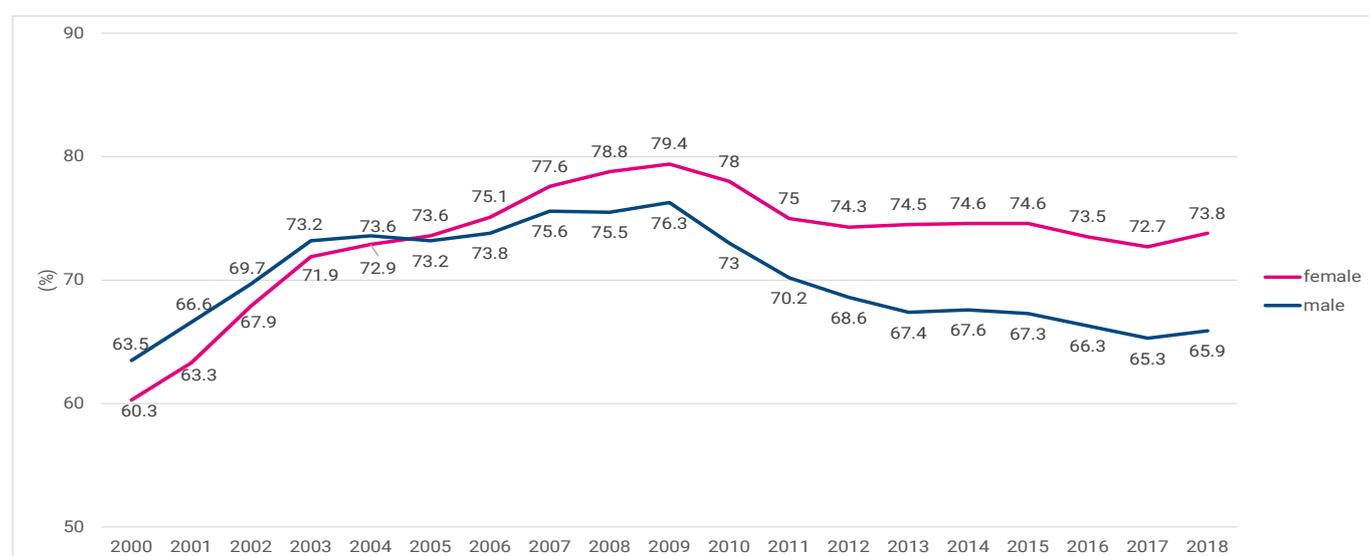
The nature of the jobs that women are employed in, mostly clerical and supporting positions, gives them fewer opportunities to get trained and qualified for senior positions. The job market changed since the 1990s as the need for women with a low educational level declined. The employment rate of women decreased to 10% below the main advanced countries and neighboring countries. To this day, the job market stays segregated as the glass ceiling prevents women from breaking into male-dominated job spheres. In 2002 only 10% were in executive positions,³ and most companies had only one or two female executives.

South Korea does not fully utilize the educated female labor force. "Only 17% of female employees had higher than college degrees, and above level, the participation ratio of women was only 54.7%, the lowest among OECD countries" (Kang, Rowley 2005, 215). In 2018, the category of women's employment in South Korea placed 30th out of 36 OECD countries, despite having the highest tertiary education rate for females between the ages of 25 to 34.⁴ South Korean women show high standards in terms of college entrance rate and academic achievement.

However, when looking at the international gender equality index, the status of women in South Korean society remains at the bottom, and the gender gap significant. According to the 'Global Gender Gap Report 2020' of the World Economic Forum (WEF), it is ranked 108th out of 153 countries, thus being part of the lowest ranking. According to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and the National Statistical Office in 2018,⁵ the rate of female students going to college in South Korea has been higher than that of male students for the last 13 years. However, the female employment rate was still lower than that of men. In 2018, the college enrolment rate of female and male students was 73.8% and 65.9%.

Comparing this to the female and male employment rate demonstrates how women proceed to be discriminated against. In 2018, the employment rate for women was 50.9% and 70.8% for men. Contrasted against the high college enrolment rate for women, the employment rate is meagre. What this means is that even though South Korean women have a high level of education, the degrees and knowledge acquired are not linked to employment (Choi 2017, 146).

College entrance rate



Source: Ministry of Education, Korean Educational Development Institute

² National Statistics Office, 2003 & ILO 2001 cited according to Kang, Rowley 2005, 215

³ Korean Women's Development Institute, 2002 cited according to Kang, Rowley 2005, 215

⁴ "South Korean Women Struggling to Get Hired by Companies That Only Want Men," CNN, last modified Feb 2, 2019, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/31/asia/south-korea-hiring-discrimination-intl/index.html>.

⁵ "2019 tong-gye-lo bo-neun yeo-seong-ui salm(2019 Women's life in statistics)," Statistics Korea, last modified Jul 1, 2019, accessed Aug 30, 2020, http://kostat.go.kr/portal/korea/kor_nw/1/1/index.board?bmode=read&aSeq=375629.

Glass Ceiling and Discrimination at the Workplace

Overall the proportion of females did grow over the past for women in professional and administrative positions, but less fast than for men. The discrimination of women in the working world happens from different aspects. One is the social discrimination that implies to the traditional gender roles and traits. These stereotypes see women as domestic and not appropriate for management as they have different 'soft' character traits and cannot devote themselves entirely to the company due to their responsibility towards their family and preparations for family planning. This was reflected in the chaebol companies, conglomerates owned by families like Samsung, where men worked in core departments and women in staffing functions. Additionally, male managers even see women "as not having enough potential since their tenure was short due to family responsibilities", furthering the job segregation (Kang, Rowley 2005, 216-217).

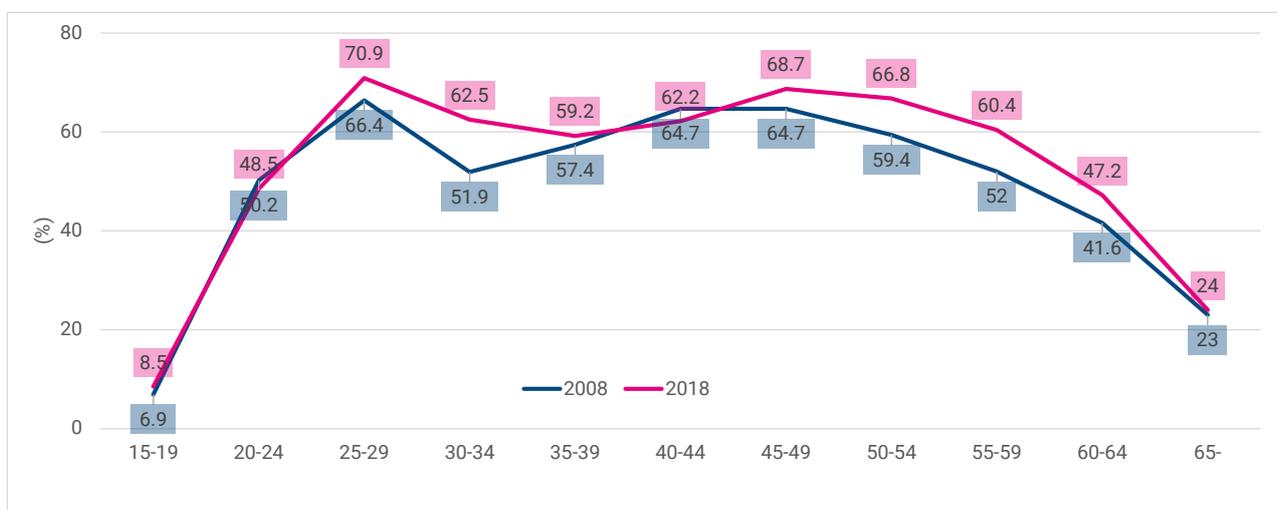
Statistical discrimination, a second type of discrimination, is based on imperfect information. "Generally, the individual is unable to signal actual productive ability perfectly to employers, and companies depend on available partial information about individuals when making personal decisions" (Kang, Rowley 2005, 217). This means that the employers make judgments on personal ability based on the average statistics of the group that an individual belongs to. And in the case for women, these statistics are mostly unfavorable. This ends in a vicious cycle, especially if men are the decision-makers; past experiences make them eliminate female candidates and impose low expectations on them (Kang, Rowley 2005, 217).

Further, implemented organizational factors are detrimental to women. Organization cultures carry male characteristics as they are male-dominated and oriented. Thus, they limit the availability of important functions such as mentoring, which remains mostly for men, who easily build relationships with one another over topics like military service, among others. Most men build such informal groups, and not belonging to one, is disadvantageous (Kang, Rowley 2005, 218; KEI Aug 30, 2020). The patriarchal values and Confucian ideas of this culture make it hard for men to accept women as equally positioned colleagues, excluding them from informal meetings and the organization. Therefore, ultimately not being able to accept women as their supervisors (Kang, Rowley 2005, 218-219).

Moreover, women have to face questions about marriage and children or experience comments about their appearance during interviews. Indeed, women feel a heavy burden with birth and childcare. New laws tried to regulate discrimination and allow women more freedom to balance their triple responsibilities but do not necessarily eliminate this problem. Uncovered scandals from recent significant corporations showed that companies deliberately removed female applicants or exchanged them with lower-scoring male applicants.⁶ Therefore, neither the application process nor the company structure or promotion has significantly changed in favor of gender equality, and the gender gap became more obvious.

When looking at the group of late twenties and thirties of South Korean women's participation rate in economic activities displays a big difference compared to foreign countries

Women's employment rate by age



Source : Statistics Korea

⁶ "South Korean Women Struggling to Get Hired by Companies That Only Want Men," CNN, last modified Feb 2, 2019, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/31/asia/south-korea-hiring-discrimination-intl/index.html>.

(Kwak et al 2017, 165). Looking at the data, one can observe career breaks, unlike those of South Korean men or women in other advanced countries. The expulsion of women from the labor market can be ascribed to discriminating reasons such as marriage, childbirth, and childcare.

The rate of participation in economic activities by age of South Korean women shows a typical double-peak type. Many women in their late twenties and thirties leave the labor market and become part of the inactive populations due to the aforementioned reasons. The problem of such a labor market expulsion becomes apparent, when comparing South Korea to countries such as the United States and Sweden, where women's participation in economic activities appear as an inverted U-shaped or horizontal plateau. In other words, once women enter the labor market in these societies, they continue to work regardless of the life cycle, such as marriage or pregnancy (Kwak et al 2017, 121). In South Korea, there are few cases when they leave the labor market during marriage, pregnancy, or childbirth and then return.

Career discontinuation occurs mostly against their will. Some employees who return from parental leave find that their desk has been removed. Also, they are given subtle signals that they should quit on their own, such as trans-

ferring them to a completely different department than the one in which they were originally working, or disadvantaging them during the promotion process. According to the Employment Equity Act, employees who return after parental leave must be given the same work as before or similar work paying the same wages.⁷ However, it is hard to file legal disputes as individual employees, and if they choose to do so, they will be viewed unfavorably by their companies. What they consider doing instead is to simply quit their jobs. The constant struggle, pregnant women or married women face is thinking that they will be nuisances to their companies, so they quit their jobs. When they try to return after raising their children, the only jobs left are far worse than their original ones. Such discontinuous labor market participation and career disruption have adverse consequences of lowering women's status when they re-enter the labor market (Kang et al 2015, 121). It is interpreted as being distant from regular and high-paid jobs as career breaks occur. Due to the loss of employment opportunities due to the suspension of employment after marriage, the participation rate of highly educated women in economic activities decreases, which results in wasting national resources, considering that educational investment in women is not different from that in men (Kwak et al 2017, 170-171).

Society is Forcing Women to Choose Between Work and Family

The social system of modern South Korea seems to give equal educational opportunities to women and men. However, in fact, in terms of the content of social attitudes and value education, education is based on the predominance of men over women and a good wife and wise mother (Kwak et al 2017, 171). Because of this social atmosphere, women are forced to feel guilty that they do not care about their families properly, no matter how successful they are at work. Or, for successful women, public evaluation is followed by attributes such as too tenacious or not feminine (Choi 2018, 9).

Despite the increasing number of women's employment activities, women's positions in the field of workforce reproduction have not changed significantly. For that reason, women are still in charge of the housework, such as raising children. Employed women also experience the conflict of a work-family balance. Contrary to the hope that women and men will share work and housework equally due to the increase in women's employment, the gender role for women's double burden has not been sufficiently improved. Women's participation in the labor force does not bring balance to women's lives, and family responsibilities and labor responsibilities

are merged. In this situation, women work more. Hence, their quality of life worsens.

In modern South Korean society, people achieve self-actualization by choosing to work in various job fields, and work makes a person become a member of society as it is an integral part of life. In traditional society, getting a job may have been taboo or rarely a choice for women. However, in modern society, women, regardless of their marital status, who do not have jobs are considered to not be participating in society and, therefore, represent an inability to perform necessary social functions (Kwak et al 2017, 163).

Simultaneously, because of the stereotype that having a job is secondary for married women who ought to be in charge of family care mainly, companies discriminate against women when hiring. This is reflected in the social perception of the wage gap. It is taken for granted by society because the roles ascribed to men and women are different. The thought prevails that male workers should be paid enough wages to support a family's livelihood because men support families. This atmosphere makes women more likely to receive lower

⁷ Equal Employment Opportunity and Work-Family Balance Assistance Act Article 19 (4)

wages than men, even if they do the same job as their income is not deemed important (Kang et al 2015, 65). The expansion of women's economic role, however, reduces the burden of men's labor and raises families' income levels.

"Women are discriminated against and excluded from the labor market, and men are separated and alienated from

home and childcare while being exploited for long hours of work, resulting in no one being happy in this labor system" (Hong 2020, 66). Even if a woman gives birth to a child and becomes a mother, she should not be marginalized and discriminated against by double labor at work and home. The overall labor system in Korean society must be changed.

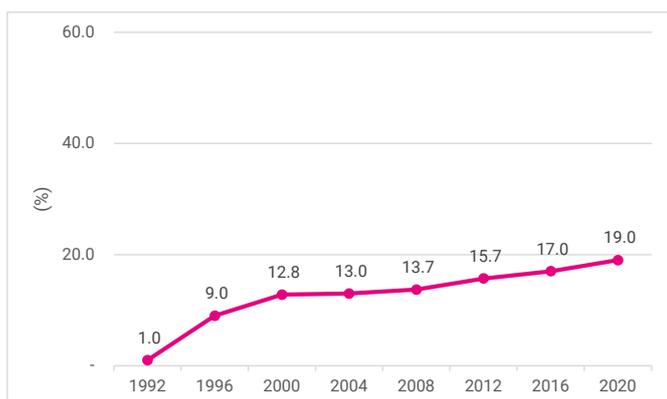
South Korean Women in Politics

Women have been underrepresented in the political factor as politics is traditionally male-dominated occupation. Being viewed as apolitical due to cultural gender structure, the underrepresentation in South Korean politics has yet to improve (Choi, Mbuh 2005, 74). "From 1948 to 2004, the average percentage of women in the South Korean National Assembly averaged 2.9 percent".⁸ The participation of women in the political world has been slowly increasing in the twenty-first century. The election of Park Geun-hye as the first female president in 2013 is an example.

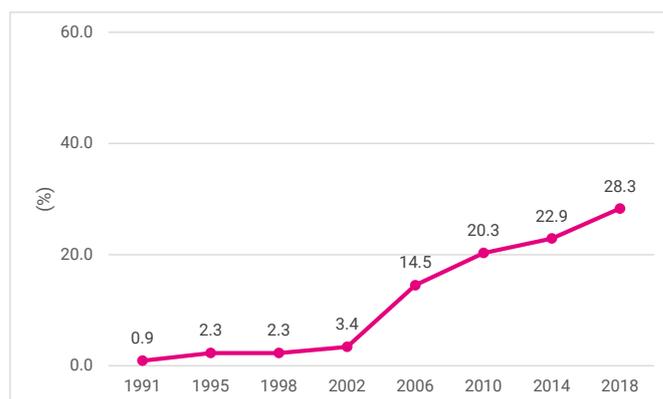
According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, South Korea is ranked 121 out of 192 for women's representation in national parliaments in 2019; for comparisons, North Korea is at rank 127.⁹ The composition of the 20th National Assembly reveals the highest proportion of seats held by women in history at 17%. However, looking at the bigger picture shows

that only 10.5% of 934 nominated candidates in the general elections in 2016 were women. All belonged to the four major parties, implying that aspiring women politicians in rural areas lack resources and mentoring programs. This happened amidst the plan of the ruling party and opposition parties to allocate 30% of all nominations for assembly constituencies. Surveys showed that 26.6% believe that the underrepresentation comes from feeling uncomfortable with women in politics, and 24.5% said that male politicians are supposed to be more capable.¹⁰ In the 2020 Parliamentary elections, fifty-seven women were elected, which amounts to an increase from 17% to 19%, a new record. As a response to occurring issues, a new feminist party, the Women's Party, was launched.¹¹ While the situation is slowly ameliorating, it remains difficult for women to enter politics, and little is done to address the root causes of this.

Rate of female members of the National Assembly



Rate of female member of Local Council



Source : National Election Commission

⁸ "The Empowerment of Women in South Korea." *JIA SIPA*, last modified Mar 11, 2014, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/empowerment-women-south-korea>.

⁹ "Women in national parliaments," *Inter-Parliamentary Union*, last modified Feb 1, 2019, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>.

¹⁰ "Women's Presence in Politics Still Limited in South Korea," *The Korea Herald*, last modified Jun 22, 2016, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20160621000907>.

¹¹ "Women This Week: South Korea Elects Record Number of Women," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified May 1, 2020, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/women-week-south-korea-elects-record-number-women>.

Governmental Measures on Gender Equality

South Korean women gained the right to vote in 1948, but in the patriarchal Confucian society, they were still marginalized in the political field. During the election, topics related to women were rarely addressed by political campaigning. President Kim Dae-jung's election in 1997 marked a significant turning point in the empowerment of women in South Korean history. In the 1997 presidential election, women accounted for half of the voters, and women's participation in the elections was revealed to society through a marked change. It showed that South Korea's democracy was further strengthened. It was an unprecedented election that manifested a change in women's consciousness through active political participation. One of the new president's election pledges emphasized that he would become a "female-friendly president" (Kim 2002, 208). Furthermore, he promised to fill 30% of the cabinet with women (Kim 2002, 208). President Kim said in his inauguration speech that "the people's government will actively work to protect women's rights and develop their abilities" (Kim 2004, 29).

With the inauguration of President Kim Dae-jung's new administration in 1998, the Presidential Commission on Women's Affairs was established to address women's issues. The Commission was promoted and expanded to the Ministry of Gender Equality in January 2001. The new ministry has made it a task to revise and enact laws and rules involving discrimination in all sectors, promote women's employment, and increase educational opportunities for women to be competitive in the labor market.¹²

He announced the following policy targets.

"1) Women will be 30% of the party candidates in all elections. 2) 30% of government ministries committee positions will be assigned to women. 3) The representation of women in the party organization will increase by more than 30%. 4) A minimum of four women will be appointed to cabinet positions,¹³ and 20-30% of critical policy-making positions will be filled with women. 5) Women will not be discriminated against in special-purpose college entrance examinations. 6) Increase the proportion of women recruiting to the military, navy, and air force academies".¹⁴

In addition, women's welfare has undergone significant changes under the direction of President Kim Dae-jung. The government has expanded welfare policies to:

"1) A divorced woman is now entitled to a part of her husband's pension after more than five years of marriage.

2) Families can apply for health insurance to pay for hospital expenses for childbirth. 3) The public childcare system has improved due to the expansion of childcare facilities and the improvement of childcare pay, and 4) Paid maternity leave has increased to 12 weeks, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO)" (Kim 2002, 222).

President Kim's efforts to achieve a more gender-equal society increased women's participation in society during the early years of the regime and improved women's welfare. However, the historical influence of Confucianism and substantial prejudice weakened society's will to empower women. The pledge that 30% of women will take on key positions in the government has not been fulfilled—in 2020, only 5.9% of females were represented in the National Assembly after the 16th National Assembly elections. The administration also failed to reach the target for the four women's cabinet appointments. From 1998 to 2002, only two women were represented in the cabinet (Choi, Mbuh 2005, 75).

The maternity leave benefit was introduced in 2001. Since the introduction of the law in 1987 under the Equal Employment Act, the law has been renamed 'Parental Leave' to emphasize the role of fathers. This policy promises financial support of 200,000 KRW (approximately 142 EUR) a month for parental leave and provides subsidies for employers who provide parental leave. It also subsidizes companies that set up childcare facilities at work, explicitly targeting employers with more than 300 female employees. However, these policies are not mandatory, and ignoring them does not result in punishment (Sung 2003, 349-350).

President Roh Moo-hyun (presidential term: 2003-2008) promised more childcare support, and it was the main topic during his election, but he regarded it as an issue concerning only women (Lee 2020, 380). He made the decision to transfer the responsibilities from the Ministry of Health and Welfare to the Ministry of Gender Equality. Childcare was not a priority in the Ministry of Health and Welfare, but with the transfer to the Ministry of Gender Equality, "the government started to understand how the issue of childcare [is] connected to issues of gender equality" (Lee 2020, 385). In 2005 the basic subsidy scheme was introduced, which led to the initiation of daily free childcare, for babies aged 3 to 12 months old, for job seekers, stay at home moms and working women, in 2013 and was further extended in 2018.

However, the handling of the issues was passed back to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, dismantling the Ministry of

¹² "Women's Role in Contemporary Korea," *Asia Society*, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <https://asiasociety.org/education/womens-role-contemporary-korea>.

¹³ Constitution of the Republic of Korea Article 88 (2) "The State Council shall be composed of the President, the Prime Minister, and other members whose number shall be no more than thirty and no less than fifteen."

¹⁴ "The Empowerment of Women in South Korea." *JIA SIPA*, last modified Mar 11, 2014, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/empowerment-women-south-korea>.

Gender Equality and Family with the starting of the administration of President Lee Myung-bak (presidential term: 2008-2013) (Lee 2020, 380). The issue of childcare is closely linked to women's right to work. In addition, this problem can be solved when the realistic demands of work-family balance, which are particularly aggravated on women, are fully understood.¹⁵ However, President Lee's administration did not take this into account and assigned women issues and childcare issues to each different ministries.

Over time, with the change of society and demographics,

the government implemented new regulations concerning childcare. The Childcare Act was revised in 2004, and "the first childcare support policy" was implemented the same year. The movement towards Gender Mainstreaming and the higher representation of women in the cabinet helped to address several topics under President Roh, who was studying gender topics in detail (Lee 2020, 381). Under President Roh, more female politicians were appointed and a female Prime Minister, which was seen as groundbreaking. This finally led to an active public discussion on gender-specific topics (Lee 2020, 385).

Current Administrative Measures under President Moon Jae-in in 2020

'Low birthrate shock' is a major social problem in Korea. According to data released by the National Statistical Office, Korea is the world's lowest at 0.98 in 2019. The low birthrate problem will be solved only when the quality of women's life is improved, and a gender-equal society is promoted (Hong 2020, 67).

President Moon Jae-in once said that he would "become a feminist president" when he was a presidential candidate. "Gender equality is the core value of human rights," He put forward gender equality policies, including improving the childcare system, abolishing discrimination against women's employment, and improving the working environment for non-regular workers. "Compared to many OECD countries, the status of South Korean women is almost the worst in all aspects. I will check the gender equality index every year to make it at least average." His words made people look forward to a better life for women compared to the past.¹⁶

In 2018, South Korea announced plans to remove some disadvantages on women's employment, allowing both parents to take parental leave at the same time and extend paid parental leave. Employers are incentivized to let parents work fewer hours. Mothers can now give their babies their own last name instead of having to give them their fathers' last name. Infertility treatment is also available for unmarried women and unmarried couples. Furthermore, social campaigns encourage men to be more involved in parenting and housework.

According to the government's latest projections, the population will decline from 2027, and the presidential committee predicts that the potential for economic growth could fall below 1%. Raising birth rates has long been a policy priority. Since 2006, the government has been spending 152.9 trillion KRW (approximately 108.9 billion EUR) on subsidies for families and children from birth to college. Nevertheless, demographic experts say money isn't a significant issue. Reflecting on the experiences of developed countries with high fertility rates, such as France and Sweden, it can be seen that gender equality plays the most crucial role.¹⁷ In South Korea, only about 56% of women aged 15 to 64 work, which is lower than the OECD average of nearly 60%. In Denmark and Sweden, which have the highest birth rates among the developed countries, 72 to 75% of women work.

Still, now it is in the third year of the Moon Jae-in administration, the government's attitude toward gender-equal employment is evaluated as passive. According to an issue paper published by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions Policy Research Institute in 2020, the government's gender equality employment policy is weak, and the gender equality law and active employment improvement measures are seriously fading. The cause of the gender wage gap is not well understood, and the government's aggressiveness is not seen at all, leaving only the voluntary improvement efforts of companies to be made.

On the other hand, it is positively evaluated that gender equality, which was entirely out of interest in the past, is at least appearing on the agenda.¹⁸ It is positive that the public's in-

¹⁵ "Dae-Tong-Lyeong-e-Ge Mud-Neun-Da... 'Han-Gug-Yeo-Seong-Eun 'Ae Nah-Neun Do-Gu'?" (Asking the President... 'Korean Women Are 'Child-Bearing Tools'?')," *Pressian*, last modified Jan 12, 2012, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <https://www.pressian.com/pages/articles/67250?no=67250>.

¹⁶ "Jen-Deo i-Syu Ui-Je-Hwa-Neun Seong-Gwa...jeong-Bu-Ui Gang-Lyeong-Han Ui-Ji-Lo Mil-Eo-but-Yeo-Ya"(Agendicizing Gender Issue Is Achievement...It Must Be Pushed with the Strong Will of the Government)," *The Hankyoreh*, last modified May 28, 2019, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/women/895596.html>.

¹⁷ "Not a Baby Factory: South Korea Tries to Fix Demographic Crisis with More Gender Equality," *Reuters*, last modified Jan 4, 2019, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-economy-birthrate-analysis/not-a-baby-factory-south-korea-tries-to-fix-demographic-crisis-with-more-gender-equality-idUSKCN10Y023>.

¹⁸ "Jen-Deo i-Syu Ui-Je-Hwa-Neun Seong-Gwa...jeong-Bu-Ui Gang-Lyeong-Han Ui-Ji-Lo Mil-Eo-but-Yeo-Ya"(Agendicizing Gender Issue Is Achievement...It Must Be Pushed with the Strong Will of the Government)," *The Hankyoreh*, last modified May 28, 2019, accessed Aug 30, 2020, <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/women/895596.html>.

terest in job gender equality policies has increased since the Moon Jae-in administration was established.¹⁹ However, one has to emphasize that the president should call attention to

feminism only in words but must rather come up with more aggressive legislation, which requires the government's willingness and efforts to improve practical employment.

Conclusion

This paper looked into women's traditional status in South Korean society, gender discrimination in the labor structure, current employment situation, and government measures. South Koreans whose thoughts and practices are deeply rooted in Confucianism, cannot easily change their way of thinking of women. It can be said that Confucianism is still significantly affecting this society in the present. Currently, South Korean women face discrimination in the job market, even though they acquired a very high level of education. In the political realm, women have not yet played a significant role. We look forward to big participation in the future as female politicians can stimulate a conversation about gender problems and help implement gender-equal friendly policies.

Due to these traditional views and disadvantages of being a wife and/or mother, women decide to stay unmarried. Women who have declared *Pihon* mostly want self-realization and are massively disappointed and frustrated when facing glass walls and glass ceilings due to the various intertwined reasons described above. In addition, when women get married, they are forced to remain highly educated full-time

housewives. Korea is underperforming in terms of female labor and gender equality at work, and statistics show that this can be a disadvantage to the nation's economic growth.

For a sturdy glass ceiling in the male-centered labor structure to even get a little scratch, it is needed for people to change their perception. Furthermore, both corporate-wise and government-wise efforts are essential. Solutions based on an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon with new policies, female lawmakers, and the general will is needed.

South Korea is undoubtedly an advanced country in many ways but does not have a gender-equal society. Over the years, slight improvements and changes have happened in the workforce as well as on the political stage. The will of political figures was not always enough as promises could not be kept, but some adjustments still benefited a gender-equal society. The public requests should be transferred to a legal basis and be implemented in a stricter manner, so women will not choose to stay unmarried solely based on the discrimination they face.

¹⁹ "Pe-Mi-Ni-Seu-Teu' Mun Dae-Tong-Lyeong-Nim, i-Je Ta-Hyeob-Eun Bul-Ga-Neung-Hab-Ni-Da(President Moon, 'Feminist', Compromise Is Impossible Now)," *OhmyNews*, last modified Nov 21, 2019, accessed Aug 30, 2020, http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002588577.

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