

CARE WORK AND THE ECONOMY

Advancing policy solutions with gender-aware macroeconomic models

CARE POLICY NARRATIVE FROM SOUTH KOREA | 21 – 03

THE CURRENT STATUS AND ALTERNATIVES OF MALE CARE PARTICIPATION IN KOREA

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I. Question

Care is still considered as the women's role and duty even with a lot of ongoing discussions to overcome gendered divisions of labor. Does this mean that men are not contributing to care at all? In Korea, there are increasing numbers of men who are on paternity leaves and who actively participate in care for their children or grandchildren, and there is a gradual increase in the number of men who take care of their frail spouses or parents. This paper focuses on the current status of men's care participation in Korea¹. In particular, we demonstrate Korean men's contribution in childcare and eldercare and analyze the role of care policies to further engage men in care work within the family.

2. Key Discussion Points

1) Men are forced to care

One common reason for men to actively engage in care is because no other family member can. In the case of childcare, many fathers answered that they had to take care of their children because their spouse was working or because there was no other family member who could help. Sons who take care of their parents say that they are the only child, or that other siblings do not take care of their parent. In addition, husbands who are caring for their frail spouses say that they did not have any other choice because they are not living with their children. These answers reflect the current prevailing perception that women are the primary caregivers. Men step into the family care only if they cannot receive help or support from women.

¹The cases quoted in this brief are based on interviews of male caregivers. More information on the interviews can be found in: Moon, H, Cha, S. E., Eun, K. S., Kang E. and I. Peng. 2019. The Qualitative methodology and Survey Instruments: South Korea Field Work. CWE-GAM Methodology Report 21-01. DOI: 10.17606/830a-e038.

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2) Family before my freedom

Even if most men do not voluntarily choose to care, those men still find meaning in their carework. That is, they contextualize the meaning of care. For example, one grandfather said he could give up his work for his grandchild by blood and his own family. One son-in-law emphasized that he does not make any other regular schedules in order to take care of his mother-in-law and he expressed his gratitude for economic support he had received from her a long time ago. One husband who is sharing childcare work with his spouse said he would of course share the burden and it is natural to make time for childcare once people get married.

3) Active support from the workplace

Most interviewees who are participating in care said they are helping their spouse rather than taking a primary role in care. There seem to be some preconditions for men to be engaged in care. First, their workplace should offer them a regular work schedule so that they can take their children to and from care facilities. Or some said their participation in childcare was possible only because their coworkers understood and had consideration about childcare. Many men who are taking care of their grandchildren or their spouse were already retired or had to quit their jobs in order to do so. Economic support for family and care seems to be two socially separated territories for men.

3. Conclusion

1) Importance of work-life balance for men

'Work-life balance' has been an important agenda in policies against low fertility and population aging in Korea. Yet, the target was primarily women. On top of the traditional gendered division of labor, the focus of the discussion was on how to let women accomplish both work and family life. According to the examples of men who are participating in care, however, the practical need is in the family-friendly workplaces that enable men to actively take a part in care within the family. Now, the focus needs to be on men rather than women, and on policies that help men balance work and family. Particularly, on policies that help men share carework within the family.

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2) Rebuilding the meaning of marriage

The meaning of marriage has already changed considerably for young generations in Korea. They are called by various nicknames such as the millennials or 'N-po' (means giving up date, marriage, childbirth, and more in Korean) generations. Socioeconomic conditions are barriers for marriage for N-po generations and marriage as the beginning of a new family cannot be easily established. Therefore, changes need to be made in the traditional perception that care must be directly related to marriage or begin with marriage. Care may occur in a long-term relationship or it may remain after divorce.

In addition, for men in particular, there is a need for a paradigm shift in marriage. It is often believed that individual free time is sacrificed for marriage. While women tend to naturally accept the fact that they will spend a large portion of their time on their children, men are under bigger pressures of making money rather than valuing the time with their children. Based on the interviews about the aspect of 'having time' for childcare thanks to a family-friendly workplace, we hope more men will raise their voices to ensure care time for family.

3) Equality in relationships

Stereotypical views that divide gender roles between the male breadwinner and female caregiver still remain in Korea. The gendered division of work needs to be reshaped in the 21st century. Care is a relationship, an active help, and an essential behavior of human beings. In the current reality that forming a family itself is a challenge, caring and helping others in a social context will be essential. For social justice through care, the hierarchical relationship between men and women needs to be redefined as equal partners who help each other. To come to gender equality through care and to achieve care through gender equality, we need to carry forward gender equality together with care.