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EXPERTS TAKE

Exploring Work-Life Balance Through a Gender Lens: Experiences from South Korea and the Nordics

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Balancing professional and personal opportunities and responsibilities is essential for improving both well-being and productivity, prompting many governments and businesses to introduce policies in support of this goal. However, many people still struggle to achieve work-life balance, as gender-related factors like prevailing gender norms, family responsibilities, and societal expectations

create additional barriers. South Korea is rapidly recognizing the importance of improving work-life balance, partly due to its problematic demographic position. Meanwhile, the Nordics are frequently regarded as pioneers in gender equality and work-life balance, although significant challenges still remain. In both regions, discussions around flexible working hours, remote work, and parental leave have gained

momentum, reflecting a broader push for a better balance between work and personal life. So how are these issues experienced at the individual level?

In anticipation of our forthcoming conference on Gender and Work-Life Balance in South Korea and the Nordics, ISDP's Korea Center interviewed two South Korean women on their experiences and perceptions of work-life balance in these regions. Both women are familiar with the Nordic countries and the aspects that shape the region's work-life balance. The interviewees vary in age and family situation in order to highlight potential differences and implications of work-life balance across different stages of life.

INTRODUCTION

ISDP: Can you tell me a bit about yourself? (e.g., age, occupation, industry, years of work experience)

Lee Sunyu: I'm still doing my bachelor's degree and I'm currently working as an intern at one of the United Nations agencies in Korea, where I've been working for around five months. I've been doing a few part-time jobs during my bachelor's, but this is the job occupation that can be called full-time job.

Jung Sooin: I am 47, I worked in Korea for about 2.5 years at a computer sales company in Seoul in the beginning of the 2000s. I have been working as a dental nurse for about 5 years in Sweden now.

WORK CULTURE IN SOUTH KOREA

ISDP: To give our readers a better understanding of South Korea's work culture, could you describe the general work culture in South Korea?

Lee Sunyu: I want to say that it's pretty demanding. Overworking is considered pretty much ideal. If you are overworking, then this person is perceived as being competent, ambitious

and very committed and that he is making a good contribution to the company. This is considered very ideal. So, most people experience overworking. Over-working might also be a systematic problem with our wages being very low compared to other countries, also forcing us to have not just one job, but even part-time jobs after work. Especially for young Korean people, with the increased inequality, high inflation and lack of increase in salaries, has forced them to overwork or to get an extra job. I also want to say that it's a bit hierarchical. The decision-making is very top-down, with team leaders and very specific job descriptions and positions.

Jung Sooin: Please mind that while I grew up in Korea and still have family there, it's been about 20 years since I worked there myself, around 2001-2003. I think some things have changed, but some are the same. But in general, the work culture is that you have to work hard and for long hours, and it's important to stick to those hours even if you have finished your tasks. Sometimes you had to work on the weekend, and sometimes you had to work overtime without compensation. It's kind of part of the culture to do overtime and I think it's a similar situation today. Also, if you were sick, it was difficult to use sick days; you needed a doctor's note to stay home. It could also be difficult to stay at home when your children are sick.

ISDP: What are some common expectations employers have of their employees?

Lee Sunyu: It might be different by people, but I think I have a feeling that employees, of course, can have opinions. They can have their own opinion, but we consider that employees should follow what their employer requires and follow their opinion. Actually, I had a conflict, however, not a big conflict, with my boss as our work styles did not fit together. Many people around me gave me the advice that it would be better to just follow his work style, and to not express myself. Because he is your boss, you must follow him, like, this kind of thing. Of course,

some bosses ask us to have a strong opinion because it can help us develop, be innovative, and contribute to a better workplace and atmosphere. But still, people often think that employees should follow the employers' style or their requests, without question.

Jung Sooin: I think that some people, when they employ men and women, have chosen to employ men in the first place. They expect that men usually don't take paternity leave – men don't give birth to children. So that difference exists. But I believe that in general, [employers] want you to work hard and, when necessary, to not think about family but to put more of your time and energy into work.

EXPERIENCES OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE

ISDP: What do you perceive is the general idea of the concept of “work-life balance” in South Korea? What does “work-life balance” mean to you personally?

Lee Sunyu: Generally, people think that work-life balance is a physical thing; work is the physical hours you work, and life is the hours outside of the work hours. I also thought this, but the more I worked in Korea, I have come to realize that it's not just [about] the physical hours. Sometimes, after working hours, you cannot just focus on your private life because you are still getting many messages from your employer, and, because of that, I have a problem with spending time with my family, because mentally I'm still at work. So, for me, it's not just a physical thing, but more related to the time to have my own life and spend time with my family.

Jung Sooin: For me, when I think about work-life balance, I think about many things that have to be in place. For example, to know that just because I'm pregnant, have children, and take maternity leave, I don't risk losing my job or being treated unfairly. I can come back and continue working as

usual. And then, that you should be able to stay at home when you are sick. That you don't have to come to work and work then, it takes a toll on your health. And that you should be able to stay home when your children are sick. It's stressful if you don't have anyone like your mom or dad who can help out. It's tough. And then regarding overtime, I think it's important that working hours are kept, or that you get compensation for doing overtime. It's very important, the working hours, so that you can have a balance between family and work.

Today in Korea, it's become so much more popular to think about work-life balance, especially among the younger generation. I know that a lot of young people don't want to work the way my generation did. They dare to speak up and say stuff like, “If I get off work at six, I get off at six. I don't want to continue working.” There are many young people who are like that.

ISDP: Do you observe a difference in work-life balance between men and women in South Korea? If so, where do you notice this difference and how do you believe it affects men and women on a personal level? Have you yourself experienced any gender-specific challenges you face in managing work and personal responsibilities?

Lee Sunyu: I think the work-life balance itself is very demanding for both men and women, but I think, the difference relates to the expectations. In Korea, it is common for people to think that guys don't value work-life balance because they are ambitious, while women want to become good mothers, so they value work-life balance more. I don't know if it can be a real difference in actual work-life balance, but some people tend to think like that. But after marriage, I think, even for my mom's case, even after work other things in our household, like cleaning, doing dishes, cooking, these things are, mostly women's responsibility and men are helping. So even though, a woman is working, when she leaves work and then comes back home, she is still

“working”. If we see this as a labor as well, if we see these chores as work, then work-life balance can be much harsher for women. In relation to my own experience with gender-specific challenges, as I am working in a UN agency, I think it’s a bit different from other Korean workplaces, but I don’t really see any differences between work-life balance for women and men. But this could also be related to my age and the fact that I don’t have a family to tend to at home.

Jung Sooin: There is a difference between [the challenges for men and women], that’s for sure. For example, when it comes to taking leave from work. When my brother took paternity leave, many people were shocked. And for mothers, it can be difficult to work. Many are forced to hire a babysitter [if their children are sick], but it’s expensive. And because it’s so expensive, many mothers think it’s better to stay at home themselves and quit their jobs instead. Some choose not to have children at all. So that’s what’s difficult as a woman: working, children, staying home from work, you know. And then there are challenges with promotion and so on too, especially for women who have been away from work.

My sister-in-law is an economist and worked in one of Korea’s biggest banks at their head office in Seoul. When she had her first child, she took maternity leave for 1.5 years. And if you have two children, you can extend the leave, so when she had another one, she was on maternity leave for another year. When she came back to work, her company had placed her outside of Seoul. Before she took maternity leave, she was always working hard, and if she hadn’t taken maternity leave, she probably would have stayed in the head office. We took this as a kind of punishment; just because she’s been away for a long time, she was placed outside. So it’s a real shame about that. It’s harder to work as a woman after you’ve had children. And I believe a lot of women can feel a bit insecure: “if I get pregnant, what could happen when I come back? Will I be in the same department? What happens to my

promotion or salary?”.

But I myself didn’t really face these challenges; I worked there for such a short time, and back then I was single too. But these differences do exist, and I know many who experienced them.

ON THE NORDICS AND SOUTH KOREA

ISDP: What is your connection to the Nordic countries and how familiar are you with their work-life balance?

Lee Sunyu: I have never worked in the Nordics, but I studied there for a year from 2022 August to 2023 August. Some of my friends are still working there, so I’ve also heard stories from them.

Jung Sooin: I have worked in Sweden for about five years, so I have also gotten an idea of the work-life balance in Sweden.

ISDP: What are the main differences between work-life balance in the Nordics and South Korea, based on your experience?

Lee Sunyu: I think the biggest difference in comparison to the Nordic countries is that remote working is very common. Even though you are working remotely, as long as you can finish the things that you have to finish, then [the employers] don’t interfere or micromanage. I think it was the biggest difference that I felt. Also, [people in the Nordic countries] can use vacation days very freely. When we are requesting vacation or leave, they [the employers] ask us to describe the reason. When I talk to my friends [in the Nordics] they say that it’s too much, they [the employers] shouldn’t ask about the reason, and that I shouldn’t be required to answer it, even though they ask it.

Jung Sooin: Depends on the workplace, but in Sweden, if you have finished your tasks, it’s more acceptable to go home. But in Korea, you have to think about the working hours. The vacation days are also a difference. You have more vacation days in

Sweden than in Korea, about 30 in Sweden and 10-15 in Korea.

Also, when you work in Sweden you often have the collective agreement about your terms for employment, leave, illness, vacation days, insurance coverage and so on. But you don't always have an agreement like that in Korea. For example, small businesses don't, so you don't feel as secure when working.

ISDP: Do you perceive that men and women face similar and/or different challenges to work-life balance in South Korea and Sweden? If so, what kind?

Lee Sunyu: I think it can be the same, just that the difference can come from just the extent that women work. The extent of the challenges that women and men face in Sweden and South Korea can vary, but I think the characteristics of the challenges can be the same.

Jung Sooin: In Sweden, I feel like women don't worry the same way about what happens with their work if they have children as they do in Korea.

In Korea there is a difference in wages between men and women, the same kind of problem exists in Sweden too. On average, men get higher pay, it's unfair. Another thing is that in Sweden, there are more mothers that mainly take care of their children, while the fathers also do but perhaps not as much. It is the same in Korea. Fathers also take parental leave, but not as much.

ISDP: Based on your knowledge of work-life balance in South Korea and the Nordic countries, in which areas do you believe the countries should learn from each other?

Lee Sunyu: I think, I might be too biased, but I think there are many things that South Korea can learn from the Nordic countries. The first thing is, [the employers] shouldn't interfere in their employee's free time and respect their free time. For example, even though you go on vacation, which

is our right, but when I am on vacation, I get the feeling that I am a burden to my team for taking time off from work. I think it shouldn't be like this in Korea. Also, when women are pregnant, or when women are taking care of their children, it's getting better, but people still think that they are making a trouble and that they are just taking money from the workplace, while doing nothing. This kind of concept is pretty prevalent, and I think this kind of thing should be corrected. Overall, I think Korea must learn many things from the Nordic countries' work atmosphere.

Jung Sooin: I think Korea could learn things from Sweden's system. For example, when it comes to using sick days, overtime and vacation days; the things I talked about before. And I think Sweden can learn things from Korea too.

In my experience, people in Sweden tend to think more individualistic while in Korea you think more collectively. It's just a cultural difference. Also, Sweden's system focuses a lot on the employees' rights, which of course is great, it protects the employee. But sometimes, although not at my workplace, people even try to "cheat" the system, which is sad.

But yes, in Sweden, many people think very individualistic. Sometimes people think too much of the individual, which can hurt the group. In Korea, we are so much of a group. That's our culture. Even though it can be uncomfortable, we work and work (which can be good and bad). In Asia in general, we think a lot of the group, of the collective, that you do everything together. But here in Sweden it's very individualistic. But at workplaces, when we're a group, it's very difficult if everyone thinks too individualistic. And you know, not everyone has a work ethic. I believe it can be better to think a bit more collectively. When you think about the sake of all employees, your colleagues, things get better if everyone works together, it will ease the workload and so forth.