Exploring Work-Life Balance Through a Gender Lens – Insights from the Nordics and South Korea

Workshop

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Institute for Security & Development Policy

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Contextual Background

On February 19, ISDP's Korea Centre co-hosted a workshop on work-life balance in the Nordics and South Korea through a gender lens with the Korea Women's Development Institute (KWDI). The one-day event comprised three panels exploring the evolution of work-life balance in the Nordics and South Korea, as well as the impact of gender norms, family duties, and societal expectations on the countries' efforts to promote gender equality and improve work-life balance.

With Dr. Jiso Yoon (KWDI) serving as moderator and Dr. Eunji Kim (KWDI) and Dr. Caroline de la Porte (Copenhagen Business School) as presenters, the first session concentrated on the development of work-life balance in the Nordics and South Korea. In the second session, which was moderated by Dr. Livia Oláh of (Stockholm University), speakers Dr. Young Sook Kim (KWDI) and Mr. Niklas Löfgren (Swedish Social Insurance Agency) delved deeper into the subject by discussing how government funds are allocated to family-related policies in South Korea and Sweden as a means to improve work-life balance and gender equality. The last session, which was moderated by Maj Gen. (ret.) Mats Engman (ISDP), featured a broader debate on the similarities and differences between South Korea and the Nordic countries' approach and drivers to achieve gender equality, as well as their success stories and ideas for new policy needed to improve work-life balance in these countries.

In order to find similarities and variations between the Nordic and South Korean perspectives on work-life balance as well as possible solutions to address issues brought on by gender stereotypes on work-life balance, this report compiles and contrasts the viewpoints made from the workshop speakers and participants.

Work-Life Balance & Demographic Challenges

The notion of work-life balance has grown in prominence in recent years, especially given that the younger generations place equal importance on their social and private lives as they do on their professional lives. However, when considering work-life balance, it is important to take into account the demographic changes brought about by women's improved access to education and the job force in recent years. In the end, this has affected how women make decisions about their personal and professional lives by enabling them to change their life paths and create new opportunities that were previously unavailable to them. The fact

that women can now pursue careers in addition to being wives and mothers has changed the dynamics of the household and the job market for good.

The declining birthrate and decreased marriage rates are particularly indicative of this demographic shift, as younger women in nations like South Korea and the Nordics currently prefer to pursue careers over marriage and parenthood. In particular, South Korea is notorious for having a low birth rate of 0.75 as of 2024, which is significantly lower than the ideal 2.1 children per woman (as per UN definition of replacement-fertility rate). Sweden, Denmark, and Norway have higher birth rates of 1.45, 1.50, and 1.40, respectively, but still lower than the desired 2.1 children per woman, additionally raising concerns in the Nordics as well.

The continual efforts to better work-life balance are garnering increased governmental attention as a result of the stagnating birth rate and the gender disparity issue. Additionally, measures such as parental leave have already been enacted to help women balance their professional and personal lives; there is also a growing focus on men's rights in this area. It can be argued that work-life balance for both men and women is one of the main tenets of attaining gender equality and that it is a crucial tool for achieving job market stability, a stable birthrate in contemporary society and increase the available working population.

Key Takeaway 1: Same type of legislation, but varying scope

Since women have traditionally been viewed as the primary "caretakers" of the home and the family, both South Korea and the Nordic countries have enacted laws to improve work-life balance for women in particular by introducing legislation targeting the home-front. Of these, our speakers focused the discussions

on parental leave.

Parental leave in the Nordics and South Korea differs primarily in two ways: 1) the duration, and 2) who finances it. Women are entitled to 90 days of leave in South Korea, of which the employer pays for the first 60 days in full. The government then pays the remaining 30 days, but only up to KRW 2.1 million. In Sweden, on the other hand, parental benefits are provided for 480 days, of which 390 are paid by the government and are determined by an individual's income. The government also covers the remaining 90 days but uses a minimum level rather than income to compute the benefit.

According to our speakers, however, the Nordic and South Korean parental leave systems are beset by the same issues as they provide less coverage for independent contractors, nonstandard workers, and self-employed people. In particular, South Korea has a large proportion of self-employed and small business owners, whose workers are less secure in terms of funding for their parental leave than those at larger companies because of the nation's employer-based paid parental leave scheme. Since their systems are government-funded, this problem is less of a concern in the Nordics, but the issue of smaller enterprises finding substitutes for when an employee needs to take parental leave still exists in all the nations.

Key Takeaway 2: Men's participation

Following up on the first key takeaway, our participants concentrated their discussion on how legislation such as parental leave and shifting social norms could encourage men to be more involved in the home as a method to distribute household responsibilities and improve work-life balance for working couples.

About 90 percent of fathers in Sweden take parental leave, compared to 32 percent in South Korea. Furthermore, South Korean men are only entitled to 20 days of fully paid leave by their employer in major firms, while in SMEs, this is 15 days. In Sweden, fathers typically take about 30 percent of the total paid parental leave (480 days allotted to each child).

Our speakers explained that the difference in the length of parental leave for fathers in South Korea compared to the Nordics can be attributed to social conventions. Conservative social standards in South Korea continues to encourage the notion that the woman should take the majority, if not all, the parental leave as opposed to the father. In contrast, the Nordic social norm encourages men to care for their children while simultaneously emphasizing the necessity of fathers bonding with their children to the same degree as children bond with their mothers.

Although the Nordic cultures once upheld the same conservative social norms as South Korea, over the years, several society institutions took part in and promoted changes in societal expectations and gender norms, including men's equal rights to longer parental leave. These institutions include governments, private businesses, and trade unions. Since South Korea does not currently have the same motivators, private enterprises could play a significant role in altering social norms and advancing men's rights, including improved parental leave benefits, which is ultimately essential to attaining gender equality.

Participants reiterated the importance of changing South Korea's conservative social norm, echoing the limitations of legislation solely to drive gender equality and a work-life balance. This likewise pertains to ensure that the objective of fathers taking parental leave—to help with household chores and take care of the baby—is met. The Nordics' general emphasis on de-genderizing traditionally perceived tasks and duties from a young age, may be a contributing factor in the social norm disparity between South Korea and the Nordics regarding fatherhood. Fathers are famously encouraged to share parenting and home responsibilities equally with their partners in the Nordic countries. Groups known as "daddy groups" are becoming more and more popular as a means for fathers to form communities where they can help one another become better fathers and socialize their children.

Moving Forward & Conclusion

The Nordics and South Korea are all dealing with a stagnating birthrate, which is partly due to the fact that women are becoming more educated and increasingly important in the working force, which has changed the dynamics of the job market and the household. All the countries have used legislation to respond to this demographic shift, with the goal of improving work-life balance to accommodate the need for assistance in the private sphere of the home. A crucial instrument for accomplishing this is parental leave which continues to be developed in the countries to address concerns raised in the gender inequality debate, to counteract the falling birthrates and improve work-life balance.

The Nordics and South Korea faces some of the same challenges to their respective parental leave programs as the systems only partially secure parental leave benefits

for self-employed people and employees of SMEs. Our speakers concurred that to achieve population security, establishing family policies across social classes is a requirement, and the current framework for parental leave must thus be altered to secure self-employed people as well.

Additionally, participants agreed that while policy can drive change, there's a limit. While the Nordics have strong public and private sectors which promotes legislation and social norms that enforces the importance of work-life balance and gender quality to a high degree, South Korea does not have this. On the other hand, the private sector and enterprises play a crucial part. In this sense, South Korean enterprises in particular should step up its efforts to support governmental initiatives and encourage a work culture supporting mothers and fathers in taking longer parental leave. Furthermore, since South Korea's parental leave program is primarily employer funded, the business community in the country must play a key role in advocating for the extension of fathers' parental leave benefits, to increase their participation on the home front.

Likewise, when it comes to changing the social norm in South Korea regarding men's participation in the household, South Korean enterprises would have to be one of the main drivers. Bigger enterprises may eventually have a huge impact on encouraging men to take longer parental leave by beginning to spread a new narrative about the importance of fathers taking parental leave. But since this de-generalization has been occurring for several decades in the Nordics, it will take some time before a shift in South Korean society's discourse would become apparent. Overall, participants felt that societies need to address the ramifications of men's absence from family responsibilities and whether or not our communities are prepared to accept these repercussions.

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