

Low female employment rates in South Korea are linked to the gender-specific burden of childrearing

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SUMMARY

Female employment rates in South Korea are far below those of other countries that are members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Despite multiple government policies committed to encouraging continuous employment, only 53% of women in their 30s participated in the labor force in South Korea compared to 72% of women in the U.S. in 2022. Therefore, examining the underlying reasons for lower female employment in Korea is critical. We assessed job satisfaction, job retention, and the underlying factors that impact these variables for both genders and various ages through a survey. Among 291 adult participants (161 women, 130 men) aged 20 to 59, working in various fields, 95% of responders were college graduates. Females tended to be less satisfied with their salaries and benefits than males. Notably, 84% of female responders had considered leaving their companies or transferring to others, while 59% of male responders had considered leaving their companies or transferring to others. Female responders noted childrearing as the most significant ($p < 0.001$) reason they considered leaving their jobs, while male responders noted job dissatisfaction. Interestingly, female participants noted childrearing as a significant reason for leaving their jobs despite the implementation of childcare benefits in 51% and flexible work hour options in 90% of participants' companies. These results suggest that even highly educated women feel more pressure from an innate sense of responsibility and societal perception to care for children than men.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the rise of women's participation in the South Korean labor force, the female employment rate has stayed at 53%, which is far lower than the average (65%) that are members of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2022 (1). However, men's participation rate in the labor force in South Korea was 72%, which was similar to the average male employment rate (75%) of the OECD. In some countries, such as Finland, Iceland, Israel, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden, the difference in 2018 was about five percentage points or less (2). In line with OECD guidelines, the Korean government has directed efforts toward alleviating the burden of childrearing, a significant challenge for women in the workplace (3, 4). A study based on the Korean Labor & Income Panel Study (KLIPS) spanning from 2006 to 2013 reported that family-friendly policies, such as maternity leave and childcare

leave, have significantly increased job satisfaction among Korean workers as a result of these efforts (5). The rate of public childcare facilities utilization, including after-school care services in elementary schools and in-home childcare services provided by babysitters or nannies, had expanded from 21% in 2015 to 40% in 2021. The recent expansion led to a more significant number of female employees in Korea (3). Although the Korean government had committed to encouraging continuous employment with multiple policies, only 53% of South Korean women ages 32-39 participated in the labor force in 2022 compared to 72% of women ages 32-39 in the U.S. in 2022 (6).

Interestingly, the prevailing social perception that women in Korea should prioritize family over work often compelled them to interrupt their careers when childcare and household responsibilities clash with employment, even among highly educated women (7, 8). In order to promote women's employment in South Korea and further enhance their job retention and financial autonomy, which eventually strengthens women's socioeconomic power, it is imperative to determine whether childcare is a major reason that highly educated women leave the workplace. Therefore, this study sought to investigate why working females than working males are more likely to leave their workplaces in South Korea. We hypothesized that Korean females are more likely to consider forsaking their current jobs than Korean males because they either experience lower job satisfaction or feel more responsibility for childcare than their male counterparts. Our study found despite the implementation of childcare benefits in 51% and flexible work-hour options in 90% of participants' companies, Korean female workers had considered leaving their workplaces due to responsibility primarily for childcare, while their male counterparts had considered leaving their workplaces due to job dissatisfaction. Therefore, this study suggests that more of a culture shift needed for men to feel some responsibility for childcare in order to maintain women's jobs.

RESULTS

To determine why Korean female employees were more likely to forsake current jobs, we surveyed 291 participants. The age range of the participants surveyed was 20 to 59 years and all had at least one child. Ninety five percent of participants had graduated college and 55% of participants were female (**Figure 1A**). All the participants worked in 1 of 14 categories: office work, public official, small business, service, medical, manufacturing, management, investment, engineering, education, computer and I.T., broadcast and journalism, banking, and art and music (**Figure 1B**). First, we asked participants if their companies provided employee-friendly facilities and 51% of participants responded that their companies provide benefits, such as childcare facilities,

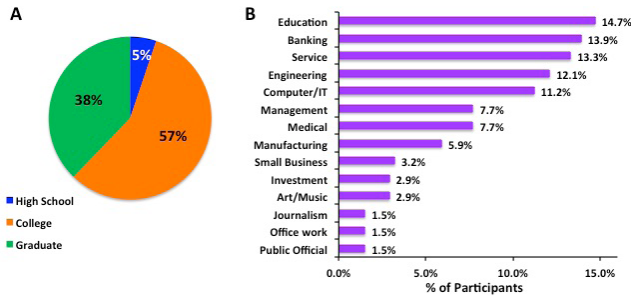


Figure 1. Participants' education and professional categories. Percentage of responders' highest degree completed (B) field for responders' primary job. The participants selected only one field for their primary profession among the various fields.

commissioned childcare, and/or childcare allowance support (Figure 2A). Next, we asked participants if their companies offered flexible work benefits and 90% of participants said their companies provided several options for a flexible work schedule (Figure 2B). The options offered by the 90% of participants' companies were flexible work hours (58%), a staggered work schedule (37%), work from home (30%), and part time (24%) (Figure 2C).

We also assessed male and female job satisfaction within the workplace between the ages of 40 and 59 with three factors: salary, benefits and compensation, and relationships with coworkers. Korean males reported being more satisfied with their salaries compared to their female counterparts, with 40% of male employees and 35% of female employees expressing contentment with their salaries. (Figure 3). Concordantly, 43% of male employees and 34% of female employees were satisfied with their jobs' benefits (Figure 3). Additionally, 48% of male responders in their 40s and 50s indicated satisfaction with their relationships with coworkers (Figure 3A). A significantly ($p < 0.001$) higher percentage

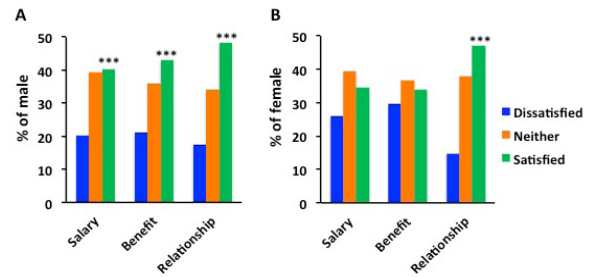


Figure 3: Satisfaction with work conditions within two age groups (40s and 50s) of male and female participants. (A) Percent job satisfaction among male responders in their 40s and 50s. (B) Percent job satisfaction among female responders in their 40s and 50s. We used a Chi-Square test to analyze significance. *** = $p < 0.001$.

of males were satisfied with their salary, benefits, and relationships with coworkers than those unsatisfied with the three categories (Figure 3A).

Forty seven percent of female responders indicated satisfaction with their relationships with coworkers (Figure 3B). The prevalence of male participants who expressed satisfaction in the three factors was significantly higher than those who expressed dissatisfaction (Figure 3A). However, female participants exhibited significantly more satisfaction ($p < 0.001$) compared to dissatisfaction in only coworker relationships (Figure 3B).

To ascertain the reasons for forsaking jobs among male and female workers, we asked responders whether they had ever contemplated changing companies or leaving their current company, with response options "No" and "Yes." Among male responders, 42% indicated "No," while only 16% of female responders also answered "No" (Figures 4A-B).

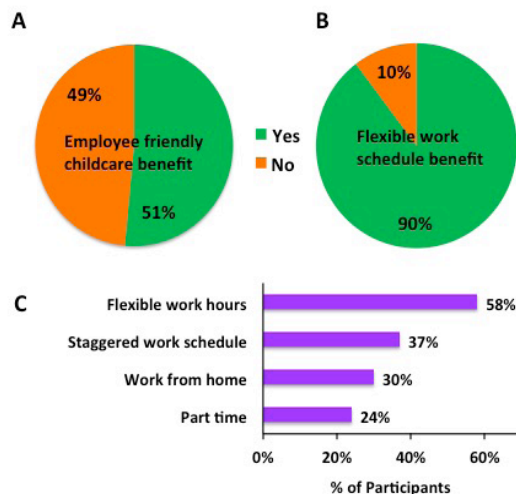


Figure 2: Assessment of employee-friendly benefits in the workplace. (A) Percentage of responders access to employee-friendly childcare benefits. (B) The Percentage of responders reporting whether their companies provided flexible work benefits or not. (C) Percentage of responders reporting flexible work schedules, including flexible work hours, a staggered work schedule, work from home, and part time. The responders selected all applicable categories.

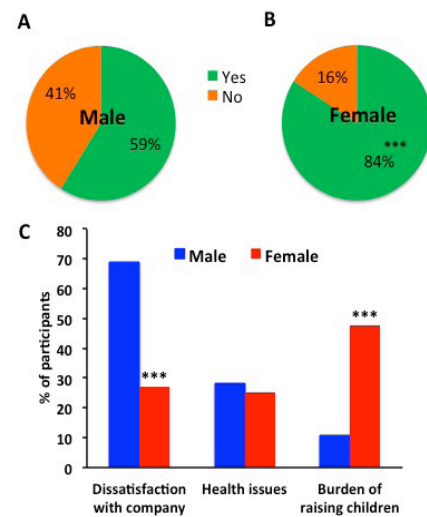


Figure 4: Reasons for leaving companies by male and female workers. Percentage of employees who have considered leaving their companies. (A) represents male responses and (B) represents female responses. (C) Percentage of responders who noted "Dissatisfaction with the company," "Health issues," and "Burden of raising children" by gender. The responders selected all applicable categories. We used a Chi-Square test to analyze significance. *** = $p < 0.001$.

We asked the male and female participants who responded "Yes" why they had considered leaving their workplace, and they chose all applicable reasons among company dissatisfaction, health issues, the burden of raising children, the burden of housework, time management, family issues, and economic insufficiency. The highest percentage (48%) of female workers cited the "burden of raising children," while this was the least cited answer (11%) among male workers. Furthermore, significantly more men (69%) than women (27%) in the workplace reported dissatisfaction with their working conditions as the reason for leaving their companies. In both gender groups, 28% of male employees and 25% of female employees reported health issues as a consideration for leaving their companies, which was not significantly different (Figure 4C).

DISCUSSION

As we hypothesized, Korean female workers demonstrated lower job satisfaction and felt more responsibility for childcare than their male counterparts. First, we found that men exhibited significantly more satisfaction than dissatisfaction with their salary, benefits, and relationships at work, while women did not express more satisfaction with their salaries and benefits in workplaces. Furthermore, female employees in South Korea considered leaving their workplaces significantly more than male employees due to the burden of raising children. In contrast, the reason why male employees wanted to leave their workplaces was significantly related to job dissatisfaction. This observation suggests that female employees tended to feel less satisfied with their work environment than male employees because they felt more responsible for raising children while working. The discrepancy between male and female perception towards childrearing could explain the significantly lower female employment rates in Korea (7, 17, 18).

The survey delves into the perspectives of individuals of both genders regarding employment and job satisfaction assessments. The study's focus on fundamental factors for women's workforce participation provided valuable insight into the underlying reasons for lower female job retention, rooted in potential gender-based perceptions. Several related studies have suggested that female individuals often perceived greater gender inequality in the workplace compared to their male counterparts (17, 18). These findings offered guidance for governments and industries seeking to support women's self-development and psychological well-being in the workplace by improving their childrearing experiences.

Nevertheless, this survey had several limitations. We could have directly asked if the reason for quitting jobs was for childrearing. The survey also neglected to assess supervisory status, autonomy, stress levels, and other work environment factors that might impact employees. Finally, while this study focused on a single country, we could gain a broader understanding by considering information from multiple sources to evaluate female employees' childrearing experiences across different countries.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data collection and participants

We carried out a community survey using the password-protected survey-collecting database Google Forms before

transferring the results to a secured Google document, which the owner and creator of the form for analysis solely accessed. Random responders performed the survey by clicking the link of the Google Form, which was randomly sent to individuals and multiple groups of people through the mobile messaging application KakaoTalk. KakaoTalk, commonly called KaTalk in South Korea, is a smartphone messaging app available on mobile and desktop platforms. In order to complete the survey, a participant had to be a currently working employee with at least one child. We collected the responses of 291 Korean employees who completed the surveys online. We drew the sample from each responder's phone or computer with gender and recorded age. We performed Chi-Square statistics to find the p-value for significance with a confidence interval of 95% in the relation between gender and each reason. We performed statistics on Socscistatistics.com. The results of the calculators and tools featured on this website have been audited for accuracy against the output produced by multiple established statistics packages, including SPSS and Minitab.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

All participants provided informed consent to participate in an online survey. Although this survey did not involve gathering personal information, invasion of privacy, risk, or potential for emotional distress, we received Scientific Research Committee (SRC) approval before conducting the survey (19).

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