

Workplace And Employment Inequality

Among Women Workers in Contemporary Korea

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Introduction

- Since the early 2000s, Korean government has initiated three major female-friendly employment and labour market policies in order to activate women in the labour market. For instance, the Affirmative Action, the creation of good quality part-time employment, and the flexible work arrangement system have been implemented.
- Despite the efforts made to boost female labour force participation, it has achieved very limited outcomes in improving the quantity and quality of women's employment.
- Women workers are still subjected to various unequal treatment in workplace and employment.

1. employment type

- Women workers are over-represented in non-regular or contingent works.
- According to a survey done by the National Statistical Office (NSO) in 2004, the non-regular employment is higher among women workers than male workers.
- Female non-regular labour accounted for 63.3% of the female waged labour, while male non-regular labour accounted for 37.5% of the male waged labour.
- It suggests that despite women labour force participation has increased throughout the years, significant number of them are concentrated at doing non-regular works in Korea.

2. promotion opportunity

- Women workers are under-represented in senior official and managerial position, the so-called glass-ceiling effect that prevent women climbing up the social ladder.
- According to the statistics of UNBP, in 2009, the proportions of women CEOs is highest in hotel and restaurant industry, but with only 11.7%, while lowest in finance, transport and communication industry, with only 2.8%.
- It suggests that female heads are very scarce in all business sectors in Korea.

3. wage payment

- The gender wage gap is wide despite the increase in women's education level.
- According to the statistics of the OECD, the gender wage gap of Korea was 30.7% in 2015, which is more than double the OECD's average gender gap of 14.7% and Korea has the widest gender wage gap among the OECD countries.
- It reflects that although women workers in Korea have attained higher education level, their wage are paid unequally compare to their male counterparts.

4. working environment

- Women workers are prone to work in hostile work environment. They suffer from workplace harassment in workplace and also in after-work get-togethers.
- According to a survey done by the Ministry of Employment and Labour in 2020, 27.6% of the women interviewees answered they had directly experienced or witnessed workplace harassment. The most common type of workplace harassment includes verbal abuse, bullying and slander, followed by coercion.
- It shows that substantial amount of women workers experience workplace harassment and it might undermine their mental health to different extents.

The unique working practices and organizational culture contribute to the workplace and employment inequality among women workers in contemporary Korea.

1. Long working hours

- According to the data from OECD, Korea ranked the second among the OECD countries for the average annual hours actually worked per worker in 2014. Korean workers worked 2,124 hours, which is 1.24 times of the OECD countries' average.
- Two major factors that maintain the long working hours regime in Korea.
 1. The loose regulation and management of the statutory working hours.
- Although statutory 40 hours working week was institutionalized in 2004, the implementation rate was relatively low. Statistics show that in 2010, only 80.7% of the workplaces had fully implemented the statutory 40 hours working week.
 2. The inclusive wage system (also known as the blanket wage system)
- The inclusive wage system suggests that wages or salaries are paid according to the contracts that stipulated the pre-set wage amounts regardless of the overtime hours workers worked, or the company would only pay a pre-set fixed amount of overtime-pay.
- As the payment for overtime is not calculated in proportion to the overtime hours, it leaves room for employees to bypass the overtime pay to save costs, and thus it contributes to long working hours. On the other hand, some Korean workers, especially those workers who work in manufacturing sectors, rely very much on overtime pay. Thus, it provides incentives for the workers to work overtime.

The long-working hours in Korean companies marginalize women workers from the workplace due their marriage, childbirth and child care issue.

- The long working hours marginalize women workers from the workplace due to the conflicts between work and family issue as there is a mismatch between working hours and life cycles of workers.
- The male breadwinner ideology is embedded in Korean society, women are considered to take the primary responsibility for childrearing, family care and domestic works.
- The employed mothers would find it difficult to bear both the responsibility of motherhood and employment. They tend to retreat from the labour market in their early 30s and contributes to the M-shaped pattern of women's employment. While when these women re-enter the labour market after childrearing and child rearing period, they suffer from lower wage payment as the career penalty due to shorter length of continuous services. It gives rise to the gender wage gap.
- The married women with jobs would face deep conflict between taking care of their family and pursuing their career. Many of the married women with jobs would shift to work as unpaid family workers.
- Thus, the long working hour practices in Korea would be a hindrance for attaining gender equality in workplace due to its nature of not being family friendly which makes any work-life balance difficult.

2. After-work get-together culture

- After-work get-togethers, commonly known as hoesik in Korea, means "staff dining" or "company dining". At a hoesik, workers and employers in the companies would eat and drink alcohol together after work. While eating and drinking would usually involve multiple rounds at multiple venues, for example coffee shops, restaurants, hostess clubs and karaoke bars, etc.
- As early as in the twentieth century when industrialization came to Korea, kyojesul, also known as the business drinking, became an integral part of developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships between coworkers, suppliers and customers. Still today, after-work get-together culture, or the hoesik culture, is very prevalent in Korea.
- After-work get-together is one of the most important forms of socialization in Korean organizations nowadays. First, it fosters organizational cohesion and promote team spirit by building up close relationship among workers and strengthening bonds and ties between workers. Workers can take the chance to get to know each other's personal background, establish common interests, open up and share their problems in work.
- Second, it helps resolve work-related conflicts and maintain good worker-employer relationship. Managers and executives of the Korean organizations provide harsh feedbacks to employees in the workplace, however, they attempt to console the employees during the after-work get-togethers by giving advice and pep talks.

The after-work get-together culture in Korean companies brings about the issue of sexual harassment and hinders the career development of women workers.

Sexual harassment:

- According to a study by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2012, 87% of the employees responded that sexual harassment was common at a hoesik.
- In an informal setting outside of the workplace, the male workers and male supervisors can "forget" that the woman worker is a co-worker or employee, and expect her to act like "female entertainer". The woman worker is expected to sit next to their male counterparts or male supervisors and serve alcohol and food to them. Also, the woman worker is expected to sing and dance for them in nighttime singing sessions.
- Furthermore, sexually-related jokes, figurative comments or vulgar talks that offend women workers would often be considered as simple humorous remarks to cheer to the mood among colleagues.

Career development:

- Participating in after-work get-togethers is beneficial to professional advancement as workers can build relational capital, obtain useful information about a workplace and seek advice from mentors.
- Women workers who do not attend the after-work gatherings due to family issues would be excluded from networking, information sharing and advice giving and thus it hinders their career development.

3. The ideology of the male breadwinner in economic crises

1997 Asian Financial Crisis:

- Korean financial markets were severely hit by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis that was sweeping throughout Asia in 1997.
- At a result of the financial crisis, the Tripartite Commission was established in 1998 which aimed at developing measures for overcoming the economic crisis and to reinforce social consensus. The Commission rapidly agreed on a "Social Compromise to Overcome the Economic Crisis" in 1998. One of the key contents of the agreement was "Enhancing labour market flexibility". It suggested the possibility for employers to dismiss workers in cases of managerial need and permission for the establishment of temporary work agencies.
- The agreement brought about significant changes in the behavior of Korean firms. Companies were made legally to lay off workers and replace full-time workers with contingent workers to promote labour market flexibility.

The ideology of the male breadwinner in economic crises

- Women workers were forced to be laid off and engaged in the irregular employment because they were not regarded as primary breadwinners.
- Immediately after the IMF crisis, newspapers, broadcast and television programmes were eager to start the campaign to restore husbands' ki, which means energy or self-esteem. The purpose of the campaign was to raise husbands' diminished ki that had been damaged due to unemployment or economic stress.
- The labour unions agreed to lay off women workers in order to maintain the status of the male breadwinners.
- Employers openly said that it was unavoidable to lay off women workers because they were not primary breadwinners.
- It shows that women workers were made redundant for the sake of "male primary breadwinners". Women workers were forced to retreat from the labour market, or pushed into the irregular employment on behalf of the male workers.

The ideology of the male breadwinner in economic crises is embedded in Korean companies which put women workers in unfavourable position in employment when the company undergo restructuring or downsizing processes.

1. Women workers were discharged from the labour market

- Statistics from Presidential Commission on Women's Affairs (PCWS) show male employment decreased by 5.3 percent, while female employment decreased by 8.2 percent between 1997 and 1998.
- Even after the IMF crisis, companies tend to lay off women workers when the company undergo restructuring processes or experience financial crises. As companies consider women workers as the "second wage earners" of their household and therefore their employment was less necessary for the financial well-being of their family.

2. Women workers were forced to engage in irregular employment

- Statistics from Presidential Commission on Women's Affairs (PCWS) show, in terms of the changes in regular employment, women workers were reduced by 20.9 percent, while male workers were reduced by 12.9 percent between 1997 and 1998.
- Even after the IMF crisis, companies tend to employ women workers in "irregular" employment term as companies believe that women should engage in "irregular" employment to make way for men in "regular" employment.

Conclusion

- The unique working practices and organizational culture contribute to the workplace and employment inequality among women workers in contemporary Korea.
 1. Long working hours
 2. After-work get-together culture
 3. The ideology of the male breadwinner in economic crises

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