

PUBLIC POLICY AND THE RECONCILIATION OF WORK AND FAMILY LIFE: KOREA IN AN OECD COMPARISON

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1. Introduction

Parents across the OECD face considerable challenges when trying to reconcile their work and family commitments. Because of these difficulties some people postpone having children, do not have as many as they might have intended, or have no children at all. On the other hand, there are many parents who have the number of children they desire, but by taking time out to provide personal care to their children they sacrifice employment opportunities and family income. Thus, the constraints to work/family choices limit both labour supply and the number of babies being born.

All OECD governments want to enhance the well-being of parents and children, and they therefore invest in “family-friendly” policies which reduce barriers to both parenting (e.g. parental leave provisions) and employment (e.g. through formal childcare support). There are different reasons why governments pursue a family policy agenda, and the emphasis on these underlying objectives varies across countries (and time). For example, given the low birth-rates it is no surprise that in Korea, fertility rates are the most important family policy concern.²⁾ But, this is not so in many other countries, as for example the Netherlands, where fertility rates are not part of the public policy debate

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2) See d’Addio and Mira d’Ercole (2005) for a discussion of the effect of policies on fertility rates.

because such issues are considered a purely private matter. In the UK, concerns about child poverty were a key driver of policy reform since 1997 which strengthened work/family support as increasing maternal employment was recognized as an effective way of increasing family incomes and reducing child poverty risks. In Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden), child development and gender equity objectives underlie investment to the development of comprehensive high quality childcare systems which are part of the comprehensive work and family support model in these countries.

Drawing heavily on the recently published synthesis issue of the OECD Babies and Bosses review of work and family reconciliation policies (OECD, 2007a), this paper first provides a brief overview of work and family outcomes across OECD countries. It then looks at public spending on family benefits across OECD countries, and Korea in particular, and at how such spending varies with the age of children and/or because support is targeted at low income families. Before concluding, this paper briefly discusses some childcare outcomes and considers how the Korean labour market institutions make it difficult for parents, especially mothers, to

reconcile work and family commitments.

2. Work and family outcomes

Changing female labour market aspirations have contributed to family formation being deferred, if not postponed indefinitely, until parents have completed more years of education and when one or both members of a couple are more securely established in their careers. Chart 1 shows that Total Fertility Rates (TFRs) have fallen since 1980 in all countries, but there is considerable cross-country variation in levels: in 2005, when TFRs ranged between 1.16 children per women in Korea to more than 2.0 in Iceland, Mexico, New Zealand, and the United States.

Since 1980, female employment has increased across the OECD (note the different scales on the horizontal axes of the panels in Chart 1). However, there are substantial cross country differences, with female employment rates being highest at over 80% in Iceland (and over 70% in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland) and below 50% in Greece, Italy, Mexico, and Poland. At 53% in 2006, female employment rates in Korea were just below the OECD average of 57% (OECD, 2007b). In some countries, working part-time

is frequently used to combine work and care responsibilities as in Australia, Germany, Japan, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and nowhere more so than in the Netherlands where 60% of employed women work on a part-time basis. On the other hand, in seven OECD countries, including Korea, less than 15% of employed women work on a part-time basis (OECD, 2007b).

Chart 1 also shows that across OECD countries the relationship between female employment and fertility has changed

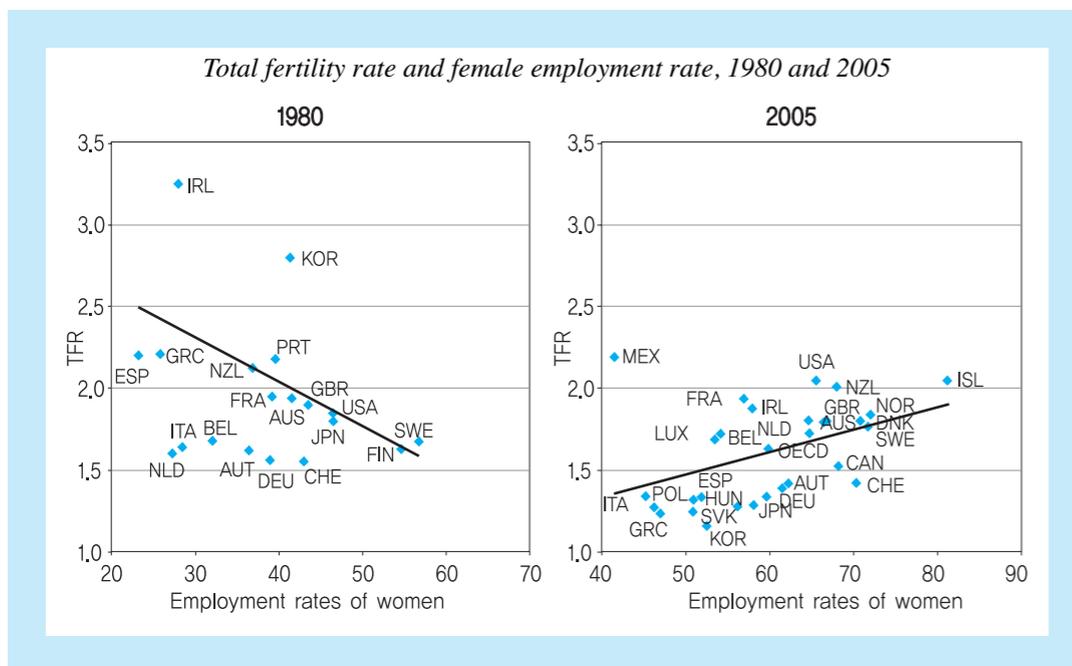
significantly over the last 35 years. In 1980 there was a clear negative correlation between female employment and fertility rates, while in 2005 OECD countries with higher rates of female employment also had relatively high fertility rates. Clearly, the degree of incompatibility between paid work and having children has diminished, but there are substantial cross-country differences: combining childrearing and being in employment is most incompatible in the Mediterranean countries and Japan and Korea.

With birth rates in excess of 1.75 per women and with two-thirds of women in employment, it seems that Nordic countries and Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States have the best outcomes in terms of employment and birth-rates. Sometimes the compatibility of paid work and childrearing is due to the existence of comprehensive public support systems (as in Nordic countries), or largely related to parents making use of flexible workplace practices while in mainstream employment. It thus appears that all policy approaches which enhance mainstream female employment (although different in nature across countries) now also help to avoid very low fertility rates.

Public spending on family benefits is much lower although it has increased across the OECD from on average 1.6% of GDP in 1980 to 2.4% in 2003 (OECD, 2007d); In 2003, gross (before tax) public spending on family benefits amounted to more than 3% of GDP in Australia, Austria, Denmark, France, Norway, Sweden and was highest at over 4% of GDP in Luxembourg (Chart 2). The composition of family spending varies widely, however: tax breaks for families are significant in the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, the Slovak Republic, the United Kingdom and the United States; Australia, Austria, Hungary, Ireland, and Luxembourg all spend more than 2% of GDP on cash transfers to children. Public spending on family services including childcare, which is “active” in that it facilitates parental employment, is only in excess of 1.5% of GDP in the Nordic countries and France (Adema, 2006a; OECD 2005a and 2007a).

With fertility concerns coming to the fore (Box 1), Korea has recently started to expand public family supports, overcoming more traditional approaches that caution against intervention in family matters. Hence, in international comparison, public spending on family benefits in Korea is very low at just below 0.2% in 2003. The system of family

Chart 1: Countries with high female employment rates now also have the highest fertility rates



Source: OECD Source: OECD (2007), Society at a Glance: OECD Social Indicators.

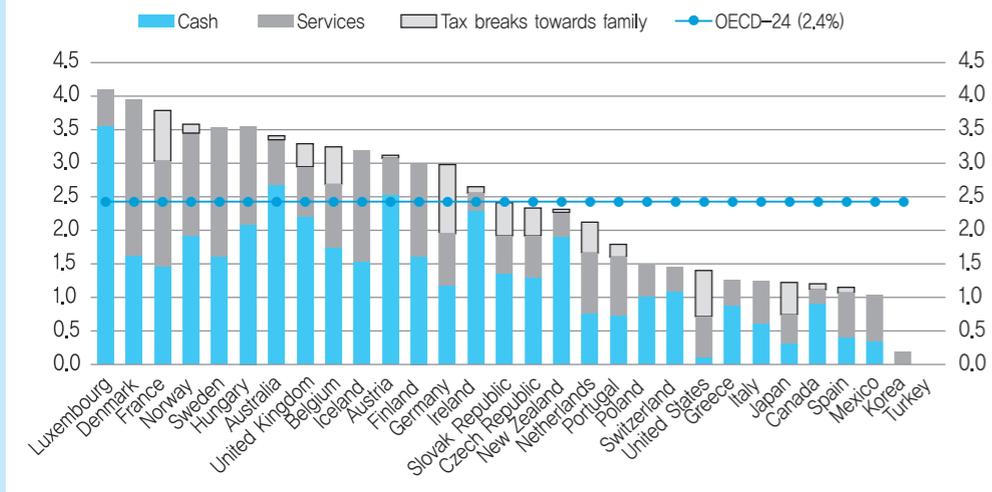
3. Public family policy

3.1. Public spending on family supports

Traditionally one of the biggest sources of support for families with children is the provision of compulsory schooling. On average in 2004, public spending on primary and secondary education amounted to 3.6 % of GDP and in Korea this was not much lower at 3.5% (OECD, 2007c).

Chart 2: Public spending on family benefits in Korea is relatively low

Public spending on family benefits in cash, services and tax measures, in per cent of GDP, 2003



Public support included here only concerns support that is exclusively for families (e.g. child payments and allowances, parental leave benefits, childcare support, family services, etc.). Spending recorded in other social policy areas as health and housing support also benefits families, but not exclusively, and is not included here.

– OECD-24 excludes Greece, Hungary, Luxembourg, Poland, Switzerland and Turkey where Tax spending data are not available.

Source: Social Expenditure database (www.oecd.org/els/social/expenditure).

support in Korea includes: support for sole parent families, family welfare services, community centres, orphans, childcare services and pre-school education. Since 2001, Korea has a system of income support during maternity and parental leave, and in 2008, an in-work benefit will be introduced to support low-income families (for an overview of Child benefits, see OECD,

2007e). There is some debate on the introduction of an (income-tested) child allowance, and or the extension of childcare support, but such initiatives may well be put on hold in view of budget considerations.

Box 1: The 'Master Plan' for increasing fertility in Korea

Even though public support on family benefits is well below average in Japan and Korea, policy makers in these two countries are arguably most explicit about their objectives to create an environment wherein parents can have as many children as they desire. It is also realised in Japan (OECD, 2003b) and Korea (OECD, 2007f) that a comprehensive policy package is needed to reverse existing fertility trends. In Korea, steps undertaken in this process include the introduction of the "The Low Fertility and Ageing Society Policy Act" in September 2005 and the signing of a 'convention' or 'master plan' towards higher fertility rates by different social partners in July 2006 (Government of Korea, 2006). This policy initiative covers a wide array of different measures that increase family resources and facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life, including:

- Increase the coverage of income-tested childcare support to serve about 80% of all children aged 0-5 in 2009. In 2006, support generally covered only families on social assistance or with earnings below 70% of average monthly urban worker household earnings, but this threshold will be increased to cover all families with children whose earnings are below 130% of average urban worker household earnings.
- Extend coverage of out-of-school-hours care from about 20% of schools in 2006 to all primary schools by 2010;

- Enhance the quality of childcare services through the introduction of an accreditation system which provides for the quality assessment of services every three years from 2008 onwards.
- The generosity of parental leave benefits is being extended. For example, since 2006 the unemployment insurance scheme pays maternity leave benefits up to a maximum of KRW 4,050,000 for 90 days, also to female workers in small and medium-sized enterprises and female workers who have a miscarriage. In 2008, 3 days paternity leave will be introduced.

Other measures in the 'master plan' include an accreditation system for family-friendly enterprises, increase awareness of the value of family-friendly policies and gender equitable practices, improve child-safety measures, establish systematic monitoring (check-ups) of pregnant women, mothers, babies and infants within the public health system. In 2007, the eligibility criteria in the existing system of income-tested financial support towards IVF-treatment for couples who are not able to conceive will be loosened so as to increase coverage. It is also intended to introduce a flexible working hours' system for working mothers with care responsibilities for young children in 2008. The government will also introduce a bonus-payment for employers who hire mothers with young children who wish to return to paid employment.

3.2. Comprehensive public support policies to sustain both employment and fertility

Since female labour market aspirations have changed, all policies which enhance female labour force participation may also help to avoid very low fertility rates. The Babies and Bosses reviews found that systems which provide a continuum of support to families – support for parents at home when the child is very young, leading on to a childcare place, pre-school, school and out-of-school-hours care activities – perform best in helping parents reconcile work and family life. Such an approach stimulates birth rates as parents can realistically plan their work and family commitments. At the same time, employers can be reasonably certain about whether and when employees will return to work.

A small number of OECD countries provide such a continuum of work/family support throughout childhood to families on a comprehensive basis. Policy in the Nordic countries, Hungary and to a lesser extent France does provide a coherent system of

supports. While systemic logic differs, all policy models include paid parental leave of 9 to 18 months in Iceland, Denmark and Sweden, followed by early childcare, kindergarten and other pre-school services, and primary education.³⁾ In Denmark and Sweden, these supports are complemented by a comprehensive system of out-of-school-hours care services, while parents in Sweden are also entitled to reducing working hours until children got to primary school.

The Nordic models are often used as role models for comprehensive family policy. However, the Nordic policy model is not directly exportable to other countries. Nordic countries are relatively small, cohesive and egalitarian societies where populations have a high degree of trust in local government to deliver high-quality childcare, health and education services. For this, Nordic taxpayers are willing to bear a high tax burden: in Denmark and Sweden the Tax-to-GDP ratio is close to 50% (OECD, 2007g). However, in many other OECD countries, including Korea, electorates are not willing to sustain a tax burden of similar magnitude, and rather than

building universal support systems, policymakers try to curtail spending by putting in place relatively inexpensive policy measures and/or focusing public support more on some areas of social policy than others and/or by targeting resources at low-income families more generally.

3.3. Targeting public family support

However, the majority of OECD countries have designed tax/benefit systems in such a manner that financial assistance for families with low earnings (up to 25% of average earnings) is at least twice as high a proportion of household income as for families at twice average earnings; and tax/benefit systems in Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Poland and Korea involve a particularly high degree of targeting support at families with limited earnings (Whiteford and Adema, 2007, table 4.2). However, the effective redistributive power of tax/benefit systems towards families with children depends not only on the progressivity of income tax systems and the income-tested nature of benefit programmes (Adema, 2006b) and their take-up, but also on the absolute amount of social spending for families. This is high in Nordic countries and higher in Australia than in Canada, Japan,

Korea and Poland (Chart 2). Whiteford and Adema (2007) found that tax/benefit systems play a significant role in reducing child poverty: on average across 19 OECD countries for which data are available, public transfers and taxes lifted out of relative poverty around 40% of all households with children in 2000. The extent of this reduction ranged from around 70% or more in the Nordic countries, Belgium, the Czech Republic and France, to being negligible in Italy, Japan, Portugal, and Switzerland (OECD, 2008, forthcoming, will cover Korea in a cross-nationally comparable study on income distribution and poverty).

An alternative to targeting spending on children in low-income families is to target spending on particular age groups of children. Across OECD countries, public support for older children in primary and secondary education is significant, while far less is devoted to younger children through parental leave and/or childcare and early education support. Moreover, there is often a long gap between the moment that paid leave runs out and the time that a young child has access to affordable formal childcare of good quality as the development of parental leave policy and childcare policy are not integrated in a coherent manner.

3) Compared to Iceland, Denmark and Sweden, Finland, Norway and Hungary focus public resources on supporting parents by means "home-care payments" (in Finland and Norway such payments are conditional on not using public childcare) to parents, usually mothers, to provide personal care for very young children up to around age 3. This weakens the female labour market position, and, particularly in Hungary, these barriers to female labour market fulfilment exert downward pressure on birth-rates.

Considering the public spending profiles on family and education support by the age of children illustrates the differences in policy approach between Sweden and Korea (Adema, 2006c and Richardson and Chapple, 2008, forthcoming). Chart 3 shows that Sweden invests in children from very early on in life at a more or less constant intensity. By contrast, public spending on very young children in Korea is very low, and the public spending profile for children reflects the traditional education pattern, with investment being overwhelmingly concentrated during the school years. Clearly Swedish policy is more in line with the notion that investment in children is most effective in the early years than Korean investment patterns (Heckman, 1999 and 2007).⁴⁾

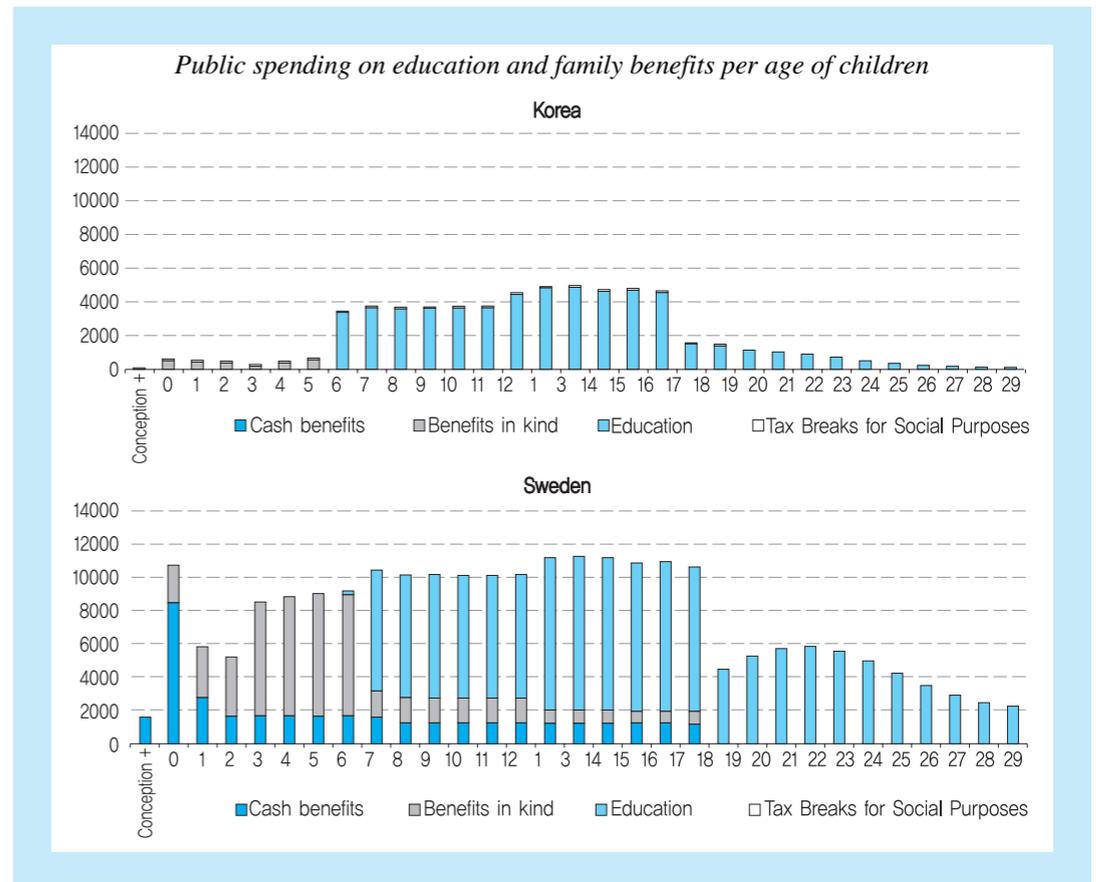
3.4. Childcare constraints are not much larger in Korea than in most other OECD countries

In many OECD countries there are gaps in support between the time of expiry of paid parental leave (often during the first year of a child's life), and the time children enter pre-

school or junior classes at age 4 or 5. As a result, enrolment in formal childcare or pre-school facilities for children not yet 3 years of age is low (and below 50% in all countries except Denmark), whereas in most OECD countries the vast majority of five- and six-year-olds attend some early childhood service, kindergarten or junior classes within the formal education system. In this regard, the situation in Korea is not all that much different from that in many OECD countries; at 23% participation in childcare for under 3s is just below the OECD average, although participation for 3 to 6 year olds at 61% is relatively low compared with the OECD average of 74%.

Compared to other OECD countries, the costs of childcare to parents in Korea are below the OECD average; a dual-earner family with 167% of pays on average 8.7% of family income on childcare for 2 and of 4 year olds, while this is 12.6% on average across the OECD (OECD, 2007e). After accounting for childcare costs, Korean and Greek parents have the strongest financial incentives to work, while childcare costs in Ireland and the United Kingdom are so high that net income gains for

Chart 3: Sweden invest in children throughout childhood while in Korea support to families is concentrated around school-years.



Public spending in PPP per capita US dollars. Data do not include public spending on health and/or housing. Spending items include, public child benefits (cash allowances, family credit, etc), income support during leave, subsidised childcare, family services, pre-school and primary school expenditure. Allocations of spending amounts to age groups are based on assumptions made by the OECD Secretariat. Source: Richardson and Chapple (2008), forthcoming.

families with children in Ireland and the UK are very small when mothers are in employment: there are other factors in the Korean labour market which deter parents

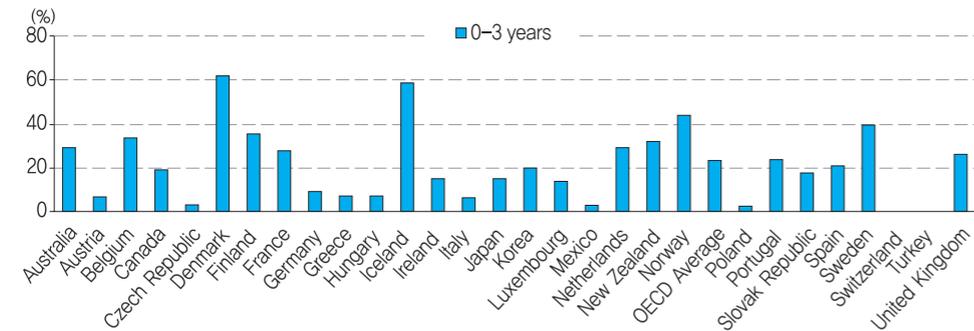
from achieving better work and family outcomes (OECD, 200f).

Limitations in formal childcare support, a system of parental leave which is still being

4) Investment at an early stage of the life course is more effective as it has a greater period to pay off during both the remainder of childhood and adulthood, and since early outcomes, which are so important for later life, are more responsive to outside stimulus during the early years.

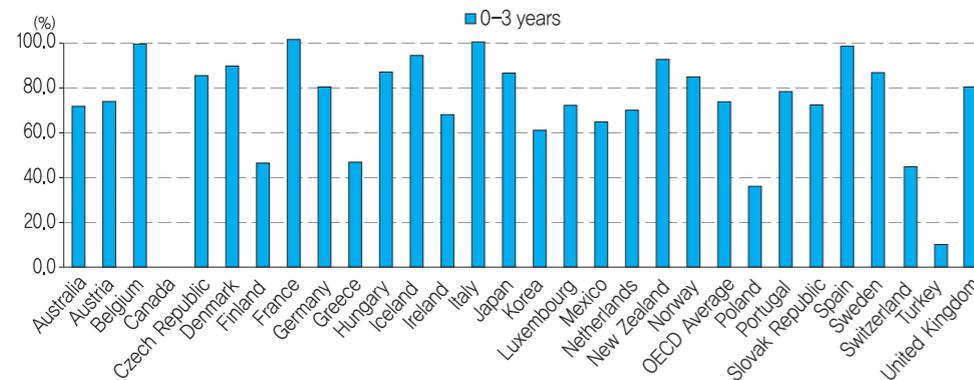
Chart 4: Enrolment rates of children in Korea are close to the OECD average

Panel A: Average enrolment rate of children aged under three years of age in formal childcare (2004)



Data for Canada, Germany and Poland concern 2001; data for France reflects 2002; data for Greece, Iceland, Luxembourg, Mexico, Norway and the Slovak Republic concerns 2003; and, data for Australia, Denmark, Korea and the US concerns 2005.

Panel B: Average enrolment rate of children aged three to five in pre-school educational programmes (2004)



Source: OECD Family database and OECD Education database.

developed and the absence of a comprehensive formal system of long-term care support mean that mothers with young children and those with care commitments to elderly relatives receive little public support to help them match work and family life.

Nevertheless, childcare constraints do not seem to impose insurmountable barriers to work for parents on a widespread basis as participation rates are not that much lower than the OECD average. In all, the limitations in public support are only part of the story; prevailing labour market practices are not conducive to parents being both in regular employment and having care responsibilities.

3.5. Making the workplace more family-friendly

In terms of employment outcomes among men and women, there are significant differences between Korea and other OECD countries. On average, employment rates are about 2.3 percentage points below the OECD average at 66.1 in 2006, but female employment rates are 21.5 percentage points below those of men (OECD, 2007b).

Furthermore, the incidence of part-time employment is low, only 12.6% of female workers work on a part-time basis, compared to 26.4% of employed women on average across the OECD.⁵⁾

For women in the age group 20–24, the employment rate (at close to 60%) is higher than for their male counterparts, but there is a marked decline in employment for women around child-bearing age. Many Korean mothers return to employment at a later age, but many others do not; across the life-course employment rates remain considerably lower than for men of the same age (OECD, 2007x), and if mothers do return to employment, they are likely to end up in low paid non-regular employment (about 52% of the Korean workforce, is in ‘regular employment’; 62.3% of male workers are in regular employment but only 38.2% of the female workers (KNSO, 2005).⁶⁾ The gender

5) In Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Switzerland part-time employment is often regarded as an attractive work and family reconciliation solution, as it allows more time for caring responsibilities, and is remunerated on a pro-rata basis. However, regular employment contracts in Korea hardly ever facilitate part-time employment.

6) Temporary, non-regular employment contracts are widely used, especially regarding female workers (Grubb et al., 2007). Such non-regular workers are often considerably less expensive to employers than regular employees, and while it is difficult to compare age-related wages of regular workers with hourly earnings of non-regular workers, it seems that earnings of non-regular workers are about 70% of what regular workers earn (Grubb et al., 2007). Moreover, even if wages were equivalent, non-wage labour costs are not. Non-regular workers are not covered by stringent employment protection legislation in the same manner as regular workers, less likely to be covered by social insurance benefits, and often not entitled to retirement allowances (severance payments) and other fringe benefits.

wage gap in Korea is the highest across the OECD: the difference between male and female median full-time earnings as a percentage of male median full-time earnings is close to 40%, and women are unlikely to be in supervisory positions: in 2000, the share of women in managerial jobs and/or with supervisory responsibilities was just 8%, compared to 20–30% in many other OECD countries. As young women have the same level of educational attainment as their male counterparts, this is often not an attractive prospect for the ‘mother returner’. Under these conditions it is no surprise that women who wish to pursue a career frequently decide not to have children, while potential ‘mothers returners’ will be tempted to stay at home, if family income allows it. This contributes to low birth-rates in Korea, while from the perspective of labour market resource allocation this reflects an inefficient use of resources and a waste of human capital.

Moreover, workplace practices in Korea are such that parents in Korea are more likely to face difficulties with reconciling work and family life than parents in most other OECD countries. First of all, Korea has a ‘long working hours’ culture. More than 86% of male workers engages in employment for more than 40 hours per week (this is 68% on

average across the OECD) and more than 3 out of 4 Korean women work more than 40 hours per week; while this is only 43% of female workers on average across the OECD area, and 10% or less in Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway (OECD, 2007h). In addition, there is unpaid overtime, commuting times often take at least another hour in urban areas, while, for men at least, there is also a culture of socialising with colleagues after working hours.

Thus, not only are workplace practices such that working women would often need (formal) childcare services for 9 to 10 hours per day, their working husbands have also little time to help out with daily household chores or the provision of personal care for dependants. Indeed, on a weekday, on average an adult Korean female spends almost 4 hours on daily chores, including family care, while this is only half an hour for Korean men (KNSO, 2005).

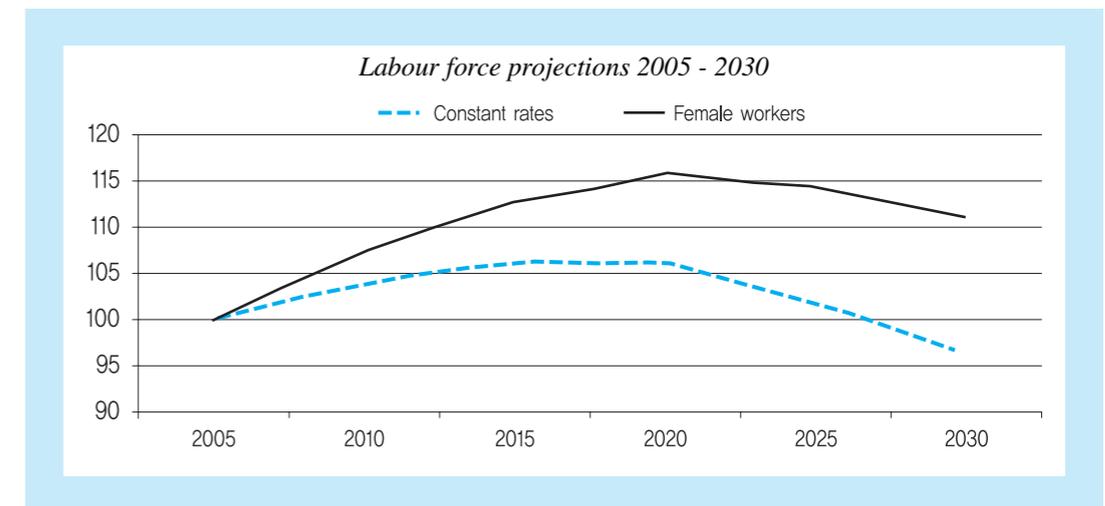
Changing workplace practices is difficult and will inevitably take some time. One step forward would be to strengthen the link between employment patterns and performance, and to reduce the role of seniority-based pay increments. Rather than expecting women to quit their jobs on marriage/childbirth, employers could start to

encourage women to take parental leave, and maintain links with them during their absence. Such initiatives can increase the likelihood that mothers return to the workplace within a limited period of time. Increasing equity among non-regular and regular workers, while improving the flow between the two types of employment, would also increase the likelihood that “mother returners” find a job, which suits their ability and training.

Given the extraordinary speed with which ageing dynamics will play out in Korea, employers associations, unions and the

government will soon face the need for more family-friendly workplace practices. If female and male labour force participation rates remain as they are, ceteris paribus, then the Korean labour force will stabilise in terms of numbers around 2015, and start to decline from 2020 onwards. If fairer and more family-friendly workplace practices make it more attractive to enter the labour force, and if female participation rates gradually increase to male participation rates by 2030, then in 2030 total labour supply will be higher than at present.

Chart 5: Korea needs ‘mother returners’ to avoid a looming labour supply shortages



“Constant rates”: assumes constant labour force participation rates for men and women from 2000 to 2030
 “Female workers”: assumes that female participation rates reach current male participation rates in each country in 2030

Source: OECD Database on Population and Labour Force Projections.

4. Conclusions

It all used to be so simple. The male breadwinner model involved a clear allocation of responsibilities and time: men spent their time at work providing family income, while women spent their time caring for children at home. With changing female aspirations and female labour market behaviour, the single-breadwinner model has lost much of its relevance, and in contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, countries with the highest female employment rates now also rank among the countries with the highest fertility rates.

Korea has both relatively low female employment rates as well as low birth-rates and in contrast to many other OECD countries, fertility concerns are the main driver to develop public family supports. Because family policy is relatively “young”, it is no surprise that public spending on family benefits is much lower than in most other OECD countries, also because of the targeted nature of such support. Nevertheless, childcare participation rates are quite close to the OECD average, suggesting that childcare issues are not the main barrier to a better reconciliation of work and family commitments in Korea.

Certainly, the child and out-of-school-

hours sector could be further strengthened, and paid parental leave provisions could be extended and better integrated with childcare policy. Another option could be to introduce general child allowances to help families with the cost of raising children. However, regardless of the extent to which Korea develops its public family supports, these efforts will have little effect unless the Korean workplace practices change significantly.

For a modern welfare state to be effective, labour market institutions must give workers a fair chance to fulfil their individual aspirations and provide for their children. However, Korean workplace practices (long hours and seniority-based remuneration systems that punish any worker who takes time off to care for children) make it very hard to balance work and caring activities. As a result, many women do not leave employment to have children while many other parents do not return to employment, and if they do, find it difficult to get back into regular employment and end up, in low-paid jobs that do not do justice to their skills and training. Employers, unions and the government will all have to work together to limit the barriers to employment women and mothers, reduce the existing gender discrimination in pay practices (and thus the huge gender wage gap), reduce

the role of seniority wages, and increase the prevalence of performance-related pay, introduce workplace measures as regular part-time employment opportunities, flexi-time options that can be used (also on a temporary basis) without this being detrimental to career progression. Giving Korean women and men a realistic chance to combine work and family commitments is key to increasing future labour supply and it also seems to be a promising strategy for stopping the fall in birth-rates, and improve them in the longer term.

Some countries have introduced legislation entitling employees to flexible workplace practices. For example, in the Netherlands employees of enterprises with ten workers or more can change their working hours, unless the courts uphold employer-objections. In general, however, governments are reluctant to intervene in the workplace bargaining because of the fear of increasing labour costs and in the belief that this is an area best left to

employers and employees to negotiate. In many countries therefore, public policy limits itself to encouraging enterprises to make more family-friendly supports available.

Policy in the United Kingdom has found a middle way, as it has granted parents with children not yet of school-age the right to request flexible working hours (which includes reduced working hours). This initiative can also involve costs for the employer, but, as both the employee has to motivate his/her request and employers have to justify why they would turn it down, it at least forces both key actors to think and communicate about the family-friendly nature of their workplace. The right to ask approach is also flexible enough to focus on measures that suit the workplace and the worker, and extends access to many low-income workers whose bargaining position is relatively weak. Therefore, this approach may also be considered by policymakers in other OECD countries, including Korea. [GSST](#)

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