

# *Transforming Gender Roles Amid an Aging Population in Korea*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The aging population of South Korea, especially women, will eventually encounter social and economic shortcomings. This essay highlights the need for a gender paradigm shift by looking at the impoverished, lonely elderly in society and the social conventions that dictate women's position as primary family caretakers. This study deeply explores the evolving dynamics of gender roles in South Korea, particularly in the context of rapid population aging. By investigating the impact of population aging on traditional gender roles, the research aims to understand the challenges faced by women and men in navigating new gender expectations. The study will examine how these changes influence familial structures, intergenerational relationships, and overall societal well-being. To achieve this, a mixed-methods approach will be employed, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. The findings will be analyzed to identify trends, patterns, and individual experiences related to gender, age, and societal outcomes. Based on the research, the study will propose evidence-based solutions and recommendations to address the challenges and maximize the opportunities presented by the evolving gender dynamics in South Korea.*

## **KEYWORDS:**

*Women in old age, Traditional gender roles, New gender norms, South Korea, Societal outcomes.*

## **Introduction:**

South Korea is grappling with an aging population, with the 65 and above population rising to 14% in 17 years. This rapid shift has led to a significant aging issue, with older women disproportionately affected by poverty, social isolation, and reliance. The convergence of gender and age necessitates an all-encompassing strategy to address the problems caused by this rapidly aging population. Policies that support work-life balance, encourage gender equality, and provide social safety nets for older persons are crucial. Key issues include the rapid pace of aging, gender inequality, caregiving burden, poverty, and social isolation. (Kyung- Sup & Min- Young, 2010)

Historically rooted in Confucian ideals that emphasized women's roles as dutiful wives and mothers, the expectation of family caregiving has persisted in South Korea. This cultural norm, combined with the country's economic development policies that prioritized growth over social welfare, has contributed to a gendered division of labor where women primarily shoulder the responsibilities of both paid and unpaid care work. The consequences of this imbalance are far-reaching, perpetuating gender inequalities and placing significant strain on women's well-being and economic security. (Abelmann, 1997)

Financial insecurity is another issue faced by the elderly, with the current pension system and lack of financial planning leaving many vulnerable to economic hardship. The reliance of women on welfare programs further exacerbates the intersection of age and gender-based inequalities. The erosion of traditional family structures is exacerbating the challenges faced by the elderly, with the decline of multi-generational households and the increasing prevalence of single-person dwellings leading to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness.

South Korea's rapidly aging population has placed an increasing burden on women, who disproportionately fill the role of primary caregiver for the elderly. This trend is exacerbated by women's longer life expectancy, leading to a significant gender gap in long-term care needs. Despite the implementation of Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI) in 2008, the system has struggled to meet the growing demand for care services, raising questions about the adequacy and quality of care provided. Abelmann, N. (2003).

South Korean society values familial bonds and intergenerational care, with women being primary caregivers for elderly parents and children. This burden significantly impacts women's economic independence and well-being. Traditional gender roles and economic pressures lead to a disproportionate number of women in precarious employment, with a high percentage working in low-wage, insecure jobs. This creates a cycle of poverty and dependence. Addressing gender equality and aging requires comprehensive policy interventions, including work-life balance, affordable childcare, and robust social safety nets, to empower women and ensure the well-being of South Korea's aging population. (Abelmann, 1997; Kendall, 2001)

In Korea, the gender gap in time spent on caregiving is notably wide, especially in households with preschool-aged children. The gender ratio for caregiving tasks is nearly 6, highlighting significant gender inequity in time use. This disparity is most pronounced in households with young children, underscoring the unequal burden of placed on women for caregiving responsibilities across various household types. Lin & Tong, 2008)

South Korea's care work sector is predominantly female-dominated, with low wages, part-time employment, and limited job security. Despite their crucial role in supporting the elderly and vulnerable populations, care workers face precarious working conditions, limited career

advancement opportunities, and low job satisfaction. The sector is also susceptible to workplace harassment and abuse, affecting workers' well-being. Many care workers struggle to save for retirement, with their primary motivation being to support their families rather than build personal financial security. This highlights the urgent need for policy interventions to improve working conditions and ensure financial stability in old age.

Certainly, to address these challenges, South Korea must adopt a comprehensive and intergenerational approach, rethinking social, economic, and healthcare policies and a cultural shift that prioritizes the needs and contributions of older citizens. Key theoretical considerations include the dependency ratio, feminization of aging, social exclusion, intergenerational relations, and life course perspective. By applying these frameworks, policymakers and researchers can develop evidence-based strategies to address the complexities of South Korea's aging population. (Choi et al., 2021)

## Literature Review:

This literature review examines the changing gender roles in South Korea, focusing on historical context, current trends, and societal implications. South Korea has traditionally had rigid gender roles rooted in Confucian values, with men being the primary breadwinners and women responsible for household duties and caregiving. However, rapid industrialization and economic development in the latter half of the 20th century began to challenge these traditional roles, leading to increased access to education and employment opportunities for women.

Traditional gender roles are changing in South Korea due to the country's aging population. Historical writings emphasize the deeply ingrained Confucian principles that have long shaped gender norms and disadvantaged women (Lee, 2009). According to recent studies, there is an increasing need to address these gaps through fair workplace practices and shared caregiving obligations (Kim & Park, 2011; Choi, 2016). Significant obstacles still need to be overcome to achieve real gender parity and the welfare of society, even in the face of governmental attempts (Sung, 2017; OECD, 2018).

As Korea's population ages, traditional gender roles are undergoing significant transformation. There is a growing recognition of the need for shared caregiving responsibilities between men and women. Increasingly, men are participating more in caregiving tasks, driven by both policy changes and shifting societal attitudes towards gender equality. This shift is also supported by workplace reforms that promote work-life balance and paternal leave. Additionally, the rise of dual-income households has necessitated a more equitable division of domestic duties. These changes are gradually reducing the gender gap in caregiving, although challenges remain in achieving full gender parity.

With a dropping birth rate and rising life expectancy, South Korea is one of the world's

fastest-aging societies. The global fertility rate dropped to 0.84 in 2020, the lowest ever, and by 2050, 43.9% of people will be 65 years of age or older. The economy, social services, and conventional family arrangements are all facing serious problems as a result of this demographic transition. (Rowland, 2012)

In the past, males have traditionally been the main breadwinners in South Korea, while women have mostly taken care of the home and provided care. These roles, which emphasized a patriarchal family structure, were firmly anchored in Confucian ideas, according to literature. But as the population ages and the labor force becomes smaller, it becomes more important than ever to utilize everyone's potential—especially that of women. Hard facts remain in the face of progressive policies aimed at promoting female labor force participation and gender equality. Significant obstacles still face women, such as job progression possibilities being scarce, discrimination based on gender, and having to balance both home and work obligations. These difficulties draw attention to the discrepancy that exists between the goals of policy and actual experiences, highlighting the necessity for more comprehensive and successful workforce equity initiatives.

This has led to a focus on gender equality and women's inclusion in all economic sectors. However, women often face a "double burden" of caring for their families and careers. Despite government measures promoting work-life balance, cultural perceptions about gender roles remain outdated. The growing need for eldercare has evolved caregiving responsibilities, and while public eldercare facilities have partly lessened the burden, women are still expected to provide care.

The transformation of gender roles in South Korea is a complex and ongoing process, with significant progress made in terms of women's workforce participation and public policy support. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing policy reforms, cultural shifts, and continued advocacy for gender equality. Understanding the intricate relationship between demographic changes and gender roles is essential for building a more inclusive and equitable society in South Korea. (Dong & Joffe, 2019)

South Korea is facing a growing elderly population facing social isolation, especially those aged 75 and above. Traditional family networks have been weakened, but close friendships and neighborly connections provide emotional and practical support. However, the underutilization of community resources to combat social isolation is a pressing issue. Accessibility challenges in public senior centers and elderly halls lead to low attendance rates, and television remains the primary leisure activity for older adults.

South Korea faces challenges in addressing the rapidly aging population, particularly in elder care. High rates of social isolation among elderly individuals, decline in traditional family support systems due to geographic dispersal, and underutilization of community-based senior centers and elderly halls are key issues. The country's elder care infrastructure is under

immense pressure due to the surge in individuals aged 80 and above. Traditionally, family, primarily women, has been the cornerstone of elder care in Korea. However, changing societal structures, including increased female labor force participation, have strained this caregiving model. Women continue to bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities, both for their families and as paid caregivers. This disproportionate burden on women and the rapid pace of population aging underscore the urgent need for more robust and equitable care policies in South Korea.

## **Result and Discussions:**

This study explores the role of gender, age, and societal expectations in shaping caregiving roles in South Korea, a country with a rapidly aging population. Traditionally, women have been the primary caregivers, a pattern deeply rooted in Confucian values and economic policies prioritizing growth over social welfare. However, the aging population has highlighted the need for more equitable gender roles. The data shows a disproportionate burden on women, both as caregivers for aging parents and as primary income earners. The persistence of traditional gender norms, limited access to quality care services, and flexible work arrangements have exacerbated women's economic vulnerability and compromised their overall well-being.

However, the increasing number of women in the workforce and growing awareness of gender inequality present opportunities for redefining gender roles and reshaping caregiving responsibilities. Policies supporting work-family balance, such as parental leave and childcare subsidies, are crucial for promoting gender equality and fostering a more equitable distribution of care work. Investing in long-term care infrastructure and developing a robust care workforce is also essential for alleviating the burden on family caregivers, particularly women. (Chong, 2020)

This study aims to enhance the understanding of the caregiving burden, economic disparities, policy effectiveness, and caregiver experiences in South Korea. Quantitative data can be used to measure the time spent on caregiving by women, analyze the correlation between caregiving hours and women's employment status, income, and overall well-being, and examine the impact of caregiving on women's retirement age and pension benefits. Economic disparities can be calculated, and the wage gap between male and female care workers can be analyzed. Policy effectiveness can be evaluated by assessing the impact of existing policies on caregiving burden and women's economic status. Qualitative data can explore the emotional and psychological toll of caregiving, the challenges faced by women balancing caregiving with employment, and the impact on social relationships and networks.

This study explores the role of gender, age, and societal structures in shaping caregiving responsibilities in South Korea, a country with a rapidly aging population. Historically, women have been primarily responsible for caregiving, a role deeply ingrained in Confucian

values and reinforced by economic policies prioritizing growth over social welfare. However, dismantling entrenched gender roles remains a significant challenge. The disproportionate burden placed on women, who often juggle caregiving responsibilities with paid work, has profound implications for women's economic security, physical and mental health, and overall well-being.

Traditional gender norms, limited access to quality care services, and flexible work arrangements have worsened challenges. However, the rise of women in the workforce and awareness of gender inequality offer opportunities for redefining roles and caregiving responsibilities. Policies supporting work-family balance, such as parental leave and childcare subsidies, are crucial for promoting gender equality and reducing the burden on family caregivers, especially women.

The findings have significant implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers, emphasizing the need for a multi-faceted approach to address the challenges posed by an aging population and traditional gender roles. Future research should delve deeper into the experiences of different subgroups of women, including those from rural areas, low-income backgrounds, and minority ethnicities.

In conclusion, the study highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive approach to address the challenges posed by an aging population and traditional gender roles in South Korea. Future research should focus on the experiences of different generations and social groups.

In conclusion, the transformation of gender roles in South Korea amid an aging population is a complex and multifaceted issue. Historical and cultural contexts have shaped the traditional division of labor, placing women at a disadvantage in both domestic and professional spheres (Lee, 2009). While policy initiatives and societal changes are beginning to challenge these entrenched norms, significant obstacles remain (Kim & Park, 2011). The literature highlights the necessity of more comprehensive strategies to support women in balancing work and caregiving responsibilities, promote equitable workplace practices, and encourage male participation in domestic duties (Choi, 2016; Sung, 2017). As South Korea navigates the challenges of an aging population, addressing these gender disparities is crucial for harnessing the full potential of its workforce and achieving sustainable social and economic development (OECD, 2018)

## **CONCLUSION:**

South Korea has traditionally followed conventional gender roles, with males serving as the main breadwinners and women taking care of the home and children. According to literature, these positions were firmly based in Confucian principles and emphasised a patriarchal household system. However, there is an increasing need to utilise the potential of all people, particularly women, as the population ages and the workforce becomes smaller. In spite of

progressive regulations that seek to increase female labour force participation and promote gender equality, harsh realities continue to exist. Gender discrimination, a lack of possibilities for job progress, and having to balance both home and work obligations are just a few of the major obstacles that women still face. These difficulties show how different legislative aims are from real-world realities, which emphasises the need for more comprehensive and successful workforce parity initiatives.

The paper discusses the current state of older women in Korea, highlighting the cultural and social expectations of women as primary family caregivers. As more women become involved in paid work, society and gender roles need to be remodeled to balance work and care over different lifespans and genders. The lack of public care support and a culture of work-family balance contribute to the reproduction of dominant gender ideologies and institutions. A shift towards a "universal caregiver" model is necessary, requiring investments in public old age social security, accessible pensions, and affordability.

Despite government measures like flexible work schedules and maternity leave, cultural perceptions about gender roles remain outdated. Revitalizing middle-aged women's careers and challenging gender norms are crucial. To improve the situation of older women in Korea, it is essential to incorporate up-to-date data, compare Korea's situation to other countries, conduct in-depth qualitative research, and develop actionable policy recommendations. This will provide a comprehensive and informative analysis of the situation of older women in Korea.

Korea needs to adapt its employment and caregiving approach to accommodate its growing elderly population, particularly women. This includes sharing duties, offering greater career options and financial freedom, and improving pensions and care services. Part-time work can hinder career advancement for mothers, and supporting families financially, socially, and legally is crucial. A long-term shift towards "aging-in-community" and age-friendly communities is necessary, with active collaboration between state and non-state actors.

South Korea needs a multimodal strategy to address the complex relationship between caring, age, and gender. This includes questioning gender norms, funding social welfare initiatives, and promoting work-life balance. To protect older individuals and their carers, shared caregiving duties and affordable long-term care services are needed. Achieving gender equality and addressing aging population issues require consistent legislative action and cultural change.

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