



**Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-first Session**

**Women's economic empowerment in the
changing world of work**

**INTERACTIVE EXPERT PANEL
The global care economy in the context of the
changing world of work**

**Social policies and the care economy in
Japan and South Korea:
Taking stock of the opportunities and challenges for
women's economic empowerment**

By
Ito Peng*
University of Toronto

Friday, 17 March 2017
3:00 – 6:00 p.m.

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

Introduction

The Japanese and South Korean governments have made some significant effort since the 1990s to help families (i.e. women) reconcile work and family responsibilities. In both countries public support for child care, in forms of child care subsidies and grants, guaranteed child care spaces and facilities, and more flexible and expanded early child care and education programs, have been extended and increased in over the last couple of decades (Japan-Ministry of Health and Welfare 2016; Korean Women's Development Institute 2015). Both governments have also implemented Long-term Care Insurance (in 2000 in Japan and 2008 in South Korea) that insures domiciliary and institutional care of people 65 years and over, and adults over the age of 40 suffering from age-related illnesses such as Alzheimer's, through a new universal mandatory public social insurance scheme. As well, maternity, parental and family care leave provisions have been extended, and employers in both countries are legislated to give women more flexible working hours, and sometimes given fines and other sanctions if they are found to violate the laws. Finally, the two governments have embedded political institutions to champion women's equality mandates within their governments in the form of Gender Equality Bureau within the Cabinet Office (*Naikakufu Danjo Kyodo Sankaku Kyoku*) in Japan, answering directly to the Prime Minister, and in South Korea, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (여성가족부).

Today, nearly a third of children under the age of 2 and nearly 90 per cent of children aged 3 to 5 in both countries participate in formal child care or early child education programs (OECD n.d.). In Japan, 3.0 per cent of population aged 65 to 74 and 23.3 per cent of population 75-years and over (Japan-Cabinet Office 2016), and in South Korea, over 6.0 per cent of people over the age of 65 receive elder care services from Long-term Care Insurance (Korea-Ministry of Health and Welfare n.d). In both countries also both parents can take up to a year of parental leave with income replacement as their right, and in Japan, up to 14 months since 2009 if both fathers also take parental leave at the same time with mothers. In 2015, 81.5 per cent per cent of Japanese mothers took parental leave, while in South Korea a total of 88,756 women took maternity leave and 73,412 others took parental leave that year (Japan-MOHLW 2016; KWDI 2016). These are significant increase compared to when mother's parental leave take up rate in Japan was only 49.1 per cent in 1996 when the law on full-year paid parental leave law was first enacted, and 22,711 women taking maternity leave and 3,685 taking parental leave in 2002 in South Korea when a similar law was enacted in that country (Japan-MOHLW 2016; KWDI 2016). Finally, the government's social spending on the family in both countries, too, have risen quite dramatically, from 1.4 per cent of GDP in 1995 to 3.0 per cent in 2013 in Japan, and from 0.1 per cent in 1990 to 3.5 per cent in 2013 in South Korea. These figures compare well with the OECD total average of increase from 3.8 per cent in 1990 to 4.7 per cent in 2013 (OECD n.d.-b). Similarly, total social expenditures on the aged (excluding health care) in these countries have increased from 4.0 per cent in 1990 to 10.7 per cent in 2013 in Japan, and 0.6 per cent to 2.2 per cent in South Korea, respectively (OECD n.d.-b). These data suggest a significant public investment in women, children and the elderly.

Given that it has been about 25 years since Japan and about 15 years since South Korea embarked on their pro-family, women-supportive, and social investment oriented policies, it is an opportune moment to review and reassess their achievements to date, and consider their legacies and challenges.

Achievements and Challenges

There is no doubt that these policy changes have achieved some positive changes. For example, women's employment rates in both countries have increased since the 1990s, not dramatically but certainly appreciably. The employment rate of women aged 15 to 64 in Japan rose from 57.1 per cent in 1990 to 66.8 per cent in 2015, while in South Korea it increased from 49.9 to 57.9 per cent, respectively (OECD n.d.-c). More importantly, maternal employment in both countries has risen. For example, the employment rate of women with children under the age of 18 in Japan rose to 68.1 per cent in 2015 in Japan, up from 46.3 per cent in 1995 (Japan-MOHLW 2016-b). No equivalent data exists in South Korea, but labour force participation rate of married women in South Korea has gone up from 47.6 per cent in 1995 to 51.0 per cent in 2015, and as well, the rate for women aged 30 to 34 - prime childbearing and rearing age in Korea - has increased from 50.4 to 61.8 per cent between 2004 and 2015 (KWDI 2016). In both countries more women are taking maternity and parental leaves and family care leaves, as illustrated above. Finally, there is also some recent evidence that suggest that families and women feel that LTCI has helped lessen their family care burden. Public opinion surveys in Japan and South Korea also show strong public support for the governments' policies on social care and Long-term Care Insurance programs. These are all good news.

While these achievements are laudable, significant barriers and challenges still exist. There are at least four areas in which women continue to face serious challenges in Japan and South Korea. First, although women's and mothers' labour market participation rates have risen noticeably, gender wage gaps remain high--25.9 and 36.7 per cent in Japan and South Korea, respectively, in 2014, substantially higher than other OECD member countries; indeed, Japan and South Korea have two of the highest gender wage gaps amongst the OECD (OECD 2016-c). Second, and related to the first point, is that a significant proportion women in these two countries are working in low-wage and precarious employment. Forty-seven per cent of women workers in Japan and 41 per cent of women workers in South Korea are working in part-time or temporary employment, and these figures have not changed since 2000, rather even increased a little (OECD 2016-c). Part-time and temporary employment are not only insecure, but also often associated with low wage, low prestige, and are often not accorded with full social security provisions such as health, pension, and accident and employment insurance. In short, in general, women still earn less, have less secure employment, and are entitled to less social security compared to men.

Third, despite women's increased employment, care remains a highly gendered activity, and the bulk of care work within family still falls on women. This is evident from the fact that even though both Japan and South Korea have introduced extremely family-supportive and generous parental leave policies, father's participation rates in parental leaves remain dismally low. In Japan, father's parental leave take up rate was only 2.65 per cent in 2015. Although this is an increase from 0.12 per cent in 1996 and 1.38 per cent in 2010, but it remains embarrassingly insignificant (Japan-MOHLW 2016). Similarly, in Korea, the number of fathers taking parental leave was 3,421 in 2015, again an evident increase from 78 in 2002, but shamefully low considering that 73,412 mothers were taking the leave that year (KWDI 2016). In addition, the Time Use Surveys from both countries show women spend disproportionately huge amount of time providing unpaid care work compared to men, and this has not changed much over the last few decades.

Fourth, in many ways work cultures and employment practices in the labour market in these two countries continue to be highly gender discriminatory. The combination of long working hours and male-worker style working environments assumed for standard employment create high barriers to entry for women in the first place, and if women manage to enter such employment, having any family responsibilities could seriously cripple opportunities for career advancement. At the same time, the pervasive societal expectations and assumptions about women's reproductive and care roles further perpetuate and support such social and institutional practices, thus making change for gender equality unnecessarily difficult.

Way forward

Much of the family supportive and women friendly policies in Japan and South Korea are framed within the contexts of demographic and social investment concerns. Realizing their rapidly ageing and low fertility society, these countries see clear logic in supporting families and women as a way to raise total fertility and to maximize women's human capital (Peng 2011, 2012, 2014; see for example, Japanese Prime Minister Abe's "womanomics" idea). Despite the high women's education level in the two countries, the outcomes of these policies show significant challenges for women in achieving gender equality, and poor utilization of women's human capital. Indeed, given women's educational attainment rate, their poor economic and labour market outcomes in these two countries show that problem lies not in women's human capital nor their skill levels; rather, much can be attributed to socio-cultural and institutional factors.

These countries would need to consider three issues if they are to achieve better gender equality outcomes. First, it appears that both Japan and South Korea have made a good start in their effort to support women achieve work and family balance, but they have a long way to go before they can fully achieve their goals. These countries therefore must be mindful that their goals and the endpoints of their policy objectives are still far, and they must continue to sustain and redouble their efforts towards those goals. Second, Japanese and South Korean cases reveal that gender equality cannot be achieved by policy alone. Rather, institutional and cultural/ideational changes must also happen. These are slow, and will require sustained individual, institutional and societal effort and commitment to change. Effort must be made from individuals teaching their children about and practicing the principles of gender equality - that is, calling into question some of the dominant assumptions about gender and gender norm - to teachers and educators adults providing positive role model for younger people, to all of us calling out and fight against acts of discrimination and misogyny, and raising these issues in our everyday lives, to pointing to employers' discriminatory practices, and making them accountable for their behaviours.

Finally, governments of these countries must also make their policies and their motivations for policies more transparent, and acknowledge the importance of gender equality as a basis to achieving their policy goals. Even though these countries have framed their family supportive and women-friendly policies in the language of gender equality, they are motivated less by gender equality, and more by economic and demographic (ie pro-natalist) objectives. Such instrumentalist uses of gender equality and social investment have limited effects because they are not rooted in the idea and goals of gender equality. As such, these policies often conflict with institutional practices (such as employers not understanding or not taking them seriously), and institutional actors, such as employers, are too easily discharged from their legislative

obligations, or that legislations do not come with serious sanctions. To achieve better outcomes, it is therefore important to either be upfront with the policies' true objectives, and to recognize that the true gender equality is, in fact, the best strategy and the core element of successful economic, population, and social investment policies for the future.

Bibliography

Japan-Cabinet Office. 2016. *Heisei 28-nen ban Koreishikai Hakusho (2016 White Paper on Aged Society)*, http://www8.cao.go.jp/kourei/whitepaper/w-2016/gaiyou/28pdf_indexg.html

Japan-Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare (MOHLW). 2016. *Heisei 27-nendo koyo kinto kinhon chosa no kekka no gaiyo (Summary Outcomes of 2015 Basic Equal Employment Survey)*, Tokyo: MOHLW.

<http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/list/dl/71-27-07.pdf>

Japan-Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare (MOHLW). 2016-b. *Heisei 27-nen Kokumin Seikatsu Kisochoosa no Gaisho (Overview of 2015 Basic Household Survey)*, Tokyo: MOHLW. <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/k-tyosa/k-tyosa15/index.html>

Korea-Ministry of Health and Welfare n.d

Korea Women's Development Institute (KWDI). 2016. *Statistical Handbook: Women in Korea 2015*, Seoul: KWDI. <http://eng.kwdi.re.kr/contents/periodicals/statistics.jsp>

OECD. n.d. *OECD Family Database*, <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>

OECD. n.d.-b. *OECD Social Expenditure Database*, <http://www.oecd.org/social/expenditure.htm>

OECD. n.d.-c. *OECD Gender Data Portal*, <http://www.oecd.org/gender/data/>

Peng, Ito (2014) "The Social Protection Floor and the "New" Social Investment Policies in Japan and South Korea", *Global Social Policy*. Lead article. 14(3): 389-405.

Peng, Ito (2012) "Labor Market Dualization in Japan and South Korea" in Patrick Emmenegger, Silja Housermaann, Bruno Palier and Martin Seeleib-Kaiser (eds.) *The Age of Dualization: The Changing Face of Inequality in Deindustrializing Societies*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 226-252.

Peng, Ito (2011) "The Good, The Bad, and The Confused: Political Economy of Social Care in South Korea", *Development & Change*, 42(4): 905-23.