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# Work-Family Policies and Women's Career Outcomes in South Korean Firms

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## Abstract

This paper explores how formalized work-family policies are transformed into practices that structurally improve the career outcomes of female university graduates employed by large firms in South Korea. It looks specifically at the interaction between institutionalized policies, and practices, and the career behavior of individual women themselves. The objectives are: 1) to identify HR strategies that contribute to sustainable retention and promotion of female talent; and 2) to find out how changes in working environment relate to the individual career behavior and work-family choices of managerial women vis-à-vis men. This study takes a multi-level approach to women in management and work-family initiatives to uncover the changing reality within Korean companies. It is based on a qualitative case study of two companies affiliated to a major *chaebol* firm. The researcher conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 24 women varying in rank, ten male team leaders, and five HR professionals. Job rotation and accountability structures were found to be more vital to women's career advancement than parental leave or childcare provisions per se. The findings confirmed the importance of two mechanism: the influence of women's perceived career opportunities on turnover intent and the critical role of supervisors in stimulating uptake of work-family policies.

## Introduction

Women in South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea) are active participants in the formal economy. Women's employment rate is now 56.2% and almost half (43.9%) of all households are dual-earning families (MOGEF 2016). Social perceptions of gender roles have changed and younger men want their wives to contribute to household income. However, the Korean worktime regime with its Confucian roots and extremely long working hours makes it difficult for fathers to engage more in childrearing and household work and limits mothers' integration into the labor market (Won 2012). Married women with full-time jobs still end up spending about five times longer on domestic work than their male spouses (4:19 versus 0:50) and 22% of them interrupt their careers in their thirties for childbirth or childcare responsibilities reasons (MOGEF 2015).

With the rapidly declining fertility rate, promoting work-family balance has become a high priority for policy makers in Korea since the turn of the century. The government increased its efforts to encourage employers to implement comprehensive policies that facilitate more flexibility in worktime and temporary leave and prevent permanent labor market exit of mothers. Adoption by the country's major corporations has increased over the years. National- surveys show that the level of awareness and compliance within organizations is improving, albeit slowly (Kim et al. 2015; MOGEF 2015). Large firms offer leave and childcare support benefits to its core employees that are at least as generous, if not more, than companies in Western Europe and the United States. It is clear the existence of a legal framework and organizational structure for work-family policies alone is insufficient (MOGEF 2015).

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There is a large discrepancy between formal policies and actual utilization by employees in firms that prevents companies to reap the benefits of diversity management and work-family initiatives (Magoshi and Chang 2009). This raises the question what happens within companies with the work-family infrastructure in place. How do formal policies transform from symbolic gestures of organizational support to practices widely supported at lower levels? What is the potential of existing corporate strategies to promote work-family balance to fundamentally challenge the traditional work-time regime of excessive hours so that individual employees feel secure to use the benefits offered to them?

Almost half (47%) of the professional workers in 2014 was female, yet the percentage of female managers has remained around the 2012 level of 11% (Kim et al. 2015). It is evident that companies loose women along the pipeline. Survey research shows that 40% of entry-level professionals is female, but only 6% make it to mid-to-senior management positions (Kim 2013). The female ratio of CEOs at (KOSPI) listed companies is less than 1% and that of executives at top ten business groups less than 2% (Ibid.). This shows many highly-skilled women continue to leave the workplace (involuntarily) before they reach higher managerial positions.

Many scholars in the field of sociology and human resource management have sought explanations for the continued underrepresentation of women in management in Korea. They predominantly focused on structural (gender segregated jobs, division of household work, social and statistical discrimination) and organizational factors (organizational culture that stresses long working hours and male bonding, lack of transparency in promotion decisions, and male-dominated power networks based on military and school ties) (Kang and Rowley 2006; Lee and Rowley 2009; Renshaw 2006). Few scholars examined factors at the societal, organizational, and individual level simultaneously based on Fagenson (1990)'s gender-organization-system (GOS) approach. This comprehensive approach has been widely recognized for its potential to capture the complex interplay of forces on multiple levels that affect women's career progression (Green and Cassell 1996; Yukongdi and Benson 2006). It assumes that individual characteristics, situations, and social systems influence each other continuously so that organizational practices become gendered over time (Fagenson 1990).

Stratification and organization research stresses the importance of looking beyond formalized personnel systems when studying career outcomes. Even in large bureaucratic organizations with formally gender-neutral procedures for promotion and rewards, there is room for bias in promotion decisions because the standards become more ambiguous the higher one moves up the hierarchy (Baron 1984). The extent to which managers are held accountable for fairness in evaluation and promotion decisions affects their individual discretion (Reskin 2003). Studies on work-family conflict and interventions found strong evidence that managerial and organizational support is critical to the effectiveness and utilization of work-family policies (Daverth et al. 2016; Den Dulk and de Ruijter 2008). Kelley and colleagues (2008) address the need for multi-level approaches that link organizational changes (work-family policies and practices) to individual outcomes (employees' work-family experiences, utilization). Organizational change studies show work-family initiatives have higher potential when they focus both on formal and informal systems

(Hall 1990).

In recent years, the work-family literature on Korea is expanding. Most scholars used quantitative approaches and either measured the effect of work-family policies on the utilization of women in management (Kim 2012; Lee 2003), or the influence of such policies on organizational outcomes such as turnover and productivity (Bae and Goodman 2014; Lee and Kim 2010). Work-family balance and women in management are highly interrelated concepts and both benefit from a multi-level approach. To this date, there are few qualitative studies that combined the insights from both strands of literature and looked at the how company policies (women's promotion and work-family) interact with the actual situation in the workplace, and the behavior of employees.

This paper explores the intra-organizational processes that influence the uptake of work-family opportunities and career choices of individual women amidst corporate change initiatives. It pays attention to both the micro-dynamics (social interaction, peer pressure) within teams that affect utilization of policies and the interaction between formal structure (opportunities and constraints), organizational culture and the career decisions of women. The objective is to find out how particularly managerial women perceive and respond to the structural opportunities (work-family services, mentoring programs, career development training, etc.) offered to them. It applies Fagenson's GOS approach by considering the larger socio-institutional environment (gender division of labor, worktime regime) organizational context (structure, policies, culture), and individual agency (career choices and aspirations, uptake of policies), and their interaction. It is based on a series of in-depth interviews with 24 female (assistant-, middle- and senior-) managers and ten male team leaders employed by two manufacturing companies affiliated with a major family-owned business group (*chaebol*).

## 1. Socio-institutional Environment

### 1.1 Korean Human Resource Management (HRM) system

Current Korean HRM systems are combinations of traditional (mass recruitment of graduates, generalist orientation, reliance on ILM and job security, seniority-based pay tables or *hobong*) and new (recruitment on demand, specialist orientation, *yeon-bong je* or Korean style merit pay, MBO and performance appraisals) practices (Lee and Kim 2006). Traditional Korean HRM systems shared many similarities to those of Japanese *zaibatsu*, the predecessors of contemporary *keiretsu* firms. Like Japanese firms, *chaebol* had tall vertical organizational structures with clearly delineated hierarchical job ranks reflecting employees' seniority within the organization and strong reliance on internal labor markets (ILMs) for staffing of higher positions (Chang 2012). *Chaebol* firms offered stable contracts with the prospect of lifetime employment to a lesser extent and job rotation was less formalized than in Japanese firms (Shin 1999).

Korean HRM systems have undergone major structural changes since the early 1990s when firms began to adopt American business models focused on maximizing profitability instead of expansion. Many firms practiced "voluntary" early retirement and relied more on outsourcing to reduce labor costs. Internal labor markets of firms weakened and job mobility increased (Kye 2008). The contract between employer and employee was no longer a career-long commitment.

Moving from one employer to another during one's career, by necessity or choice, became more normalized among younger cohorts of employees (Shin 1999). These changes were accelerated by the 1997 Financial crisis.

Pressured by international and domestic forces to rationalize organizational functions, major business groups engaged in grand-scale restructuring, downsizing and benchmarking under the banner of neoliberalism and globalization (Tung et al. 2013). Large firms reconfigured their staffing, training and reward systems prioritizing performance-based incentives and higher flexibility in allocation of human resources. The IMF-bailout program included a condition to eliminate the legal foundation for lifetime employment. The 1998 revision of the Labor Standard Act law legalized layoffs by firms in times of crisis (Rowley and Bae 2002). Firms favored recruiting experienced workers over career starters and become ever more selective in choosing high-potentials for training programs (Lee and Kim 2006). This is not to say that seniority-based promotion practices were replaced entirely by Anglo-Saxon "best practices". Most firms kept the seniority system, with job ranks based on years of tenure, but introduced ability- performance-based pay grades within each rank (Bae 1997).

Korean conglomerates typically recruit graduates annually through open job postings (*kongch'ae*) and place them at the departments of group companies where they learn job and firm-specific skills. As mentioned earlier, firms are increasingly staffing positions that require special skills by recruiting mid-career professionals from the external labor market. Chaebol firms usually have eleven job ranks for administrative and managerial positions and apply a standardized *hobong* table to determine eligibility for promotion (Song 1990). Female university graduates enter the same career track as their male counterparts and are subject to the same promotion rules. As such, the recruitment and promotion system formally doesn't differentiate based on gender.

Since the late 1990s, firms widely adopted performance evaluations, often relative grading with forced distributions, to add a merit-based component in the compensation system. In 2000, almost half (49%) applied management by objectives (MBO) to employee compensation and individual development decisions (Lee and Kim 2006). These personnel management practices (e.g., 360-degree performance appraisals, upward appraisal, feedback systems) increased the level of individualism and competition among employees, male and female, within teams.

## 1.2 Work-family legislation

Korean policy makers tried a variety of work-family policies to prevent labor market exit of highly skilled women after marriage since the late 1990s. The 2001 amendments (Labor Standards Act, Equal Employment Opportunity Law, and Employment Insurance Law) introduced a legal obligation for employers to bear part of the financial burden of maternity, paternity and parental leave (Chin et al. 2012). Female full-time employees became entitled to 90-days maternity leave with full wages paid by the employer (first 60 days) and the employment insurance (last 30 days).

The 2007 Act on Equal Employment and Support for Work Family Balance further extended leave and financial childcare support stipulations. The policies now resemble those found in Northern European countries, namely Sweden (Won 2016). Employed mothers, and fathers, are

now allowed to take one year parental leave until the child reaches the age of eight years. The leave takers can expect 40% of their regular monthly wage with a maximum of one million Korean Won paid by the employment insurance (MOGEF 2016). In recent years, the government is actively promoting the adoption of flexible work arrangements by employers and stimulating fathers' involvement in child-rearing.

To improve the quality of employees' life and raise productivity, the Korean government lowered statutory working hours to 40 per week in 2004. The restriction was enforced in phases and now applies to all employers with more than five employees. However, the efficacy of the Standard Labor Act, particularly article 52, is questioned since it leaves it up to the discretion of employers and employees to agree on amount of overtime (Lee et al. 2007). It is not surprising that the observance rate in Korea (24%) is low while overtime for men and women remains widespread across firms and industries. This indicates that the 40 statutory hours are not the socially accepted norm yet and the Korean worktime regime characterized by excessively long working hours is still deeply embedded in the culture of Korean organizations.

### 1.3 Work-family policies

Chaebol firms started to recruit more female university graduates since the late 1990s. Bae and colleagues' (2012) quantitative analysis of work-family policies revealed employers initially adopted leave policies due to increased institutional pressure. Childcare and flextime arrangements were not implemented as widely since the legal stipulations were more explicit about employers' obligations regarding leave provisions.

These findings were corroborated by a survey of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (2015). The study reported the adoption rate of types of work-family policies by 110 firms with more than 300 employees. The three policies with the highest adoption rate were 90-days maternity leave (95.4%), paternity leave (94.5%), and parental leave (93.6%). Reduced working hours during childcare period and family care leave were adopted to a lesser extent (61.8% and 62.7% respectively). Flexible time policies were the least popular with low rates of 28.2% (shorter working hours), 21.8% (flexible start-finish time), and 20% (flexible working hours).

In recent years, large firms are increasingly providing in-house nursery facilities since Article 14 of the Infant Care Act obliges employers with more than 300 female employees (or 500 regular employees) to establish on-site nurseries. A survey of 1,204 companies showed almost 53% of employers were operating such a facility by the end of 2014 (MOGEF 2015). The total utilization of parental leave by employees is rising steadily. In 2014, a total of 76,833 employees requested parental leave (a 10.4 percent point increase from 2013) but only 4.5% of the users was male. About 60% of parental leave users continued their careers within their companies. Despite these signs of progress, work-family policies remain underutilized.

### 1.4 Diversity management

Social recognition for the need for workforce diversity is still relatively weak in Korea considering the homogeneity of its population. However, large firms are gradually applying diversity

management, namely gender diversity, as a competitive strategy to various HR areas (e.g., compensation, promotion, training, leadership and work-family policies). Research points out that HR managers experience difficulties in getting the policies practiced by employees due to perceived pressure from supervisors and coworkers (Magoshi and Chang 2009). A 2004 survey of HR officials of 177 domestic firms showed awareness of diversity management is growing (Sung et al. 2005). Although less than 20% of domestic firms had a diversity management program in place, almost 40% had plans to implement one in the future. A McKinsey survey showed that respondents in Korea had the highest expectations of their companies to accelerate gender diversity measures of all Asian countries in the study (Süssmuth-Dyckerhoff et al. 2012). In fact, the percentage was more than double (66% versus 32%) that of Japan. This suggests diversity management will feature more prominently in the HR strategies of Korean firms in the near future.

## 2. Case Study

### 2.1 Data collection

The data for this study was collected between December 2016 to May 2017 at the headquarters of two large Korean firms. The researcher conducted a series of in-depth interviews with 24 women at different stages in their career (nine assistant managers and fifteen female middle/ senior managers) and ten male team leaders. Five HR informants (two senior HR managers and three women's policies officers) were also interviewed to clarify the group's work-family policies and how they are disseminated at each company as well as the overall HR system. The interviews were semi-structured and took place in meeting rooms arranged by the companies.

### 2.2 Company introduction

The two manufacturing companies, with affiliation to a chaebol firm, are major players in their industry. The chaebol was founded in the post War period. The current chairman voiced his commitment to employ more women since the early 2000s resulting in a formalized quota for female recruits of 30% in 2003. Since 2003, the policies transformed from mere numerical quotas and maternity leave stipulations to an increasingly comprehensive set of policies. The two main pillars are target recruitment of outstanding female talent and retention of female employees along the pipeline. There is no separate organizational entity that oversees the implementation of work-family policies. HR team leaders of member companies typically appoint a female member in charge of the policies. As such, it is an integral part of overall personnel management.

Since the introduction of promotion policies, the ratio of female employees group-wide has increased steadily to 19%. In 2016, the female ratio of new graduate recruits was 45% and 11% at each host company respectively. The group-wide employee statistics show that women remain overrepresented in the lowest job ranks (34% of senior clerks, 26% of assistant chiefs, 14% of section chiefs, 7% of deputy managers, and 5 % of general managers). Female executives (i.e., directors, vice presidents) are scarce and make up only 3%. These figures align with the general trend that firms lose most of its female recruits within eight years before they reach the first managerial rank.

### 3. Main Findings

#### 3.1 Career trajectories and expectations

All the women and men interviewed had undeveloped ideas and vague aspirations at the start of their careers. Once promoted to section chief, the first managerial rank, their outlook extended beyond their own jobs. The increased responsibilities and chances to work with colleagues at other departments made them aware of their role within the organizational hierarchy. They became aware of career opportunities and constraints and learned strategies to improve their chances. Reflecting on their career trajectories, both senior males and females felt they had little control in shaping their careers based on their own ambitions and interests due to the company's overall HR vision.

The men experienced job rotation frequently early in their careers. On average, men held positions in three different departments and sometimes at other member companies. These transfers were strategic human resource decisions by the organization, often as the result of changes in corporate vision and downsizing of divisions. These transfers were not always welcomed by the men out of concern it may hurt their career prospects.

Before the transfer I was worried about my future. How can I survive if I move there. It felt like taking a step down. In reality though there is no difference between being in the sales or planning team. My future at the company cannot be guaranteed. That is the way it is in traditional Korean companies. After I transferred to my new team, I just tried to do better than my predecessor.

In hindsight, however, they think the broader work experience gave them an edge in the competition for promotion.

It [job rotation] is better than staying in one department alone. I became a multi-player after gaining broad experience. I learned a lot. In large enterprises like ours, those with broader work experience in the company tend to become top managers.

The women moved less frequently and many still worked in the same department where they started. Only one female manager was transferred three times due to downsizing of her current departments. Although nine women said they would welcome a transfer, very few felt comfortable asking their superiors about it. The few women who did request transfers early in their careers had problems with their supervisors or the work environment. The finding that women had less job rotation opportunities than their male colleagues has also been highlighted in Kang and Rowley's (2006) examination of women in management.

For women with young children, limited job rotation opportunities and tightly staffed teams posed difficulties for their parental leave requests and comeback. In the period after comeback, they felt an increased pressure to re-establish their position within the team and value to team performance. The tendency of supervisors to give below average grades to women returning from parental leave added to the pressure to meet expectations regarding hours in the office and availability for overtime, business trips and other after-work obligations. Without the possibility to move to other departments with more favorable conditions for mothers, the only option was to work ever more time efficiently and make child care arrangements. Women without parents to rely

on spent a considerable portion (approximately one third) of their monthly salaries to nurseries or au pairs. With very few role models in their organization--only a handful of female executives has children-- and personal experiences of being treated differently after motherhood, they felt disadvantaged by the company's promotion practices for the first time.

All the male managers were in their forties and voiced concern about their future in the organization. Having reached general manager level, they didn't expect to be promoted further. Their main priority was survival rather than promotion. Some men received offers from headhunters but preferred to stay with their current company. The men showed less willingness to take risks late in their careers. Their answers indicated they would stay even when passed over for promotions or offered higher financial compensation elsewhere. Most of them already experienced being graded lower by supervisors for other reasons than their performance (team members up for promotion who needed the highest grades).

This is in stark contrast with the women interviewed. Virtually all of them, regardless seniority level, said they would look for a job elsewhere if the company does not offer them fair promotion opportunities. A female deputy general manager explained:

I don't feel strongly about the job rank. I want to grow and continue fulfilling a role in this organization but this is only possible by getting promoted to team leader or director. If I get passed on for promotions consecutively, my male junior will eventually become my superior. I don't think I could live with it if the company does not recognize my efforts on the long term. It would hurt my self-esteem to stay working in such an environment. Promotion means that the company values your work after all.

The women appeared to be more sensitive to recognition and the strength of their position within the team than their male counterparts. The female managers thought of promotion as the only way to survive. Receiving recognition from one's supervisor also acted as a strong motivator to women with young children. It made their pursuit of a career, despite work-family conflict, rewarding enough to make sacrifices in personal and family time.

The senior male and female managers had different career orientations. In this mature stage, the men were more conservative than the women. Several men preferred to be transferred to same rank positions in other teams to prolong their future within the company.

These days, many executives get fired very quickly. They recruit them from outside by headhunters and when the results are not good they get fired. Most of the executives resign within three years. If you get fired from an executive position, it is the end of your career in this company. But the company cannot fire regular staff, only in extreme cases. The horizontal move seems more appropriate for me now. Otherwise there is the risk of getting fired all the time.

This may also reflect that men have more access to information about internal job openings through their network. Women, with less developed networks, may not see lateral moves as realistic options. The women instead were more outspoken about their ambition to reach executive ranks. They also considered gaining a different expertise elsewhere as a strategy to be scouted back for an executive position. The higher willingness to take risks may be because the women have working spouses

whereas most of the men were single breadwinners.

It appears men and women respond differently when they perceive they reached the ceiling within their organizations. Although the men are aware that moving to another company or department may strengthen their profile for executive positions, they are reluctant to jeopardize their current position and investment in personal relations within the organization. Men feel a stronger commitment to the organization than their jobs, whereas women who are less integrated into the internal power networks are primarily committed to their work.

For senior managers, male and female, the longevity of their careers within the company is tied for the most part to their hierarchical progression. Both men and women perceive the leap from general manager to executive to be beyond their reach. In this late career stage, men spend more time strengthening ties with key individuals in the company or finding new sponsors group-wide. Women also increase their networking activities but are reluctant to approach executives due to the perceived power distance. They focus more on acquiring foreign language skills or professional licenses that can strengthen their profile as candidates for executive positions.

The interviews with female senior managers revealed two career strategies for survival in the company. Firstly, like men they can try to become generalists with broad firm-specific expertise and move strategically to business divisions most visible to top management. Secondly, they can carve out a technical niche with professional licenses or continued education and become indispensable to the company. The chances of success when pursuing the former are low as women are less integrated in male power networks and offered less opportunities for job rotation.

It is promising that vertical career progression is possible for women with specialist knowledge in Korean organizations. By hiring more experienced women mid-career, firms can increase the ratio of female managers faster than what can be achieved with internal seniority-based promotion. However, more fundamental measures are needed for long-term results. These should focus on improving job rotation systems and accountability in performance evaluations and executive succession.

### 3.2 Work-family attitudes and choices

The interviews highlighted that employees' work-family decisions are largely guided by unspoken rules. Employees read the situation within the team (*nunch'i pogi*) and base their decisions (start and finishing time, length of leave requests, frequency of days off) on the perceived expectations of their immediate supervisor and coworkers. Before making any formal request to one's team leader, female employees ponder the average leave period of other women in their departments, the burden on coworkers, and the work-family attitude of their boss. Most of the managerial women felt pressured to return from leave within a few months and noticed their supervisors were clearly less supportive in case of a second child. Due to the top-down hierarchy, typical in all Korean organizations, supervisors set the standard of appropriate working hours and leave periods within their work group and subordinates will internalize and reproduce them.

The interviews with the team leaders indicated that they have different work-family values than their supervisors and subordinates. They are somewhere in between and try to meet the

expectations of younger and older cohorts of employees. Some team leaders deliberately leave the office on time to discourage habitual overtime among subordinates, yet they use their own days off sparingly because it gets reported to their boss. The dual expectations of team leaders may lead them to send mixed signals about how supportive they are of their subordinates' uptake.

Some female (assistant) managers with young children challenged the traditional worktime regime and left the office exactly on time (6 PM). Motherhood legitimized their deviation from the norm to a certain extent. Although male team leaders expressed understanding for the situation of working mothers, they considered work-family conflict to be a private matter that needs to be solved by women themselves. They had lower expectations of women with families and perceived them as less energetic and committed at work. This gendered view influenced them in how they managed female juniors in two-ways. On the one hand, they showed more leniency, but not flexibility, regarding working hours and one-day leave requests. On the other hand, it made them assign more and challenging work to male subordinates. The group's increasingly comprehensive work-family policies were still understood as merely a set of regulations regarding parental leave that apply to women not men. All team leaders perceived extended parental leave and re-adjustment after comeback to be highly disruptive to team dynamics, operations, and performance. Some in business divisions deliberately requested male additions to their staff for that reason.

The HR informants and women's policies officers clarified male team leaders are generally aware of their task to promote more women but find it difficult to achieve in practice. The interviews point out that the way standardized performance evaluations are practiced can disadvantage women who extend parental leave beyond six months. As mentioned earlier, team leaders tend to give below average grades to women returning from extended leave thereby breaking company regulations. Since promotion and salary increases are linked to employees' grading record, it clearly disadvantages women in their career progression within the company. The following statement of a male senior manager illustrates why team leaders find it hard to comply by company policy.

If someone takes an extended period of leave, like six or eight months, that person will need a longer time to adjust again after return to the office. The team leader will not assign difficult tasks during that period. Other team members who already had a heavier workload during the leave period will do the hard work instead. This has implications for the grading. Of course, you cannot give the person who returned from leave the lowest grade because of it. But you have to be fair towards the other team members for their increased workload and work pressure. It is difficult to explain... To be honest, I give lower than that [B]. In many cases I give a C. The situation forces me to do so.

Since there are no formal accountability structures, team leaders are unlikely to change their behavior. The women interviewed appeared to have come to terms with this unfair practice and rationalized the behavior of team leaders.

At our company, I don't think team leaders deliberately give bad grades to female team members because of their gender. But in case of maternity and parental leave it is

inevitable that team leaders give lower grades to woman who where on leave since the male team members did more work during that period. Many share the opinion that it is an unfair aspect of performance evaluations.

The married women had very different work-family experiences depending on their job type. The women in business support divisions had more control over their time, and less work-family conflict, than their peers in business divisions due to predictable working hours, few interdepartmental meetings and no contact with external suppliers or customers and business trips. The five female managers with children under the age of ten experienced the most work-family conflict related to the early closing times of elementary schools and nurseries. Some women with self-employed spouses, au pairs, or parents to help with childcare, put in the same hours as before motherhood and only spent time with them in the weekends. Women relying on private nurseries often started one hour earlier to get all the work done for the day. It is obvious that work-family conflict is a reality for managerial women, yet having a family did not necessarily make them less committed to their jobs or organizations. In fact, many women became more attached to their work after experiencing a career interruption during parental leave.

#### 4. Conclusion and Discussion

Although the workforce of Korean firms is becoming more diverse, the pool of executives continues to be largely males in their fifties with similar educational backgrounds. There is a time-lag before gender-diversity or work-family initiatives produce tangible results at the highest organizational levels due to seniority-based promotion and opaque selection criteria for executives. The case study showed that vertical career progress was possible for a select group of women with specialized expertise. However, seniority-based promotion and lack of job-rotation opportunities clearly pose limitations for the majority of women who are stuck in divisions less visible to top management. The traditional worktime regime (structural overtime, fixed working hours for work groups, after-work socialization) is still very salient in the mindset of senior managers who select their successors. Younger cohorts of employees irrespective of gender value their personal time more ; yet, they adjust their behavior under social pressure from supervisors and coworkers. Interactions between employees in Korean organizations are governed by respect for hierarchical relations. This aspect restricts individual work-family behavior of subordinates that deviates from the traditional values of their superiors.

Work-family initiatives that are not explicitly supported at the executive level, have little potential in changing employees' behavior at lower levels. The interview data confirmed that informal supervisor support, rather than formal organizational support, is critical to employees' work outcomes and uptake of work-family policies (Aryee et al. 2013). Middle managers (team leaders) not only take the decisions whether or not to approve leave requests or allow flexibility in working hours. They also signal their support through their own behavior (use of days off, overtime). The team leaders interviewed all adjusted their behavior to meet the expectations of their superiors (executive level). This can become a vicious circle as senior managers who experienced lack of work-family balance themselves tend to be less supportive of employees' uptake (Daverth et

al. 2016). Altogether, it clearly indicates that initiatives are more likely to succeed when they focus on informal support mechanisms at lower organizational levels. The way (formally) gender neutral HRM systems are practiced by supervisors disadvantages mothers, who deviate from the ideal worker image, more than their childless peers or male counterparts. This highlights the necessity to establish accountability structures at middle-management level that enhance policy legitimacy and compliance among team leaders.

The common belief among policy makers and HR professionals is that promoting parental leave utilization is key to the retention of highly skilled women after childbirth. While difficulty to reconcile work and family responsibilities undoubtedly leads many women to quit, it is not the only reason for the loss of women along the corporate pipeline. The interviews with women irrespective of job rank indicated that their expectations (promotion opportunities) featured more prominently than work-family conflict in their intentions to leave the company. Previous research found mothers do not necessarily have lower career aspirations (Lee and Cheon 2009) or loose affective commitment to their work but tend to have lower expectations regarding career progression than their childless peers (Chang et al. 2014). Female managers showed more willingness than their male counterparts to leave their companies if they are not offered fair opportunities for promotion and development. These insights indicate that policies aimed at retaining female talent should also focus on this important dimension of the career leaving behavior of women.

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