

Understanding women's empowerment in post-Covid Korea: A historical analysis

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Abstract

South Korea has been faced with a widening economic gender gap during the recent Covid-19 pandemic. To inform discussion of Korean women's future following the pandemic, this article explores the country's history of women's empowerment. It identifies cultural, educational, economic, and political changes, and their long-term effects on women's role and status. The analysis is based on data collected from Korea's national statistical database and a review of relevant literature. Findings inform policy directions for advancing women's economic empowerment in Korea and other countries following a similar development path and contribute to expanding our understanding of the factors and relations influencing women's empowerment.

JEL codes: J160

Keywords

women's empowerment, economic development, cultural influence, historical analysis, post-Covid, Korea

Introduction

As one of the four Asian tigers, South Korea (Korea, hereafter) is a country of remarkable economic, social, and political transformation. Recording a more than 556-fold growth in gross national product between 1962 and 2019 (Macrotrends, 2020), the country has risen

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from one of the world's poorest to become a developed nation in six decades. Along with rapid economic growth, there have been steady improvements in its people's economic, political, and social well-being as well as in the status of women. Attributed to a considerable increase in women's participation in education and labour markets as well as improvements in women's reproductive health, Korea, in a 2016 United Nations (UN) report, ranks 10th in the world in terms of gender equality (UNHLP (UN Secretary General's High Level Panel) on Women's UN Secretary General's High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, 2016). More recently, however, the country has been faced with a widening gender gap during the Covid-19 pandemic. As in many other countries, the recession caused by the pandemic has had disproportionate effects on women's employment in Korea, leading more women than men to suffer job and income losses (Ham, 2021; Jones, 2021; Stangarone, 2021).

This article provides a basis for discussing what the future holds for women in Korea following the pandemic by exploring the country's history of women's empowerment. A holistic view of the underlying factors contributing to the widening economic gender gap in post-Covid Korea may help predict future gender outcomes and develop policy recommendations on women's empowerment (Dilli et al., 2015; Giuliano, 2018). The time period of focus, from the 1960s to the present day, covers the country's significant socio-economic and political development as well as important progress in women's empowerment. The next section explains the contextual perspective of this paper by reviewing some of the primary debates surrounding women's empowerment.

Background of the study

Conceptualisations of women's empowerment

UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) (2014: 60) defines gender equality as a situation where 'women and men enjoy the same status and have equal opportunities to realize their full human rights and potential to contribute to national, political, economic, social and cultural development, and to benefit from the results.' Gender inequality, in contrast, means a 'social process by which people are treated differently and disadvantageously, under similar circumstances, on the basis of gender' (Kent, 2007). Women's empowerment refers to a process by which women expand their ability 'to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them' (Kabeer, 1999: 437). Accordingly, over the past decade, policies and programs to increase women's empowerment have been developed and implemented across the world, and its progress has often been measured by the advancement of women's status in different life domains including education, employment, health, and politics (United Nations, 2015).

The process of women's empowerment can be conceptualised and measured in different ways. These include: (i) individual or personal level empowerment: improvements in women's recognition of barriers and access to various resources; (ii) household or community level empowerment: improvements in women's power and position in relationships with others (e.g. partner, family and community group members); and (iii)

societal or institutional level empowerment: improvements in social and cultural perceptions and behaviours towards the systematic reproduction of gender inequality (Duflo, 2012; Huis et al., 2017; Kabeer, 1999, Kabeer, 2005; Malhotra et al., 2002; Mosedale, 2005; Oxfam, 2017a). Huis et al., (2017) add that personal, relational, and societal empowerment do not necessarily develop in order, while two directions are possible: bottom-up (from individual to societal) or top-down (from institutional to personal). In any approach, it is evident that the process of women's empowerment involves long developmental time frames. Thus, a historical focus on the evolution rather than the outcomes of women's empowerment pays off.

Economic growth and gender equality

The relationship between economic growth and gender equality is complex. Conventional modernisation theorists, as an early example, proposed that economic development has only positive effects on gender equality due to growing state- and individual-level support for liberal values. In fact, studies have found widespread and severe gender inequality in developing countries (Cuberes and Teignier-Baqué, 2012; Dormekpor, 2015). Despite the persistent presence of gender inequality worldwide, women in developed countries are more empowered than those in developing countries through active engagement in productive work and income generation, and progressive advancements in social policy and legislation (Cohen, 2006; Eastin and Prakash, 2013; Forsythe et al., 2000). In contrast, contemporary feminist and dependency perspectives have suggested that the changes wrought by economic development and globalisation have no or even adverse impact on women's status by marginalising and exploiting women, especially in developing countries where female labour participation is concentrated in low-income labour-intensive manufacturing industries (Afshar and Barrientos, 1999). Extensive literature has also shown that, in Korea, developmentalist industrialisation fueled by the availability of cheap female labour between the 1960s and 1980s caused and perpetuated the spread of gender inequality within the labour market (Chang, 1995; Joo and Choi, 2001; Kim and Lee 2011; Kong 2009; Park 1993).

More recently, empirical studies have shown that while economic development has reduced women's poverty and improved their education, employment, income generation and health in some countries (Gupta, 2014; Munshi and Rosenzweig, 2006; World Bank, 2011), it did not necessarily help advance gender equality in others (Duflo, 2012; Kapadia, 2002). This asymmetric relationship found between economic development and gender equality has been used to support the argument that economic development does not ensure progress in the status of women or tackle gender inequality in all dimensions (Duflo, 2012; Jayachandran, 2014; Kabeer and Natali, 2013). Thus, a substantial strand in the literature has instead focused on the inverse relationship between economic development and gender inequality. Empirical findings suggest that gender inequality hinders economic development (Bayeh, 2016; Ferrant, 2011; Klasen, 1999) while, conversely, increased gender equality or decreased gender inequality is an important contributing factor to development (Kabeer and Natali, 2013; Oxfam, 2017b).

Through a review of these different strands of literature, scholars like Eastin and Prakash (2013) and Duflo (2012) have reached a broad conclusion that economic development, although not a guarantee of gender equality in a society, is closely related to the status of women, posing some reciprocal effects. Many studies suggest that gender equality outcomes are combined results of economic development, social and cultural values, and legal and policy responses to gender issues (Cohen, 2006; Dilli et al., 2015; Dormekpor, 2015; Duflo, 2012; Jayachandran, 2014).

Cultural explanations of gender inequality

Historical determinants of continuing gender inequality, especially the important role played by culture and cultural values, have drawn considerable attention from scholars (Alesina et al., 2013; Bozzano, 2015; Farré and Vella, 2013; Fernandez, 2013; Huis et al., 2017; Krishnan, 2018; Sen, 2000). Some cultural norms and values are highly persistent, leading to the detriment of gender equality. In Korea, many studies have shown that culture, especially those embodied by the Confucian idea of male supremacy (patriarchy), has shaped social norms and beliefs about the role of women, generating a long-term effect on women's status (Chung, 1994; Han and Ling, 1998; Lie, 1996; Park, 1993).

This culture-focused analysis, while useful and appropriate, however, can limit our understanding of the diverse factors that may be associated with the multifaceted and multidimensional process of women's economic empowerment. Culture cannot fully explain large differences in the level of women's economic participation and opportunity among Confucian countries in East Asia as seen in the 2020 Global Gender Gap reports: Vietnam ranked at 31, China 91, Japan 115, and Korea 127 (World Economic Forum, 2020). Particularly in light of the changing nature of culture, we should not focus so much on the role of culture, but rather the dynamic, long-term link between culture and the evolution of women's empowerment.

Key historical determinants of women's empowerment in Korea

In this section, we examine the various historical contexts of the evolution of women's empowerment in Korea, including Confucian cultural influence, economic development, expansion of education for women, and the development of legal and policy measures for closing gender gaps.

Confucian culture and its persistent influence

Much mainstream literature suggests that the limited economic empowerment of women in Korea is deeply ingrained in cultural factors. Patriarchal gender and family norms rooted in the Confucian culture of the *Choson* dynasty (1392–1910) have been identified as major obstacles to women's employment and career development in Korea (Chang, 1995; Cho and McLean, 2017; Chung, 1994; Joo and Choi, 2001; Park, 2016).

Originating in China from as early as the fourth century, Confucianism was first introduced in Korea as an element of Chinese culture and civilisation during the ancient

Table 1. Reasons for career interruption among Korean women aged 25–54 (%), 2019.

Age group	Marriage	Pregnancy/childbirth	Family care giving	Childrearing/children's education
25–29	51.8	42.3	0.3	5.6
30–39	41.5	40.7	3.1	14.7
40–49	54.0	31.1	3.7	11.1
50–54	68.0	20.1	4.5	7.3

Source: KOSIS, (Korean Statistical Information Service) (2020).

Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE–668 AD). It was adopted as a new state ideology upon the establishment of the *Choson* dynasty and implanted as a national social ethic by the 15th century (Koh, 2003). Centred on values of harmony and order, Confucianism prescribes moral guidelines governing individual and societal behaviour (Koh, 2003). Harmonious and hierarchal relations within the family are highly valued, assigning different roles and statuses according to gender (Zhang et al., 2005). The sexual division is also emphasised in the physical separation of women and girls from men and boys in social and other settings. In Korean Confucianism, the ideal life for a woman was to become ‘a wise mother and a good wife’ while for a man it was to become well-educated to play a productive and decision-making role for the family and the society (Chung, 1994). Such Confucian beliefs and perceptions of gender roles, many scholars argue, have been deeply embedded in Korean values, exhibiting significant restrictions on women’s economic roles (Cho and McLean, 2017; Chung, 1994; Joo and Choi, 2001).

The strong influence of Confucian gender ideology on women’s labour force participation is an enduring feature of the Korean labour market. In a survey conducted in Korea in 2018, a vast majority of young female job seekers (72%) claimed that they experienced disadvantages at the initial recruitment stage because of their gender (Hur, 2018). In this survey, many women reported that, during job interviews, they were asked about their plans for marriage or childbirth. It is hardly surprising then that the gender gap in workforce participation rates, although gradually reducing, remained at 20% in Korea in 2019, being among the highest in Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2019a).

The gender division of labour is largely tolerated within the family, contributing to a significant reduction in the labour force participation rate of women around the ages of marriage and pregnancy. According to 2015 statistics, regardless of their increasing positive attitudes towards the idea of sharing household chores between husband and wife, Korean men did the least housework in OECD countries, while women spent 47 h more than the OECD average on household chores (Ock, 2015). With women given primary responsibility for housework and childcare, married women face social and cultural resistance when working outside home. In a 2019 survey, marriage and childbirth were identified as the two major reasons for career interruptions among Korean women aged between 25–54 (Table 1).

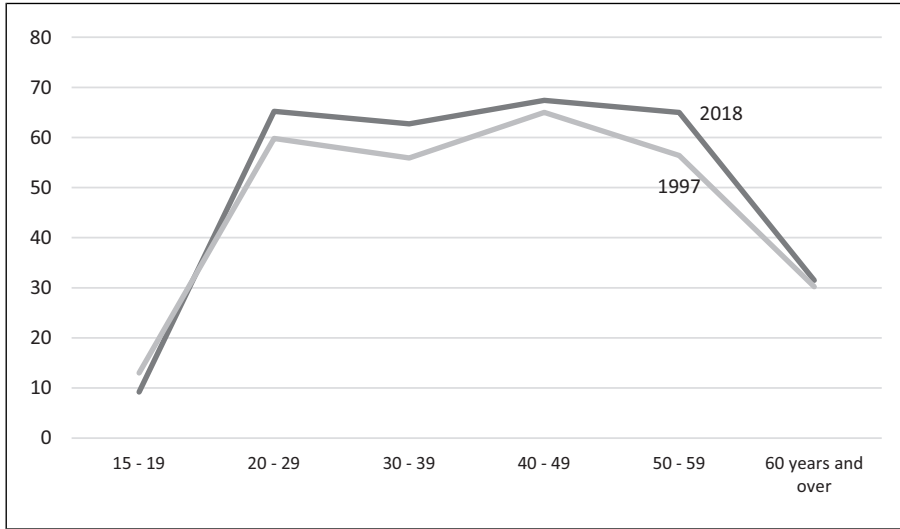


Figure 1. Female labour force participation rates by age group (1997–2018).
Source: KOSIS, 2020.

With women leaving the workforce during childbirth and child rearing years and re-entering at a later age maintained as a consistent trend over time, female labour force participation rates began to form an ‘M-shaped’ age pattern during the 1990s (Figure 1).

More recently, in the context of increasing competition in the education system and college admissions, it is argued that working mothers in Korea face additional demands on their time as their child-rearing responsibilities often extend to school-age children (Kim, 2018a; Ma, 2016). Research explains that this trend forces many young mothers, regardless of greater career commitment, to take long-term career breaks or leave the workforce permanently after childbirth, reducing their opportunity to earn more income (Kim, 2018a; Ma, 2016). This phenomenon may add to systematic disadvantages Korean women experience in the workplace and explain why those of younger generations suffer a stronger ‘motherhood penalty’ in Korea (Choi and Park, 2019). Research indicates that women’s re-entry into the workforce following career-breaks frequently involve lower pay and status in Korea (Kim et al., 2015). It is also challenged by low average female wages, high opportunity cost of childrearing, and limited work opportunities available (Lee and Chung, 2008). In this context, women find it difficult to re-enter permanent full-time employment and often settle for irregular (e.g. temporary, part-time or casual) employment or self-employment (Yoon and Kim, 2015). In the 2018 statistics, married women consisted of 41.5% of non-regular employees while married men comprised 28.8% (Kim, 2018b). As a consequence, labour force participation among married women, while undergoing moderate growth, remained at much lower levels compared to other population groups (Lee and Song, 2018).

However, there is also evidence suggesting that women in general, and young women in particular, are more career-oriented than their predecessors and increasingly in well-paid stable employment and delaying or avoiding marriage and/or childbirth (Bonneuil and Kim, 2017; Cho and Bang, 2005; Lee and Kwon, 2015; Ma, 2016). Between 2008 and 2018, the employment rate of women aged between 30–34 increased by 10.6 percentage points (from 51.9% to 62.5%), marking the biggest growth among all age groups (Statistics Korea, 2019). In addition, in the 2019 statistics, 51.9% of Korean women aged between 15–39 believed that marriage was not a must and a further 8.4% thought it should be avoided (8.4%), in comparison with the 51.4% of men who believed that marriage was necessary (Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), 2020). These views among women are also reflected in empirical data. The mean age at which women first marry was 21.6 in 1960, 24.1 in 1980 and 24.8 in 1990, before increasing sharply from 26.5 to 30.6 years between 2000 and 2019 (Statistics Korea, 2020). To put things more into perspective, in 2017 the average age of first-time Korean mothers was 31.6, the oldest in the world, while the country's total fertility rate reached a record low of 1.05, the lowest among the OECD countries (OECD, 2019b; Steger, 2018). With these changes among new generation women, the age pattern of female labour force participation began to deviate from the typical M-shape during the last decade (see the 2018 data in Figure 1).

However, evidence suggests that changes in gender role attitudes were not necessarily similar between men and women. In a 2019 survey conducted among 1002 young people aged between 19 and 39, the majority of male wage worker respondents (58.4%) agreed that it was natural that employers favour men over women in recruitment, while less than one third (29.9%) of females did so (Kim and Ma, 2019). It can be argued that significant reform of laws and institutions are needed to keep up with women's changing attitudes and to trigger changes in the rest of the society in favour of gender equality.

Rapid economic development

In Korea, women's economic roles and status have been profoundly influenced by changing government strategies and interventions aimed at promoting rapid economic growth and key industries over the process of economic development during the past six decades. First, between the 1960s and 1970s, export-led industrialisation resulted in a sharp increase in the labour force participation rates among women from 26.8% in 1960 to 45.7% in 1980 (Jang et al., 2001: 11). Participation rates particularly soared among women aged between 15 and 24, ranging between 40 and 50% (Jang et al., 2001: 10). To support poor families, many young rural women moved to the city seeking employment at manufacturing companies (Kim and Voos, 2007). This trend, however, also generated adverse effects, initiating women's segregation into labour-intensive, low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Despite their core role in supporting economic growth, many female manufacturing workers suffered low wages, long-working hours and abusive working conditions (Lie, 1996). In 1980, women worked an average of 9.7 h per day compared to 9 h for men (Chung, 1994), while earning only 44.5% of the male wage (Park, 2016). Women workers' poor working conditions came to attention particularly with the rise of

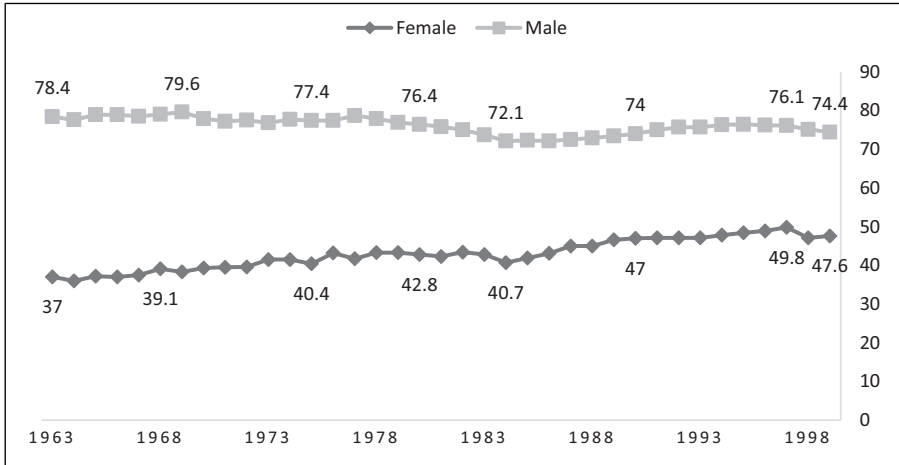


Figure 2. Labour force participation rates by gender. Korea, 1963–1998.

Note: Job search for one-week standard.

Source: Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), 2020.

women's groups in the late 1970s but did not lead to a women's rights movement until the mid-1980s as the then government strongly suppressed any labour movement to maintain Korea's competitive advantage in labour-intensive manufacturing (Kim and Bae, 2017).

Second, the heavy and chemical industries (HCI) push in the 1970s and 1980s intensified gender-segregation by industry (Chang 1995). Signifying a new demand for scientific and technical knowledge and skills, the HCI policy led to the expansion of tertiary education in male-dominated fields of science and engineering and promoted the growth of *chaebols* (large family-owned business conglomerates) as key actors in the economy. Consequently, a large number of educated and skilled male workers entered into *chaebol*-dominated advanced manufacturing industries heavily focused on the use of technology, and thus emerged as the main actors in the economy. In contrast, many young women in the light-manufacturing labour force lost their jobs, resulting in only moderate improvements in women's labour force participation rates until the mid-1980s (Figure 2).

Third, the industrial shift towards a service economy between the 1980s and 1990s expanded women's employment sectors to the service industries and increased labour force participation among educated women (Kang et al., 2015; Kim, 2006a). Accordingly, office workers (15.5%) emerged as the third largest occupational group for women in 1990, following agriculture, forestry and fisheries (27%), and manufacturing (21.0%) (Kang et al., 2015; Kim, 2006b). In addition, labour force participation greatly rose amongst tertiary educated women, with their participation rate increasing from 29.8% in 1980 to 57.9% in 1995 (Ahn, 2011). Consequently, female labour force participation rates continued to increase during the 1990s (Figure 3).

Fourth, through the Sixth Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development (1987–1991) and the Seventh Five-Year Plan for the New Economy (1993–1997), economic policies during the 1990s, for the first time, contained provisions for the

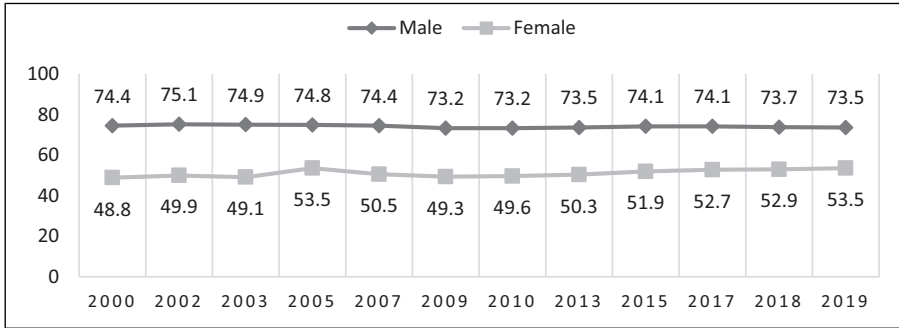


Figure 3. Labour force participation rates by gender between 2000 and 2019. Korea.
 Note: Job search for four weeks standard.
 Source: KOSIS, 2020.

development of women. A greater focus was placed on promoting female participation and advancement in the labour force, improving working conditions and utilising and training the female workforce. In line with this policy direction, flexible work arrangements were strongly promoted. This change, however, generated some negative effects, with a rising percentage of women falling into part-time or casual employment. In 1998, the majority of female workers were made up of non-regular workers (over 65%) rather than full-time workers (nearly 35%) (Statistics Korea, 2009). With persistent conservative social attitudes towards married women’s employment, non-regular employment in particular was regarded a viable option for married women (Park, 1993).

Fifth, following the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis, Korea was forced into neoliberal economic restructuring, which had both favourable and unfavourable outcomes for women’s empowerment. With its focus on boosting productivity, economic restructuring contributed to narrowing the gender gap in education and economic activities while worsening gender segregation. During the financial crisis, many companies were sold or shut down, or began to relocate their production bases to China and Southeast Asia, resulting in high unemployment, with women being the most affected. In a 1999 report, for example, 43% of female office workers in Korea lost their jobs in the form of ‘voluntary’ resignation during the financial crisis compared to only 29.7% of their male counterparts (Lee, 1999). This situation led more women than men to give up looking for jobs, resulting in a greater decline in women’s unemployment rate than men’s after the crisis (Kim and Voos, 2007). In these tough economic and social environments, on the contrary, married women entered the labour market in larger numbers to offset the loss of family income, contributing to the increase in non-regular, lower-paying employment amongst women (Kim and Voos, 2007). In consequence, the proportion of non-regular female workers grew rapidly reaching an all-time high of 68.9% in 2000, in comparison with 40.8% for men (KOSIS, 2020). Female workers as a buffer were re-employed during the 2008 global financial crisis as well. Women’s unemployment was affected more significantly than men’s during the crisis, accounting for 75% of job losses in the first half of 2009 (Lim, 2020).

Sixth, in the face of increasing economic globalisation and declining foreign direct investment since the 2000s, the Korean government sought new growth engines in more technology-intensive and knowledge-based industries such as information and communications technology (ICT), biotechnology and the cultural industry. Women's labour force participation in science and technology also gradually increased from 2007, contributing to the steady rise in the female labour force participation rate from 48.8% to 53.5% between 2000 and 2019 (Figure 3). During the same period, labour force participation rates of female college graduates also rose from 60.9% to 67.6% while decreasing for their male counterparts from 88.8% to 86.8% (KOSIS, 2020).

The country's transition towards a knowledge-based economy, however, did not necessarily generate a meaningful change in occupational gender segregation within the highly educated labour force. Despite a greater desire to pursue career development than their predecessors, highly educated women of new generations remained greatly underrepresented in the new industries. While the ratio of male and female university graduates was 5:5 in natural science and 8:2 in engineering, the ratio in their full-time employment in these areas was much further male-biased at 7:3 and 9:1 respectively (WISSET, 2017). As a result, the gender pay gap remained significant in the technology sector in Korea, recording 41.17% in a 2018 report, overwhelmingly higher than the other 33 reported countries (Honeypot, 2018).

With labour market conditions like these being persistently gender-based, women's employment was more prone to being affected by an economic recession following the recent COVID-19 pandemic. In Korea, during the first 12 months of the pandemic between March 2020 and February 2021, average monthly employment fell 2.28% for women, more than double that of men (1.03%) (Park, 2021). A fall in employment was more evident among women aged between 30 and 45 (3.1%), particularly those with young children, than those in their 20s (1.25%) (Park, 2021). This is because they are responsible for family caregiving tasks and their employment status is often precarious and concentrated in the most impacted industries (Ham, 2021; Jones, 2021; Stangarone, 2021).

These consequences of the pandemic have revealed that gender gaps enduring in various labour market conditions remain a pressing challenge in Korea today. It is noteworthy that growth in female employment in the past two decades has been driven by employment in 'female jobs' or irregular positions with low pay and little stability (Park, 2019). During this period, the share of non-regular female workers has sustained at around 40–45% (Figure 4). This is in contrast to that of male counterparts which rarely exceeded 30% during the same period.

The country's gender pay gap, in fact, has been the highest amongst OECD countries over the past two decades (OECD, 2019a). As of 2019, the average woman earned 67.8% of what the average man earned in Korea (Figure 5). With the continuous rise in minimum wage, the gender gap slightly narrowed for low-income earners, but has become more pronounced amongst employees aged between 30 and 50 (Ministry of Employment and Labor, 2017) as well as higher income earners and employees of long-term tenure (10 years or more) (Min et al., 2008). Most notably, this gap was sustained at later ages, having significant implications for the feminisation of poverty in old age in Korea.

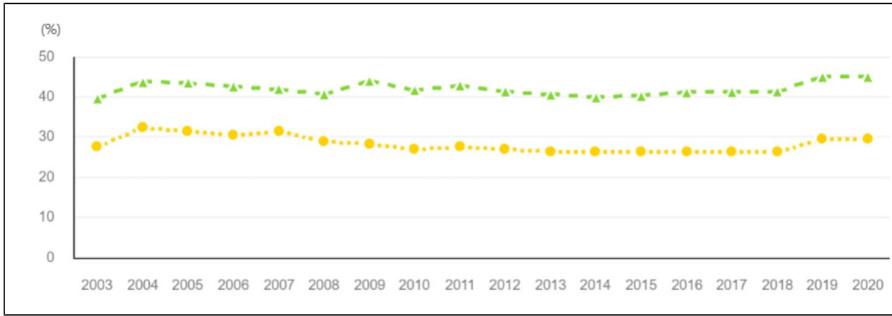


Figure 4. Share of non-regular employees among female and male wage workers. Korea, 2003-2020.

Source: KOSIS (2020).

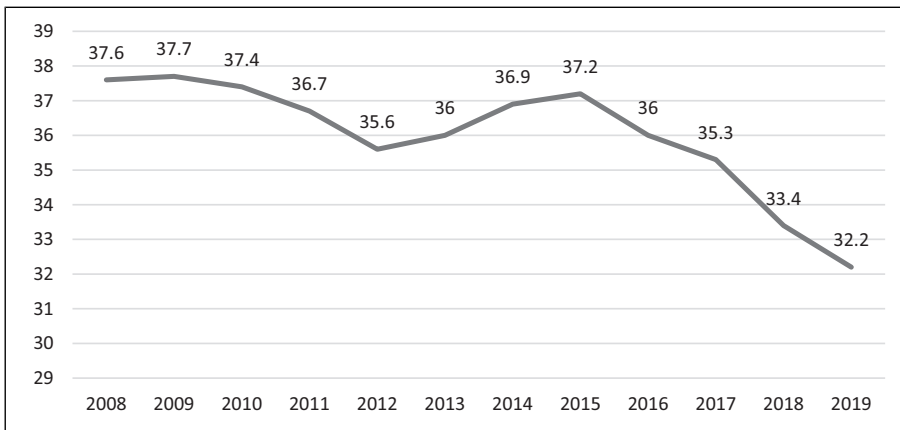


Figure 5. Ratio of female to male wages in Korea. 2008–2019 (%).

Note: Percentage gap = $\times 100 (1 - \text{Rate ratio})$ % Rate ratio = Female average monthly wage/Male average monthly wage Average monthly wage = Monthly salary + (Total yearly bonus \div 12)

Source: Statistics Korea (2021)

According to the latest available figures, besides having the highest old-age poverty rate in OECD countries, Korea is also one of the countries with the largest gender differences in the rate (OECD, 2019c).

Expansion of education for women

With the Confucian gender ideology strongly embedded in social and cultural contexts, the idea of women having education equal to that of men was not easily accepted by Koreans during the early stage of the country’s socioeconomic development in the 1960s

Table 2. Number of female students per 100 male students across four education levels in Korea, 1966–2014.

Year	1966	1971	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2014
Primary	90.4	92.5	94.3	94.3	94.3	94.2	91.8	88.8	89.5	91.4	92.7
Lower secondary	56.9	64.2	73.1	88.6	93.2	94.1	94.2	91.4	89.0	90.4	91.2
Upper secondary	51.3	60.8	61.7	74.1	85.5	88.6	92.8	92.1	88.5	88.0	91.5
Tertiary	28.3	30.2	42.2	29.0	52.6	59.1	67.9	85.4	86.5	89.6	90.6

Source: Statistics Korea (2017).

and 1970s. The Confucian tradition of son preference remained particularly strong and typically manifested in parents aspiring to higher educational attainments for their sons than their daughters (Ahn, 2011; Chung, 1994; Lee, 2012). Despite this unfavourable cultural context, Korean women have achieved the most significant empowerment in the education sector. The increase in the male-to-female enrolment ratio in every educational institution seen in Korea over the past few decades is truly remarkable (Table 2).

This change has been brought about by continued institutional support and legislative measures for female education as well as changing social norms on girls' education (Oh, 2004). Important driving forces were government-led socio-economic development and the subsequent demand for human capital as well as high educational aspirations embedded in Korean culture (due to the Confucian emphasis on the importance of education) (Chung 1994). With the enactment of the first education law in 1949, a 6-year national initiative (1954–1959) was undertaken to increase the number of classrooms, while providing accommodation for poor students, securing funds and supporting private school entry (Kim et al., 2015). As a result, the female enrolment rate for primary education continuously increased from 35% in 1952 to 45% in 1960 (Kim et al., 2015; Park, 2008).

Being pivotal to human resource development and to the nation's general economic development, women's education received more attention in the 1960s (Oh 2004). The government introduced free compulsory primary education in 1960 for all children aged between 6 and 12 and achieved universalisation of primary education (nearly 100%) by 1965 (Chung, 1994). In addition, educational reform in 1968 abolished the admissions system for junior high school and introduced standardised education in secondary schools. Consequently, women's enrolment rates in secondary education soared from 23% in 1965 to 86% in 1991, demonstrating a greater increase than men's over the same period (from 38% to 89%) (Chung, 1994). Under the enduring Confucian influence and with little consideration of gender equality, education for girls during this period, however, focused on cultivation of 'wise mothers and good wives', only reinforcing gender stereotypes and discrimination of Confucian culture (Oh 2004; Park 1993). For example, secondary schools offered separate curriculums for girls and boys: 'business and technical education' was offered only for boys while 'home-economics and home-making' for girls. In this context, women's enrolment in tertiary education remained very low, being only a third of the rate of men by 1980 (Chung, 1994; Lee, 2012). While only a small number of women entered tertiary education, they were usually concentrated

in fields of less favourable employment prospects such as arts and homemaking (Oh, 2004). This was because women's higher education was perceived as an investment for a marriage market, as opposed to a labour market (Chang, 2015).

The emergence of democratic governments in the late 1980s led to greater investment in women's education. Economic policies during the 1990s, for the first time, contained provisions for the development of women. They promoted equal education for women and men with a particular focus on the advancement of women into science and technology sectors and vocational and transitional education (Ahn, 2011: p. 127). As one of such measures, separate curricula for girls and boys were integrated into one subject in 1992. More liberalising social institutions such as weakening son preference, increased income, and a decreasing number of children in the household, also supported women to participate in education as fully as men, finally contributing to the achievement of women's equal rights with men in education. By 2009, 99.9% of girls were enrolled in middle school and 98.7% in high school, at similar rates to boys (99.9% and 99.6%, respectively) (Ahn, 2011). In addition, the rate of college advancement among female high school graduates began to outpace that of males in 2005 (Statistics Korea, 2018).

Along with the reversal of the college gender gap, the share of college graduates within the female labour force continuously grew and marked 43.8% in 2018 (Statistics Korea, 2019). However, female college graduates are still underrepresented in the workforce in Korea today. The gender gap in employment rates of college graduates consistently worsened from 2.9% to 3.6% between 2015 and 2018 (Korea Economic Daily, 2019; Department of Education Korea, 2019). The ratio of non-regular employment also remained high amongst highly educated women. In 2017, highly educated women comprised only 16% of people in full-time employment but 30% of those in irregular employment (Korea Institute of S&T Evaluation and Planning, 2019). Research suggests that the persistence of traditional gender role stereotypes and gender-based and gender-discriminatory practices in workplaces impede active labour force participation among highly educated women (Ahn, 2011; Cho et al., 2015; Jang et al., 2001; Kang and Rowley, 2005; Keum, 2000; Park, 1993).

In avoidance of inequalities widespread in the private sector, highly educated women began to flock to public sector employment (Choe, 2010). This phenomenon became evident with the enactment of the Framework Act on Women's Development, 1995 and was expedited by the growing share of women passing the highly competitive national examinations (Korean Women's Development Institute, 2019). This suggests that gender inequality in the economic structure may not only diminish the impacts of women's greater educational attainment on their employment status but also serve as a continuous challenge for Korea's sustainable economic development. Thus, gender inequality in the economic structure remains a persistent obstacle, creating ambiguity in the relationship between educational attainment and women's employment status in Korea.

Democratisation and legal and policy measures for closing gender gaps

Korea's legal and institutional system for closing the gender gap has progressed along with its democratisation that has increasingly supported the rule of law and human rights.

Under the decades of military rule (1960s–1980s), women were recognised as an active resource of economic development. While women’s development through education was emphasised, their inequalities and marginalisation in the public and political spheres were largely ignored. Following the ratification of the ‘Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)’ in 1984, however, the government faced growing internal and external pressure to address gender inequality. In 1985, women’s policies were adopted under the names of the ‘Master Plan for Women’s Development’ and the ‘Guidelines for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women’. In 1987, Korea introduced the *Equal Employment Opportunity Act (EEOA)* as a special law stipulating equal opportunities and treatment of men and women in employment processes. With a lack of adequate penalties, however, this law was not adhered to by many companies.

After the successful achievement of a direct democracy in the late 1980s, elected governments became more responsive to the needs of the people. They have shown greater commitment to expanding democracy as well as advocating women’s rights. After the country was elected as a member state of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 1991, the government adopted the concept of gender mainstreaming in policymaking, following the global trend. In undertaking women’s issues as a new agenda for social policy, the government actively promoted laws and policy measures to enhance protection of women’s rights and gender equality during the 1990s. Among them, the *Framework Act on Women’s Development* was enacted in 1995 with an aim to promote gender equality and empower women in all areas of the society. Along with this Act, a gender quota system was first introduced in 1996 to boost female employment in the public sector. In addition, the Special Committee on Women’s Affairs was newly formed in 1998 directly under the office of the President, and the *Act on the Prohibition and Remedy for Sexual Discrimination* was also introduced in 1999. Despite legislative advances, however, Korean women became more vulnerable to gender discrimination during this period. Hard hit by the Asian Financial Crisis, they were laid off or converted to irregular or part-time workers at higher levels than men.

The 2000s saw the emergence of progressive governments, under which meaningful progress was made towards gender equality. The government established the Ministry of Gender Equality (renamed as Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2010) for the first time in 2001 to deal with issues of gender inequality. Accordingly, the paradigm of women’s policy expanded from ‘women’s development’ to ‘the realisation of gender equality’. With continuous efforts by women’s organisations, the long-debated Family Law of 1960 was finally revised in 2005 to remove its discriminatory patriarchal elements including the following: that only men qualify as legal head of household, and that the child should take the father’s surname. This revision was followed by the additional amendment of more than 300 existing laws to eliminate gender bias, setting a major milestone in the history of women’s empowerment in Korea. Additionally, the EEOA was renamed and reinforced as the Equal Employment Opportunity and Work-Family Balance Assistance Act, 2007.

During the last decade, the government has showed continued commitment to enhancing the legal system in order to promote gender equality and strengthen its

accountability. The *Framework Act on Women's Development* was reviewed and then restructured into the *Framework Act on Gender Equality* in 2014. In addition, the Basic Plans for Gender Equality Policy were adopted, firstly for 2015–2017 and secondly for 2018–2022. The *Equal Employment Opportunity and Work-Family Balance Assistance Act* was partially amended in 2019 and 2020, to ensure increasing use of family-care leave, reduced working hours, and greater working hour flexibility. As a result, the law in Korea provides parents an entitlement to paid leave and unpaid parental leave, both longer than the OECD averages (OECD, 2019d). While the take-up rates of parental leave have gradually increased among both women and men, men only accounted for 17% of all parents taking leave in 2018 (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2019). Despite a national campaign to promote greater use of parental leave, according to a recent survey, the majority (60%) of Korean working parents still felt uncomfortable to take leave over concerns of negative consequences for their career (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2019). In this context, it was usually mothers rather than fathers who tended to take parental leave largely because they earned less, further contributing to the gender pay gap. In addition, according to 2019 statistics, after taking leave, 6 out of 10 women were unable to return to work due to a work environment not supporting work-family balance and the lack of reliable childcare services (Park, 2020). There is still doubt as to whether law reform and policy measures have adequately addressed the specific needs and perspectives of women in Korea.

The fact that women are still underrepresented in positions of leadership and decision-making can pose a significant barrier to creating an enabling environment to ensure gender perspectives in policymaking. First, the number of women appointed to cabinet has been very low; two by President Kim De-jung (1998–2003), four by President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) and two by both President Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and Park Guen-hye (2013–2017). The current President Moon Jae-in (2017–present), formerly a human rights lawyer, showed greater commitment to gender balance in the government and appointed women in six out of 19 government ministerial positions in 2017, reaching a record 31.5%.

Second, the percentage of women in the National Assembly remains minimal in Korea. Despite an electoral law reform in 2000 stipulating an obligatory quota (30%) for women in the political party's candidate list for all elections, with no specific compliance and enforcement measures, however, this brought about only a moderate increase in the average proportion of women in the National Assembly, from 13.16% in the 2000s to 16.35% in the 2010s (Figure 6). In the recent 2020 election, the proportion recorded 19%, the highest since the restoration of direct presidential elections in 1987, although still lagging significantly behind the OECD average (28.68% as of 2016) (OECD, 2021).

Third, gender inequality in career progression has been sustained over the course of socioeconomic development in Korea. In *The Economist's* glass ceiling index (GCI), Korea has continuously ranked over the past decade as the worst country for women to work in among the 29 OECD countries listed (*The Economist*, 2019). For instance, Korea women are significantly underrepresented in management positions. According to the OECD's statistics, they held only 15.4% of the total management positions in 2019, marking the lowest rate in the OECD only after Japan (OECD, 2021). It is argued that the

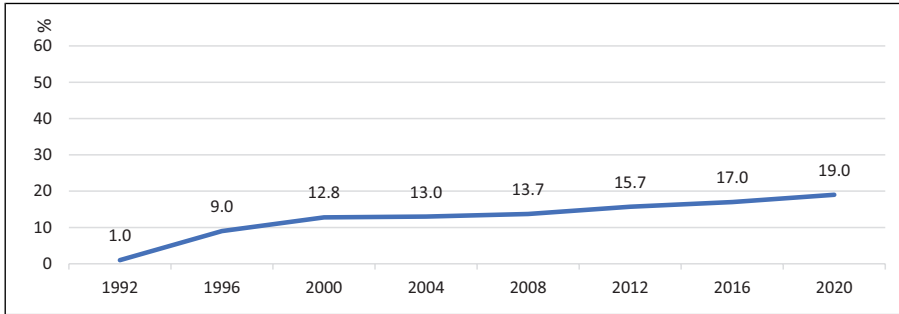


Figure 6. Share of women in the National Assembly. Korea (1992–2016)
Source: Statics Korea, 2020

traditionally male-oriented workplace culture in Korea, including rigid hierarchy, demand for loyalty and obedience, long working hours, no support for work-family balance, lack of flexible arrangements in the workplace and the preference for male employees, function as gender-based obstacles that hinder women from entering similar occupations, earning similar wages and receiving similar promotions to men (Jeong, 2019; Park 2016).

Conclusion

This paper has explored how women's empowerment in Korea has been affected by various contextual factors over the past six decades. In undertaking a historical analysis. Findings reveal that women's empowerment in Korea, as conceptually defined in literature, is a complex and multidimensional process, not determined by a single factor (such as the Covid-19 pandemic) but closely linked to its cultural, social, economic, and political conditions and factors. While Confucian culture still plays a large and integral role, economic development, educational progress, and legal and policy measures have also cast significant, long-term influences on the progress towards women's empowerment in Korea.

Historically, the country's rapid economic development has had a significant effect on the empowerment of women in the labour market. Government policies and changes with a disproportionate emphasis on rapid economic growth over inclusive growth, however, have become a historical determinant of both a highly gender segregated workforce and persistent gender inequity in (type of) employment and wages. Government education policies that periodised increased access to and opportunities of education for women contributed to gender parity in education while generating gender disparity in changes in gender-role attitudes and behaviour. While more educated and possessing a greater desire to pursue career development than their predecessors, new generation women, however, still earn less, suffer more from work-family pressure, and remain excluded in positions of power and decision-making. The country's transition to the digital economy or its increasing labour market flexibility did not necessarily lead to better labour market outcomes among highly educated women. Disadvantages and challenges women faced in

employment were persistent and heightened during economic crises or recessions. Although the country's democratisation has promoted the development of law and policy measures for promoting gender equality, a proactive approach to closing gender gaps is still lacking on the political front. Without a tailored policy design and delivery to prioritise women's empowerment and change longstanding gender-based labour market conditions, the economic gender gap is not expected to close in the post-pandemic future.

The historical analysis of this paper in conclusion provides important contextual information of women's empowerment in Korea that policy makers can use to create strategies for successful policy implementation. Most importantly, it highlights the importance and relevance of a comprehensive policy approach in addressing the complex, multifaceted issues affecting women's empowerment at all levels. In this respect, this study provides insights as to why the UN changed its focus in 2015 from gender parity in education (Millennium Development Goal 3) to a broader set of targets (Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5), as a strategy for achieving its gender equality goal (United Nations, 2015). In this paper, we have seen that educational advancement, without 'sound policies and enforceable legislation' (SDG 5.c) and including women in decision-making (SDG 5.5), does not necessarily create a gender-equitable environment nor expand women's power and agency. Our findings in particular lend support to the special attention of SDG five on the importance of tackling structural and historical disadvantages as key to achieving women's equality and empowerment (Razavi, 2016; United Nations, 2015). Our analysis confirms that discriminatory social norms that view housework and childcare as women's work confer a profound impact on married women's economic, social, and political participation, and is thus an urgent issue to address in Korea (SDG 5.4). With Confucian gender role attitudes deeply and extensively entrenched at the grassroots level, including individual mindsets, family relations, and workplace culture, effective implementation of family-friendly policies in Korea requires the development of holistic strategies.

Continuously ranked as the top OECD country for working women, Sweden presents a good role model for Korea, a long-time bottom ranking country (*The Economist*, 2019). As of 2019, the country is among the most gender-equality and family-friendly countries (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2019), with 76% of fathers taking parental leave (compared to Korea's 1.2% in 2018), and 88.7% of women aged 25 to 54 participating in the labour force (67.8% for Korea) (Stat OECD, 2021). This model country, however, was no different to Korea until the 1960s and 1970s, with its strong endorsement of traditional gender role beliefs as well as very few fathers taking part in childcare (Chronholm, 2007). Although the parental leave insurance system was formally introduced much earlier in 1974, it was mothers who took the vast majority of the leave as in Korea today. A significant change to the status quo was brought by the introduction of a 'use-it-or-lose-it' paternal quota in 1995 (Duvander and Löfgren, 2019). While legislation ensured equal amounts of paid parental leave for all parents, a portion of the leave (30 days) was reserved to each parent as a 'mother's quota' and a 'father's quota', not transferrable to the other but lost if not used. The introduction of the quota immediately increased the proportion of Swedish fathers taking leave from 44% to 77% (Mohdin, 2016). In an effort to achieve a more equitable share in parental role, Sweden continued to

review and revise its leave provision and child education and care services. As a result, paid parental leave entitled to each parent was extended to 240 days (for the first child) in 2002 while the days of the quota increased to 90 days in 2016 (Duvander and Löfgren, 2019). In addition to this generous period, parental leave in Sweden, unlike Korea's, also offers a high level of gender-neutral mandatory pay (77.6% of wages, as of 2019), which has played a significant incentive to encourage more men to take leave and more women to participate in the labour force (Duvander and Löfgren, 2019; Mohdin, 2016). The focus on fathers in a Swedish model of family-friendly policies has many implications for Korea in that it has not only contributed to a more equal share of parental responsibility but generated a wide range of benefits for families, mothers, fathers, and children (*The Economist*, 2014).

To advance women's economic empowerment in Korea, we thus suggest that the government should play a more active role in ensuring that policymaking adequately addresses the specific needs, perspectives and experiences of both men and women. Government interventions at multiple levels to create more gender equitable attitudes across society are essential. At the individual level, government interventions need to challenge and change people's gender-role attitudes and behaviours, for example, through school curricula, youth forums and other programs. At the community level, the government should establish and strengthen partnerships with organisations to reduce gender discriminatory culture and practices in the workplace and to encourage and support employees' accessibility of family-friendly policies. At the national level, legislation, regulation, and national campaigns need to be reinforced to remove the barriers and disincentives to women's full and equal participation in the economy, politics, and wider society and to encourage positive attitudes towards women's empowerment. The success of these interventions will require ongoing analytical and research initiatives aimed at developing and strengthening gender-sensitive and gender-specific policies and investments as well as integrating gender perspectives throughout the policy-making process (Williams, 2004). Continuing policy commitment to support women's leadership and political participation, even at the expense of men as suggested by Duflo (2012), is also essential for greater inclusion of women's views and priorities in decision making. These suggestions will serve useful lessons for many developing countries committed to sustainable development and contribute to expanding an understanding of factors and relations influencing the advancement of women's empowerment and gender equality.

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