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The Netherlands

Gender and agency in careers: the work-life experiences of women employed by Japanese and South Korean firms

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Citation

Beekman, C. H. (2024, February 14). *Gender and agency in careers: the work-life experiences of women employed by Japanese and South Korean firms*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3717568>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Chapter 5

Motherhood and Claims to Work-Life Balance

Nozomi (43) worked three years as a hardware engineer before becoming a mother at 28 years old. She was fortunate that her company was an early adopter of work-family policies. Her boss allowed her to go on leave and return to work after eighteen months, which was very exceptional in those days. After resuming work, however, her job responsibilities changed from challenging to simple assignments. She didn't mind it at first as her main priority was the wellbeing of her newborn child and she felt conflicted leaving him at the nursery on weekdays. Her company had a reduced working hour system in place that enabled her to continue her career in the intensive childrearing days. After giving birth to a second child, she resumed her duties at the same company but gradually got bored at work and asked for a job transfer. When her request was not granted for several years, she contemplated to quit but decided to continue after a talk with her husband. Her resilience was rewarded and the timing of the job change conveniently coincided with her children's growing independence. Yet, Nozomi thought she could not meet the expectations of a managerial position when offered a promotion due to family responsibilities. She declined and only accepted once her children turned 12 and 10 years old and her priorities shifted. She believed it was her last chance considering the age-bound promotion system of her company. Looking back on the first seven years of childrearing, during which she worked herself to physical exhaustion, Nozomi still felt guilty about the time away from her children who now grew estranged.

Nozomi's story illustrates the predicament of many women currently employed by firms in Korea and Japan. While they now can prolong their careers after childbirth, it remains difficult to achieve career dreams while maintaining a healthy work-life balance throughout motherhood. This chapter focuses on the perceptions and lived experiences of working mothers like Nozomi who have the most to gain from work-life balance policies. The analysis pays special attention to individual diversities (age, education, family situation, seniority at work, motherhood and gender role beliefs) and situational factors (spouse's employment, family living arrangement, parenting stages, support systems). It delves into the particular work-family issues encountered by corporate women at different stages of motherhood and uses individual interpretations to identify the constellation of factors that broaden or constrain the choice freedoms of working mothers in

daily life. How exactly, and when, do women negotiate a better work-life balance in the workplace and home? More generally, what can we learn by examining their strategies from a situated agency perspective?

Entry into motherhood confronts women with a major challenge how to give meaning to this new identity in addition to other roles they may perform as professionals, wives, and daughters. When seeking some sort of balance between multiple identities, working mothers may do what they believe they should do rather than what they want to in certain situations and settings. This begs the question how dominant gender roles and motherhood ideologies inform the behavior of women with families and corporate careers in negotiating better work-life conditions. We cannot simply assume that the meanings of work and motherhood, or the ways in which they influence women's responses at an individual level, are the same across these countries. Therefore, I will start by exploring how expectations of self and others about what it takes to be a devoted professional and mother guide the work-family behaviors of Korean and Japanese women.

Studies on family and education issues do confirm middle class women in contemporary Korea and Japan are particularly subjected to high parenting standards and the role powerful institutions (state and schools) play in constructing dominant motherhood models that justify a gendered division of childrearing and heavy investment of mothers in early child education. (Allison 1991; Heo 2017; Hirao 2001; Holloway 2010b; Yu 2001). In addition to expectations in the workplace or distal societal and cultural norms, they also come from high-pressured, narrowly defined educational systems (Holloway 2010a; Seth 2002) and from within (extended) families (Joo 2017). This means we must keep the particularities of each country's sociohistorical context in mind when making inferences about women's agency within a tight-

knit web of structural constraints posed by three central institutions (workplace, family, schools) that place disproportionate time and energy demands on working mothers. Nonetheless, as Inglehart and colleagues point out, cultural values and norms are fluid and socially constructed, and individuals can contest and negotiate new norms even within rigid structures (Inglehart and Norris 2003; Inglehart and Oyserman 2004; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Thus, the inquiry in this chapter focuses on the interaction between mothers' agency and structure, that is the work-family lives that are possible given their situations, and avoids exaggerations of women's role in perpetuating traditional gender roles or their lack of agency in monolithic structures. The narratives of working mothers⁶³ will be used to find clues to the most pertinent question emerging in the work-life balance literature on Korea and Japan. What particular conditions enable middle-class women to challenge institutionalized ideal worker images and high parenting standards imposed on mothers but not fathers?

This chapter starts by clarifying what work-life balance actually means in the daily experiences of corporate women. It then identifies the settings and contexts in which work-family tensions arise in the lives of women at varying stages of motherhood in search for explanations why some individuals were better situated than others to negotiate better work-life conditions. Both the reflections of mothers with older children on past work-family choices, the present-day, and future outlook of mothers with preschoolers will be used to address generational and life cycle differences in women's responses to changing realities. Hereafter, women's perceptions of recent work-family policies in their organizations and actual experiences using them will be examined. The analysis goes beyond women's resolve of practical issues (time

⁶³ The reason for this narrow focus is that the caregiving responsibilities women in both country samples mainly spoke about in connection to work-life balance were related to child rearing and not taking care of other family members such as a sick relative or elderly parent.

management, childcare logistics) or policy uptake and looks for signs of change in underlying assumptions about mothering, womanhood, and ideal workers in three crucial institutions (workplace, family, schools). It pays particular attention to the interaction between women's situated agency and workplace dynamics that shape women's perceptions of real possibilities for improved work-life balance and offer space to negotiate better conditions with employers and spouses.

5.1 WOMEN'S OWN INTERPRETATIONS: BALANCING WHAT EXACTLY?

Work-life balance is such a broad (and loosely defined) concept used by multiple stakeholders (policy makers, scholars, HR professionals) that it can mean a variety of things. How then do women in Korea and Japan understand this concept imported from abroad and how does it relate to their daily realities? In consideration of women's situated agency, I will first provide some context regarding the family situations of the informants used for this chapter. The analysis in this chapter is based on the personal accounts of married women with at least one child (10 in Korea; 19 in Japan). The average age of the Korean working mothers (thirties) was much lower than that of their Japanese counterparts (fifties) so their experiences with motherhood and work as well as general sense of entitlement to work-family balance diverged as may be expected. The youngest mother in the Korean sample was 30 and the oldest 47 years so their narratives typically centered around the many challenges they experienced balancing the care of preschoolers and workplace demands. In contrast, the youngest Japanese mother was 40 and the oldest 59. Some were mothers of preschoolers, several had children in high-school or university, and a few had daughters or sons who already started a career of their own. As such, the women's stories and work-life balance experiences offered a wealth of information about

particular concerns at different motherhood and career stages (see appendices 3 and 4 for more background information on the women).

The number of children ranged between one and (occasionally) two in Korea and one and three in Japan⁶⁴. In both countries, most women had salaried husbands (5 in Korea; 14 in Japan) and were raised by mothers who worked outside the home (and salarymen fathers) when they were young. Thus, at least in terms of family background (early exposure to women's dual-roles and middle-class parenting values) and current situation (dual-career couples) there was some similarity among the working mothers in both countries. Interestingly, the Korean mothers relied heavily on the continuous help of relatives (two even lived with parents or in-laws while their husbands lived elsewhere) while most Japanese mothers primarily used professional childcare services to take over some of their maternal duties⁶⁵. With the exception of a handful, all women in both countries had resumed their jobs (in the career-track) within one year after childbirth and most still worked for the same company. As such, the women in my samples represent a privileged group of female employees who were able to have uninterrupted career trajectories and benefit at least in that sense from the strengthened work-family regulations.

When the Korean and Japanese women spoke about work-family issues or utilization of company policies, they used different terms. Korean women used the word *il-kajǒng yangnip* (literal translation: work-family reconciliation) whereas Japanese women used *wāku raifu baransu* (literal translation: work-life balance). This reflects the principal terms used in each country's policies at the time I conducted fieldwork to essentially achieve the same goal

⁶⁴ The lower average number of children in the Korean sample is telling. As several mothers explicitly mentioned, excessive work demands make it impossible to have more than one child.

⁶⁵ This cross-country difference may be largely attributed to the closer physical proximity of the working mothers to their parents in the Korean sample than the Japanese sample. Most Japanese mothers had parents and in-laws who lived outside the Tokyo metropolitan area.

(increasing women's labor market outcomes and fertility rates by improving people's quality of family and work life)⁶⁶. Although the term that replaced the older "work-family balance" in Japanese government communications is broader in conceptualization (balance in other aspects of life than career and family such as health, leisure, and religion) (Bienek 2014), the life stories of Japanese women interviewed indicated it foremost meant having sufficient time and energy for one's career versus parenting responsibilities. The overloaded schedules (eight-hour workdays with a second shift until midnight) of Korean and Japanese mothers alike clearly left little room for personal time or hobbies, at least not until their children entered high-school (at the age of twelve years).

Women in both countries did not conceive of work-family or work-life balance as something measured in quantitative terms (equal time/energy spent on childrearing/work, management of double workloads) that could ever be achieved, not even with the most meticulous planning. Their family lives were chaotic and full of unpredictable events (e.g., child's sickness or refusal to go to school/bed, inability to find a trustworthy nanny/caregiver, waiting lists for nurseries, etc.) that did not allow for strategic planning of caregiving around work responsibilities. Work-life balance, thus, was an impossible ideal image and definitely not a simple matter of individual "choice" as it is often framed in the literature or company policies (Caproni 2004). Instead, the meaning of "balance" in the daily realities of working mothers was situational and often a compromise or sacrifice of personal time/well-being and entailed "being physically and psychologically able to pursue a meaningful career and raising a happy family."

⁶⁶ In the latest Korean government publications the terminology also included a broader definition of work-life balance, namely the ability of employees regardless of gender to combine work and a variety of other aspects of life beyond caregiving of children and elderly family members such as self-development, but the main pillars of the support policies are protection of maternal employment, childcare leave stipulations, and flexible work arrangements (Kim 2017).

Using the words of Kaori (56) “many people think that the balance should be fifty-fifty, but I think it is important to prioritize work and family life depending on the time. It could be eighty-twenty at times too. I often tell working mothers that they don’t have to think like ‘I must do this’ or ‘I have to do that’. I tell them to do what they want to do best at the time, and not try to do everything perfect.”

For all working mothers, there was a degree of ambivalence whether the ongoing balancing act was essentially a private matter to be resolved by parents themselves, the company’s social responsibility, or a collective task of the government, schools, and families. In many cases, women contradicted what they had said earlier (“individuals are responsible”) once they described/recalled their hardships concluding, four institutions: “the family, company, government, and schools all bear responsibility.” On the record, women echoed the dominant policy discourse in their firms (achieving work-family balance is an employee’s individual responsibility). However, their personal comments revealed they felt it was a fundamental right that was not respected by senior male managers in practice. It stands to reason that this discrepancy largely reflects a gap between how family-friendly policies are officially framed and perceived by authority figures in their companies and women’s own beliefs.

My impression was that the terms “work-family balance” and “work-life balance” shared similar connotations (both formal and personal) for women in both countries. It was not understood as a degendered practical matter (relative time use in both domains) but an ongoing and fluctuating balancing act of women’s identities (dedicated professional and mother/wife/daughter). As we will see in the next section, the idea of balance was more about finding meaning in work and family life than spending equal time or attention on competing obligations. Whether women spoke of work-family balance or work-life balance, other facets of

life than work and caregiving (e.g., hobby's, self-actualization, adult learning, socializing with friends, etc.) were of little significance during the intensive childrearing years (until a child reaches twelve years of age). Since the two terms essentially refer to the same dilemmas in the daily realities of working mothers, I use them interchangeably in the narrow sense ("finding meaning in work and family life") within the context of this chapter.

5.2 MOTHERHOOD AND WORK-FAMILY TENSIONS

Competing Devotions and Work-Family Issues

When going through long periods of excessive demands on time and energy in the workplace and home, some women seemingly accepted their fate and do the best they could while others tried to improve their situation in subtler to bolder ways. Clearly, individual women interpret and respond to work-family interference in different ways. My findings will show that personal meanings of devoted professionals and mothers shift throughout women's lives and careers away from dominant notions in response to new realities at work and home.

Linkages between work-family ideologies, women's identities, and agency

Socially constructed ideas about housework, parenting, and working were connected to women's capabilities to give meaning to their roles inside and outside the workplace but to varying degrees depending on the context at work and home. Moreover, the same individual can have fairly degendered attitudes towards paid and housework but not when it pertains parenting or child education. For instance, mothers who strongly believed they were just as entitled to a career of their own as their husbands and housework should be shared so that both could pursue individual goals while raising children often held gendered beliefs about a child's dependency on

maternal care. Such a contradiction in women's attitudes is not uncommon nor unique to Japanese and Korean well-educated mothers. In-depth studies on American middle-class mothers have shown that individuals who believe they are equals when it comes to valuing paid work or public life can simultaneously endorse the logic of the sacred child that mothers, not fathers, should be child-centered and engage in intensive mothering (Harris and Estevez 2017; Hayes 1996). Indeed, while women of all generations expected their husbands to be (more) active in housework and parenting so they could invest more in their own careers, they did not connect a father's absence to potentially harming their children like they did when they addressed their own absence as mothers at home.

Some women in their forties and fifties took for granted that their husbands were good providers but absent fathers with little involvement in their children's lives. Kayoko (56) thought her husband would help her more after starting his own business but gave up persuading him when he did not. She rationalized his inactive fathering saying "it was not common for husbands to help their wives in Japan." Yuki (43) reluctantly accepted that her husband let his mom take over his parenting duties and only stepped up as a father when her children misbehaved, in which case she thought "he did a good job." When asked whether it worried her that her husband was not so involved as a father in childrearing, she answered "there is not that much difference if he is at home or not when taking care of my children. I can complete all the tasks at home myself without him such as helping with homework." On the surface, Yuki's comment may appear as an example of "maternal gatekeeping"⁶⁷. However, later in the interview it became clear that she

⁶⁷ Women who impose high parenting standards on themselves and their spouses may be more reluctant to relinquish control over childcare and child education matters acting as maternal gatekeepers (Allen and Hawkins 1999; Allen et al. 2000; Holloway 2010c; Thompson and Walker 1989). Individuals who believe men are naturally less attentive to children's needs or less competent in managing detailed tasks associated with child rearing may not even want their husbands to be more involved as fathers (Hayes 1996) or take gender-imbalance in parenting activities for granted (Coltrane 1989). In contrast, those who believe men and women are equal in their ability to

primarily took over all remaining parenting responsibilities because she lowered her expectations of him as father after being let down so many times when asking for help. Similarly, Yuriko (52) raised two children without any help from her husband other than occasionally scolding when they made trouble at school. Reflecting on the difficulties she experienced during her children's adolescence, she expressed strong feelings of guilt for her absence as a mother.

The above does not mean women remained passive over the years. A surprising finding was that more than a few Japanese women in their late forties and fifties trained their husbands in fathering. For instance, Megumi (48) recalled her husband who used to work for the same company did not help at all raising their first born. After their second child was born, her husband quit his corporate job to open a noodle soup restaurant. When Megumi became the stable provider of household income, she made her husband take over more childrearing activities. Hiroko (54) made her husband who worked for the same company take their son to the nursery in the mornings while she picked him up at 5:00 PM. Although she didn't think he helped her enough, she felt grateful he pitched in whenever she was not at home (and had to) and took turns going home early when her son was sick. Kaori (56) expected to be a housewife but had to become the main breadwinner (she married an actor without a stable income). After giving birth at age 25, she wanted her husband to get a corporate job so she could spend more time with her daughter but did not communicate her desires. Three years into motherhood, during which she tried to do everything herself, she finally had a serious talk with her husband and got him to take her daughter to school, cook and clean. Like Hiroko and Kaori, Hana (48) had no problems relinquishing some control over childrearing to her husband who ran a small business. Hana told her husband she would only get married and have a child if she could

learn parenting skills may be more patient when certain standards are not met and appreciate whatever help they can get from their spouse.

continue working full-time. Yet, more equal sharing of childrearing responsibilities was not a natural arrangement from the start. She recalled her husband was rather passive after childbirth doing 10 percent of childrearing while she did the rest. After some years, he met her halfway and grew to like taking care of their son (with whom he had a close relationship now) while she regularly stayed in the office until 8:00 PM. These cases illustrate women's higher/equal employment status vis-à-vis their spouses' can override mother-centered rationales and spur women to challenge gender-skewed parenting arrangements.

Overall, the stories of Korean mothers with younger children at the time of the interview (women in their thirties) did not reveal typical attitudes or behaviors associated with maternal gatekeeping. The strong feelings of guilt mentioned by several Japanese mothers in their late forties and fifties did not emerge as frequently either. On the contrary, the Korean millennials spoke in a matter-of-fact manner about the practical, not moral, side of outsourcing childcare to relatives and marketized services without mention of harming their children. Except for Mi-yong (34), a mother of two, who considered parenting foremost her responsibility as a woman adding "you know what I mean, right?" none of the women believed mothers were naturally better at parenting than fathers and collaborated with their spouses. Eun-joo (32), Soo-jin (37), Eun-kyung (33) actually entrusted much of the caregiving of their preschoolers to their husbands who had more flexible work schedules without feeling conflicted about being absent at home to work late. Having said that, when the topic of child education came up the narratives did reveal gendered ideas regarding a mother's role. Several women expressed serious concerns about juggling work and school related activities. Their narratives about anticipated time strain during a child's school years indicated child educational matters were viewed as one aspect of parenting

that could not be substituted by fathers. Ha-Eun (34-year-old mother of a preschooler)'s explanation why many women quit when their children enter elementary school is telling:

Elementary schools have many holidays and finish at 12:30. Kids with working mothers have to kill time going to one after-school institute to another until their mom comes back from work. Seeing that breaks your heart. Many kids struggle making the transition from nursery to elementary school. At the nurseries they received full care but at elementary school they have to stand on their own. It is a stressful period. Mothers pay a lot of attention to their children so that they can adapt quickly and not fall behind in grades. That is why many working mothers quit then. There is a saying "children with mothers who help them a lot get higher grades." This is especially the case for the first three years.

For several Japanese and Korean mothers across generations, women's ideas about the relationship between mother and child were also connected to how fulfilled they felt in marital/family life and work. The positive case of Eun-Kyung (33), who gave birth to her first-born the year before the interview, exemplifies that entry into motherhood poses less tensions between competing identities when a woman feels satisfied with her spouse's role as partner and parent. Eun-Kyung believed her open-minded husband (he grew up abroad and worked for an American company) and shared domestic and childrearing responsibilities equally. The couple paid a great portion of their salaries to pay for a full-time nanny *and* daycare center so she could return to work which both felt it was worth it. Eun-Kyung did not express feelings of maternal guilt about this arrangement nor sadness about her baby's strong attachment to the nanny who had become a substitute mother after spending five hours a day with the newborn at home. When asked about her priorities at the current life stage, she responded:

I struggle with that dilemma right now. I returned from leave last year November. So I am back at work for about one year. It was really hard to take care of my baby full-time for one year. Now I am happy that I have my own time from eight to six at least, even

though the work is difficult. I don't know. Maybe my priority now is raising a happy family. But if I am not happy, it is hard to create a happy family. If I would be a full-time mom, I am afraid I would push her too much with my expectations of how she should live her life. It is better if I have a work life while she finds out her own ambitions in life. To have that, I need to have a job.

Eun-Kyung's narrative further illustrates that mothers with young children, who have the material resources (financial means and access to trusted childcare services) and relational closeness with husbands (cooperation, emotional support, equal sharing of domestic duties), can have identities as career women and mothers that are inseparable and meaningful on both domains. Indeed, other Korean women who believed pursuing their careers made them better mothers also felt their experiences raising a family made them better professionals. Mi-Young (34) recalled feeling burned out before becoming a mother. Once she became a first-time mother, her routine changed and she felt raising a family enriched her life. Mi-Young received a lot of support from her seniors at work and felt recharged. Although her weekdays were still hectic from early morning to night, she no longer thought about quitting her corporate job and gladly let her parents take care of her two children while her husband did his best to help and take turns using personal days in case of emergencies.

Such positive spillover in both directions (work to family and family to work) also surfaced in the interviews with Japanese mothers. Tomomi (35) felt more fulfilled when she returned to work after spending one year on childcare leave. She was able to enjoy her work and family life because her husband (who worked from home) took on many childrearing tasks and the family-friendly atmosphere in her work group (less emphasis on working hours, respect for employee's work-life balance, awareness of bias against working mothers) that seemed to be the fruits of strong top-down pressure on middle managers to comply by the company president. Megumi (48) thought she got better at dealing with both work related and childrearing problems

because she was forced to reset her mind when coming into the office and returning home to her husband and two children.

If today there is something troubling me in the office, I would worry about it when I go home and I am alone. But, when I cook food and make them [her two children] sleep, I forget it for some time. Maybe I will think it again once I am calm, but I get a break or refresh from it... Even when I was worried about childcare, when I came to office, I concentrated on my work, and forgot the childcare problems for a while. Or sometimes when come back from the office you are irritated, but your mood changes later... This break maybe unwanted but it is good for the mind.

Balancing identities was not as effortless when she just became a mother. She recalled taking care of her daughter on weekdays all by herself while finishing work during the weekends before her company implemented flexible work arrangements. In Megumi's case, positive spillover between two identities clearly could not have been realized without the combination of new family friendly workplace conditions (normalization of telework, reduced workweeks) and the structural support from her husband. When comparing the situational factors of these two women with those who experienced negative spillover, the significance of spouse's employment/level of support and attitudes towards flexible work and work-life balance on the work floor became apparent. It was exactly the combination of the two that was missing in the stories of women like Mi-Young (34), Seo-Yeon (35), Eun-Suh (33), Eun-Joo (32) who all struggled to find meaning in their careers and private life after becoming mothers. In line with older studies of dual-income couples (Coltrane 1989; North 2009), the women in my samples had fairly degendered attitudes towards their careers and sharing housework but less so with regards to their own role as a mother despite some individual variation in level of intensity⁶⁸. As

⁶⁸ The term "good wife, wise mother," used in conjunction with evaluations of work-family strain, occurred as frequently in the narratives of older and younger age cohorts in both countries.

we will see next, the stronger they internalized motherhood ideologies, the more they struggled juggling multiple identities and compromised on their ideal version of parenting and working.

Shifting gender roles, dual parenting, and adjusting expectations to everyday reality

Before (and in the first few years after) childbirth, all mothers across age cohorts in the Korean and Japanese sample had somewhat gendered expectations. Their concerns reflected a strong emphasis on maternal not paternal care until the child reaches three years⁶⁹ and experienced internal conflict about prioritizing career and childrearing demands. Not surprisingly, women in their fifties were more influenced by older models constructed by their parents' generation when they became mothers. These women, raised during a historical period when the "good wife wise mother" ideology prevailed among the new middle-class, could not escape the stereotypical view that it was a woman's virtue to give birth and foster a child into a full-fledged adult capable of functioning in society. This is understandable since normative pressures came from multiple directions. For instance, Fumiko (51-year-old manager at an IT firm) recalled:

I felt pressure that I should be a good wife and wise mother... I thought it was natural to have a child soon after getting married at that time. I spent too much time supporting my daughter. I was very busy. I took paid vacation and participated in PTA, parents' day, and children's gatherings. I have been trapped by fixed ideas on women. I hope younger women give priority to what they want to do. It can be work, family or anything.

⁶⁹ This refers to the myth a child's cognitive and psychological development is compromised when a mother works full-time in the first three years. Although not unique to Korea and Japan, and certainly not uncontested by politicians and scientists alike, gender statistics and empirical studies show that it is still a widely shared belief among women and men in both countries (see Holloway 2010, Kim 2005b).

Others from the same generation tirelessly tried to be as involved in their children's lives as stay-at-home mothers. Without giving up on being a good mother by the standards of society, they managed to the best of their abilities to live up to the multiple roles (wives, mothers, daughters, and professionals) ascribed to them. Unlike most members of their generation, these women had more or less equivalent corporate jobs to those of their husbands (in terms of status and earnings) before motherhood and equally valued their own career. However, after childbirth a gender hierarchy between spouses inevitably emerged. These individuals, clearly products of their time, perceived they had few options other than to do what they were expected to and engage in intensive childrearing despite their inner desire to want more out of work than supplementing family income for the time being. While they (as "responsible" mothers) spent less time at work resulting in motherhood penalties or stalled career progression, their husbands (as "absent" fathers) continued to ascend the corporate ladder and became the largest contributor to family income. In response to structural constraints (incompatibility of women's lifecycle and male-oriented linear promotion ladders) in the workplace, the meaning of career advancement diverged along gender lines. For the working mothers it became a matter of continuation by "leaning out" rather than the arduous strive for timely vertical progression and ongoing skills development by "leaning in" of their spouses.

To women in their fifties like Fumiko (51), who were not exposed to work-family balance or egalitarian parenting ideas when becoming a first-time mother, sacrificing/devaluing their own career pursuits in the early years, and "solo-parenting" were neither fair nor unfair. It was "just the way it was." Without viable options to simultaneously live up to the "good wife, wise mother" and "ideal worker", even the more progressive (and ambitious) women re-enacted the traditional gender roles of their own parents at home and forfeited their already

disadvantaged position in the race for promotion at work. Their husband's detachment from fathering was justified by their stressful jobs or long working hours. Although the husbands were technically not sole providers, they did gain the status of primary breadwinners as their earnings did increase with seniority and this legitimized them as "good fathers". Being an "absent mother" however, was morally unacceptable to these women and they made sure to spend whatever time they had before and after work tending to their children's needs.

For the women in their thirties to early forties, many of whom were raised by employed middle-class mothers, newer yet still gendered parenting ideas⁷⁰ shaped the lens through which they evaluated themselves as first-time mothers. In contrast to the older mothers, they defined being a "good mother" more in terms of securing the socioeconomic future of their children which required them to continue their careers. Many felt guilty about being absent during the day or concerned their children suffered from substitute care arrangements. None of the younger mothers spoke about the absence of fathers, who generally did not make it home before their children's bedtimes, as something damaging to their children's emotional wellbeing. Complaints about their husbands' inertia or incompetence in childrearing were made in the context of women's endless childrearing routines and often chronic sleep deprivation. In almost all cases when both spouses had corporate careers, the women acted as main childcare managers and their husbands as (occasional) helpers. This resonates with an earlier study of American dual-earner couples in the late 1980s (Coltrane 1989) and a more recent study of spousal interaction among Japanese dual-earner couples (North 2009) that both observed a tendency of fathers to assume a helping role when involved in family or housework. Women's own descriptions of their

⁷⁰ These included educational mothers, preschoolers' deservingness of full-time maternal care, mother's emotional support during preschooler's transition from nursery to elementary school, and lunchboxes as symbolic acts of maternal love.

husbands' paternal activities suggest a similar dynamic exists for housework *and* childrearing routines in today's dual earner families in Korea and Japan. To be fair, without knowing their husbands' perspective (spousal interaction was not directly observed and no husbands were interviewed in this study), we cannot tell to what extent the women themselves sustained gendered parenting roles by maternal gatekeeping⁷¹ (Allen and Hawkins 1999) or whether they took charge in response to their husbands' inertia.

A careful reading of women's perspectives in isolation, however, does suggest women's early motherhood ideas (need to be a "perfect mother" or act as primary caregiver) can coexist with equal parenting values (wanting their spouses to be more than helper fathers). In fact, several older women socialized with conservative notions of womanhood (good wife, wise mother ideals) spoke about being let down by their husband's limited involvement in parenting, wanting them to be more than a disciplinary figure in their children's life or "weekend father", or encouraged their husbands to be more pro-active in fathering over the years. The examples of younger women who partially internalized intensive mothering beliefs but also had a critical stance towards dual standards for mothers and fathers in the workplace and the education system or acknowledged multiple actors other than a mother (father, relatives, friends, teachers, community members) are also responsible for a child's development, provides evidence that the child-centeredness of urban middle-class working mothers is not a straight-forward reflection of maternal gatekeeping nor conservative family values. From a comparative perspective, intensive mothering beliefs, while certainly not unique to Japan and Korea⁷², constrain the work-family

⁷¹ The concept "maternal gatekeeping" is defined as mother's reluctance to relinquish responsibility over family matters by setting rigid standards, external validation of a mothering identity, and gender-specific family roles that inhibit greater involvement of fathers in family work and child rearing (Allen and Hawkins 1999).

⁷² In "The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood" Hays (1996, p. 122) argues that intensive mothering, which she defines as "child rearing methods that are child-centered, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive," has evolved over several centuries into the dominant ideology in America.

choices of women married to husbands with corporate jobs more severely when compared to counterparts in many (neo-)liberal societies due to the reinforcing pressures from three interrelated institutions (workplace, education system, and extended family) on a mother's role in (early) child education and wellbeing.

The harmful influence of gendered parenting norms on working mothers' quality of life and leisure time, exacerbated by rising media coverage since the 1990s of successful professional women "who appear to do and have it all" (Chae 2015; Lee 2003), was eminent in both the Korean and Japanese sample. This also manifested in lower self-evaluations of their functioning as professionals, surrogate teachers, and mothers. All women, including the youngest of current mothers, felt pressured to be a "superwoman⁷³" and tried to live up to ideals in both realms. Although impossible, they strove to tend to the child with the same energy and time as stay-at-home mothers while being productive at work like single-minded peers without family responsibilities. For instance, Mi-yeong (34-year-old, mother of two, assistant manager) exemplifies the struggle of today's careerist mothers who are pulled in opposite directions:

In order to succeed in my work and raise a happy family, I should fulfill both the role of career woman and good mother. It takes too much energy to accomplish that. In Korean society, women are primarily held responsible for household work and child rearing. Since I am a professional, and I cannot slack off at work, I have no other choice but to do less at home and let my parents or the daycare center do what I cannot do there. I think I prioritize my work responsibilities... out of necessity.

Mi-yeong's decision to prioritize spending time in the office over hands-on care of her infant was clearly not a free choice but reflected a perceived lack of alternatives to maintain her

⁷³ This phenomenon is also known in the literature as the "super-woman syndrome" and refers to the conflict experienced by Korean and Japanese full-time working mothers between their need to pursue individualization while constrained by strong beliefs related to motherhood (Yamane and Hong 2008).

status in the workplace. Other mothers in their thirties and early forties also went through great lengths (mobilizing whatever resources they could) to create intricate childcare support networks so they could prove to superiors that motherhood had not changed their devotion to work. Miki (43-year-old mother of a 7-year-old, deputy general manager) explained:

Nothing changed in my work by having a baby... Being a mother has not changed my attitude towards work, but I had to work with some time constraints. I concentrated on my work to maintain my results. Also, I became more conscious of producing good results with a team... Family is the most important to me. I could do some work at home, so I would stay with my child in emergency situations... I think there is no problem if I produce desired results to compensate for the inconvenience... I stay [at work] until 7 PM because it is possible for me. My child goes to a private after-school day-care center. They send her home by car.

Like Mi-yeong, Miki primarily resolved work-family dilemmas by adjusting her image of a “devoted mother” and letting others help her fulfill maternal duties. Both women believed “being less of a professional” was out of the question and made sure their productivity at work remained high despite other demands on their time and energy. These cases were certainly not unique and suggest that the work-family behavior of middle-class women with dual devotions may be less influenced by older motherhood ideologies than suggested by scholarship on marriage and family attitudes (Kim 2005b; Park 2008).

Over time women gradually lowered their standards doing less at home, but not at work, once they found themselves stretched out thinly in terms of time and energy. Those with unpredictable work schedules or business trips delegated more parenting responsibilities to their husbands. Ironically, their family-unfriendly workplaces may have provided the necessary impetus for husbands to *do* instead of *believe* in equal parenting. The work-family attitudes of one woman stood out in the Japanese sample. Unlike the others, Hina (40-years old, section

chief) strongly asserted herself and demanded from her husband to take parental leave instead so she could resume her work at an insurance firm as if motherhood had never occurred.

When I got married, I told my husband that I would like to continue working and I would not take leave even if I had a baby. I told him he could take childcare... When I had a baby, I had to take legal maternity leave, but I didn't take a childcare leave. My supervisor asked me if it was really okay with me not to take more leave... If we want them to treat us equally with men, we must show them more eagerness to work than men. If we just work ordinarily, our supervisors would be too considerate of us, and we would end up being off the career track. So, I deliberately demonstrated that I didn't need any special consideration... It was not that I wanted to work like a man, but I wanted to avoid any disadvantage just because of being a woman. So I worked very hard... my husband took childcare leave. I think I am an enemy of every woman who takes childcare leave or works reduced hours. I am a bit embarrassed to say that I did that deliberately, but I worked hard just as before to let them understand that they didn't need to be considerate of me.

What makes this unusual case noteworthy is Hina's assertive stance at home (letting her husband face negative career consequences instead) and lack of agency displayed at work despite her supportive supervisor. Her notion of being treated equally in terms of employment opportunities reflects the dominant image of a competent worker in a hypermasculine environment with a strong work-family binary. The embarrassment about the strategy to conceal her womanhood as a mother in the workplace indicates her decision to forego family commitments that could potentially harm her professional status was not primarily driven by personal preference or egalitarian parenting beliefs. Similarly, sales manager Soo-jin returned immediately after maternity leave and deputy department head Hye-jin shortened the period of childcare leave because of the atmosphere in their work teams.

For ambitious women like Hina, Soo-jin, and Hye-jin, a hypermasculine working environment appears to make alternative ways to achieve career goals other than becoming defeminized professionals and downplaying childrearing commitments inconceivable even when

work-family options become available. Other career invested women, who were the first working mothers in their work groups, had a similar tendency to completely organize family commitments around work responsibilities and emulate hegemonic masculinities in the workplace. Kayoko (56-years old, mother of two, general manager) spoke almost proudly about her ability to work “nearly 150 hours overtime per month until two or three o’clock at night and weekends” while her mother and mother-in-law, but not her husband, took care of routine childcare tasks and emergencies. The work-family ideas of these women resonate with the female executives from Blair-Loy’s (2003) study suggesting that career-committed women in the top layers of Korean and Japanese organizations (and core positions with relatively more power) also tend to be the most diligent practitioners and believers of ideal work devotion schemes, and the least likely to reject them. However, not all senior managers with children became adherents of hypermasculine work devotion schemas⁷⁴. These women were pioneers (first cohort) in utilizing new work-family policies when uptake was highly contentious and redefined themselves as loyal devoted workers with time constraints.

For others, the full-time mothering period while on leave actually made them more grateful of having a corporate career and emotionally attached to the company and its people. In any case, they were not simply more family than career committed. Although navigating family-unfriendly workplaces like Hina or Kayoko, these women asserted themselves despite fear to burden other coworkers or lose their painstakingly earned status of a valued employee. Some had husbands who alternated in taking days off when a child fell ill (or a substitute caregiver was unavailable) while others expected little or no help from their salary men husbands with “old

⁷⁴ Blair-Loy defines work devotion schema “As a general model or ideal type... [that] implies a relationship between employer and manager, in which the manager’s allegiance will be rewarded with upward mobility, financial security, a positive sense of identity and recognition from peers, challenging and autonomous work, collegiality, and even transcendence (2003, p. 22).”

mindsets.” In terms of agency, they were the mirror image of the previous masculinized women in that they claimed their work-family rights at work but not at home⁷⁵.

As pointed out, individual factors (spousal support, childcare support networks, work-family devotions) do not fully explain why the women asserted themselves to varying degrees in either domain. To understand the structural and cultural nature of the variance among women within the same cohort, we must also look at firm-level and workgroup factors. The recollections of the women who claimed their right to family-time, albeit letting their spouse be consumed by work, whether accurate or distorted, showed commonalities in important workgroup dynamics and particularly relational closeness to powerful men in their organizations. This small number of agentic women all mentioned being told directly (by influential authority figures such as a CEO, president, HR director) they “needed to set the right example and pave the way for other women to continue their careers.” Perceived top-down reassurance (or in some cases pressure) seemed to provide the initial push for these pioneers to request childcare leave or a personal day off, go home at a reasonable hour, and potentially risk antagonizing their immediate superiors and coworkers or losing credibility as devoted workers. Equally important, they often had cooperative, not competitive, professional relations with other (team) members on the work-floor and amicable interactions with them in informal settings. They felt “indebted” to coworkers who had supported them during the intensive childrearing years or “fortunate” to have understanding superiors but not apologetic for being less available for office contingencies and overwork. This strongly suggests both collaborative working relations between peers and supportive supervisor-

⁷⁵ The senior managers were all employed by large Japanese domestic firms with similar organizational structures at the time (seniority-based reward and promotion system, dual-career track system for women, underrepresentation of women in career track, absence of female managers, gender segregation in jobs and responsibilities) that just started initiatives to help female regular workers continue their careers after marriage and childbirth.

subordinate relations are necessary preconditions for the normalization of policy uptake by individual working mothers.

All younger mothers (thirties and forties) with entry- to mid-level managerial positions were keenly aware of their legal work-family balance rights and vocal about the aspects of work culture standing in the way of fundamental change. Chung-ja (39-years old, mother of two, deputy general manager)'s critique illustrates the general sentiment among members of her generation.

The work culture does not really enable flexible time. I think we really need more flexible time arrangements. You see in other countries that when employees work from 9:00 to 16:00 or 17:00, it does not affect productivity... From the company perspective, there are too many things that need to be arranged. For instance, if some female team member leaves at 16:00, it may create real problems for the team's operations. Other team members will probably complain. Because of that, employees hardly feel the effect of the current policies on the work floor. If flexible time is used properly, it could be helpful in emergency situations. But this is not the reality. It is also difficult to use vacation days. The workload is too heavy...I want to become a female director having worked for the company this long. I know very well that you can only reach that position by making personal sacrifices such as time. Of course, I want to rise in the organization. But when I think about all the big sacrifices I need to make... I feel overwhelmed. For now, I will just work hard and do my best.

The predicament of younger working mothers like Chung-ja shows we cannot assume the influx of new generations of employees and managers with different work-life values/preferences will naturally lead to more family-friendly cultures or practices in the higher echelons of corporations. Therefore, stronger measures aimed at changing expectations of ideal workers among senior managers and correcting undesired behaviors are vital. I believe this is the missing link in many Korean and Japanese companies that have not succeeded yet in significantly raising the number of women in senior management positions.

Redefining motherhood depending on situation and work-family life stage

Women's ideas about mothering (and fathering) were certainly not fixed. The life stories revealed the significance of motherhood ideologies declined with more first-hand childrearing experience. The red thread running through the reflections of women whose children were now grown up was that they saw themselves as mothers, and their spouses as fathers, in a different light. The entry into motherhood was a major turning point in the lives of women irrespective of age cohort from a gender perspective. Before becoming a mother, university-educated women wanted very different lives than their mothers and certainly did not expect the same level of self-sacrifice to support husbands and children once raising a family of their own. To be precise, in the immediate years following childbirth (not marital life per se) they did become more family-centered and reverted to varying extents to gender-differentiated parenting roles. However, even the first-time mothers who initially became more conservative in their views of family life, replaced preconceived notions of good parenting with more flexible beliefs that changed depending on their work-family situation after some years into motherhood. A plausible explanation for this attitudinal shift in family roles is that women adjust their moral compasses when they realize they cannot do it all (be perfect as mothers and professionals) by themselves (and need support from relatives, care professionals and spouses).

A closer examination of the developmental process described by the mothers indicates a more fundamental process besides coping with reality took place that led them to embrace new family values. Relations with other working mothers in and outside their firms were instrumental in providing a new point of reference (or *yardstick*) in mothering. This finding challenges the life-cycle hypothesis in the literature on family and marriage that on the individual-level there is an association between entry into motherhood/marital life and women's more conservative

family values within age cohorts (Kim and Cheung 2015). The women in my samples became more progressive not conservative, in their beliefs and actions, after more first-hand experience of marital life and childrearing. Their own explanations for the gradual shift frequently addressed conversations with successful female professionals about childrearing under time constraints or interviews with women who talked about how their earlier anxieties turned out ungrounded once children adjusted to not having full-time maternal care and became independent. Exposure to alternative models of mothering through personal dialogue and media strengthened women's sense of entitlement to pursue their individual ambitions and claim personal time to recharge now and then.

Optimistically, it means that experienced mothers in the workplace (who abandoned fixed parenting notions after maturing in their maternal/professional roles) could potentially become key actors in constructing alternative parenting ideologies from the ground up that challenge intensive mothering practices. Indeed, several Japanese women with adult children who "turned out fine" without helicopter mothering shared their personal experiences with female juniors to alleviate anxieties about disadvantaging their children's chances to get into prestigious schools or pass competitive entrance university exams by being less engaged than "education moms." In doing so, they constructed a new discourse among working mothers in their firms questioning the dominant logic of appropriate childrearing at a localized level.

The Japanese women who became mothers in the period before awareness for gender equality redefined being a good mother emphasizing qualitative over quantitative terms. This often involved setting the right example for their children from a distance. In retrospect, they believed being a mother with a work life of her own instilled important values in their daughters and sons that would broaden their outlook and dreams in adulthood. Sakura (59-years old, retired

from senior management at a foreign owned company in Tokyo, founder of a consultancy firm and board member of three Japanese companies) mentioned:

I learned many things [about child development] by reading books or by listening to other people. What is necessary for a child? I studied objectively that being related to many people is good for her growth and not just me alone... It is not just time, but quality time that is important... I may have spent little time with her but made it valuable or played with her even when the house was dirty... because I am working there were many enjoyable experiences [to compensate]. Like staying in Disneyland after coming from business trip, making her come to Hawaii, when I was on a trip there. My company was also quite open about it. Perhaps, those experiences are connected to her present career. She interacted with engineers, and saw the world, maybe that is the reason she wants to be global now.

Similarly, Nozomi (43-year-old mother of two, senior engineer) came to rethink her responsibilities. When her children were in elementary school, she always felt responsible for their grades. Now that her daughter was fifteen years old and ready for junior high school, she stopped pondering over her academic achievements (or prestigious school she was able to get into). For women like Nozomi, being a good mother changed into treating their children as independent beings and allowing them to make their own choices. This was most pronounced in the case of Fuyumi (51-years old, mother of two, section chief editing) who did not feel personally responsible for her son's failure according to societal standards. When asked if she felt others blamed her for her son's gap year (*rōnin*), she candidly responded:

Some do. Parents should not spoil their children and we are not their teachers. If we force them to study, they will blame us for failures. My son will start studying when he sets his mind and heart to it. But my son did not like studying. I have been waiting and waiting for a long time for him to wake up... I do not really worry about whether he has academic ability or not. He was not accepted to a university of first choice, and he decided not to enter another university. He did not blame others for that. I am glad I have been waiting until he gets motivated.

In their own way, all three women rejected (or abandoned) the notion working mothers harm their children and are to blame when they have problems following the rigid trajectories of the educational system. In fact, all mothers of teenagers and adult children questioned the fixation of others from their generation on their children's early development, education, and smooth transition to adulthood. Whether children without mothers on top of tutoring, entrance exam preparations, or nurturing relations with teachers experience more difficulties keeping up with peers is a topic for another dissertation altogether. The point here is that mothers not fathers or educators are primarily held accountable (and blamed) for how a child develops. The normative pressure felt by working mothers that they are responsible for the academic achievements of children, and their transformation into full-fledged adults, exemplifies the connection between gendering processes in organizations and other areas of economy and society (Acker 1998).

Another source for the intensified pressures on working mothers of school-aged children was related to inefficiencies in the educational system. Korean women with older children believed mothers had to compensate for the shortcomings of schools. Their critical stance indicates they believed there were other reasons beyond their control that also influenced the achievements of their children. For many mothers of preschoolers, concerns how they could fulfill expectations regarding child education while working full-time and not "letting" them fall behind peers with hands-on education moms⁷⁶ started shortly after childbirth and influenced their ideas about their future in their companies. The deliberations of Eun-joo (32-year-old mother of two, assistant manager) demonstrate male-oriented rules of promotion and flexibility stigma are

⁷⁶ This phenomenon refers to the intense focus on a child's (early) educational achievements as their exclusive sphere of responsibility and social contribution by middle-class highly educated women raised from the 1980s onwards in Korea (Park 2008).

particularly detrimental for the professional identity of careerist women with preschoolers who are not immune to norms regarding a mother's active role in her child's adjustment to school life.

In Korea, children need their mothers the most when they enter elementary school. I am now in a stage that I worry the most about my future. Should I give up my career for the sake of my children? If I cannot find a caretaker when they go to elementary school, I must quit. When I started, I had the dream to get promoted to the top management of this company. I was eager to take on new challenges and worked like my male colleagues. Even getting married did not change that. Now that I have children, I find I have a handicap. I cannot come to the office during weekends like others in case there are sudden things to take care off or meetings. That is a disadvantage for me in getting promoted. It worries me. If the situation at work changes and I can leave earlier by the time my children enter elementary school or make an arrangement with other working mothers in their class, I may be able to endure that period. But if it continues to be like now, I have no choice but to quit. I cannot quit my children after all.

The finding that even the fortunate women who received structural support from parents or in-laws and spouses with shorter and more flexible working hours anticipated intensified work-family conflict from the time their children started elementary school indicates educational responsibilities are more resistant to change (equal sharing or outsourcing) than other parenting responsibilities. All women happily delegated routine childrearing activities to others such as cooking family meals, taking and picking up children from nursery or daycare, cleaning up after the children, getting them ready for bed without feeling they fell short in maternal duties. Yet most could not perceive alternative configurations to pave the way for their children's academic success and tacitly assumed they had to be on top of homework, tutoring, school entrance exams, communication with teachers and PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) events. This ambivalence shows the fiercely competitive environment in educational institutions in Korea is a crucial factor that intensifies the work-life strain of current mothers with corporate jobs long after childbirth.

Social dynamics at the work-group level rather than individual diversities or family situation seemed to make the difference in whether early mothering concerns developed into an optimistic outlook (confidence in managing a career and child education matters) or pessimistic outlook (fear of having to give up on a corporate career as a responsible mother). Positive aspects like a cooperative team atmosphere, presence of other young parents, flexible supervisors who, albeit unofficially, allowed subordinates some freedom when to come into or leave the office or when to take days off, and stimulating job contents helped women through periods when they were confronted with unavoidable limitations in their functioning as attentive mothers and productive professionals. Negative aspects (i.e., competition and distrust among coworkers, little diversity in team composition, supervisors with biases against employees with family responsibilities, emphasis on facetime, and monotonous job contents) raised doubts whether it was worthwhile pursuing a career at all costs and “slack off at home.” Seo-yeon (35 years-old, mother of two, section chief) is a case in point.

In our team, I am the only one who works late all the time. It would be nice if the company divides the workload more evenly among the team members. Also, it would save me a lot of stress if there was more flexibility in starting time in the mornings. I wish there was less of a culture that stresses coming to the office so early...I worry if I continue to work this hard on my own at nights, I won't be able to put my heart in it... or in my family. If I am not content and happy at work, I will bring that home and my family life and marriage will suffer. I need to manage those things. For female employees, managing those responsibilities are the biggest challenges.

The contrasting interpretations of Korean and Japanese women offer a deeper insight into how mothers reconcile competing devotions/expectations and the particular significance of the economic and social quality of jobs. Whether a job is perceived by mothers as qualitatively rewarding, and prestigious/economically rewarding by significant others, both operated as

powerful rationales to justify being absent at home or use financial resources to buy marketized childcare services. The Korean and Japanese mothers of preschoolers were comparably concerned about the additional work-family pressures associated with school-related matters but differed in expectations how it would impact their corporate careers. For the Japanese women, the worries were transient and did not fundamentally change their long-term career perspective whether they worked in a family-friendly or hostile environment believing they could at least keep their jobs until retirement. For the Korean women, the anticipated incompatibility of work and child education demands were a constant source of anxiety and made them question whether they could keep their jobs. Careerist women in each country clearly diverged in the way they made sense of the looming dilemma. The Japanese women tacitly accepted the period would temporarily slow their career advancement but did not lose their general sense of entitlement to a corporate job. In contrast, Korean women seriously doubted whether they would be allowed to stay on the job and evaluated if their current career path was sustainable long-term and worthwhile pursuing at all costs. When using Hobson's concepts, we could see this as tentative evidence that the interaction between high social quality of jobs (institutional level), less gendered notions of working mothers (firm-level), and relations with family members (women's situated agency) is of major importance to the sense of entitlement of working mothers to improve their own quality of life and seek self-actualization.

This could also be explained by the idea of deservingness (Oh 2018) that evaluations who deserves to work depend on a mother's agency (work-family conflict, motherhood ideology, family background, aspirations for paid work, opportunities and constraints at work) but also on the qualities (security, autonomy, schedule control) and status of the job (occupational prestige,

financial stability)⁷⁷. The relatively higher job security (long-term employment), schedule control (availability of flexibility policies), and chance to change jobs (job-rotation systems) may have prevented Japanese women to lose their sense of deservingness to work. Korean women's doubts whether their careers are worthy sacrificing involvement in child education seems mostly rooted in negative aspects of their jobs (i.e., fierce competition among coworkers, precarious status of working mothers, unpredictable working hours, inflexible schedules, or limited intrafirm mobility) rather than anticipated work-family conflict or child-centered attitudes. In any case, there exists an intricate relationship between motherhood and work ideologies, women's (in)ability to give meaning to multiple identities amidst structural constraints/opportunities, and work-family choice freedoms.

Both first-hand experiences (positive/negative) with immediate supervisors when requesting childcare leave, leaving on time, or taking days off, and (success/failure) work-family balance stories from more senior working mothers in their organizations shaped a woman's perceived negative spillover from family-work and work-family. Women with predominantly negative female role models (queen bees and masculine childless or divorced female managers) lost their sense of entitlement to a career and work-family balance during the intensive child rearing years. In contrast, women who had more diverse female role models in their vicinity and learned how other working mothers dealt with competing devotions in real life believed they had the right to take time off from work as long as it did not create problems for other team members.

The stories of Korean mothers with strong egalitarian gender role beliefs before childbirth revealed help from parents or in-laws had both positive and negative implications for

⁷⁷ Although Oh (2018) applies this framework in the context of working mothers seeking kinship child-care support, it is reasonable to assume similar processes are at work when women make decisions about career and child education priorities.

their agency in negotiating work-life balance. Kinship support freed women from much of the essential care of preschoolers (and substantial costs when hiring nannies) during weekdays and gave them piece of mind to concentrate on work. However, their involvement also meant parenting dilemmas became more complex and infused with conservative motherhood ideologies⁷⁸. In some cases, “paying some stranger that kind of money to look after your children” or “leaving a toddler at a nursery” was deemed unacceptable to parents (in-laws). The ambitious women with parents who engaged in “intensive grandparenting” (preparing meals, providing constant stimulation, cleaning up, and playing with their preschoolers during weekdays) all had ambivalent views about such involvement. On the one hand, they were grateful for the practical support that freed the necessary time and energy to keep their careers (not jobs). On the other hand, the judgement of family members from a previous generation made them feel they had to justify how they spent their time when they didn’t work.

The complex family dynamics described by women from post-baby boom generations brings to life the situated nature of agency in work-life balance choices of today’s mothers in Korea. It indicates women’s childrearing decisions are perhaps shaped more directly by the involvement (and hierarchical gaze) of grandparents than spouses when reliance on family support is the primary substitute for maternal care comparable to the realities described by Japanese working mothers who co-reside with in-laws or married a first son (North 2009). Women’s ambivalence towards reliance on kinship support in childrearing was also connected to ideas about a daughter’s responsibility to protect the wellbeing of parents.

⁷⁸ A recurring theme in the Korean interview data was that help from older family members created intergenerational tensions between a couple’s own desire, and practical necessity, for a dual-parenting family configuration and myths regarding superior female childrearing instincts rooted in the “good wife wise mother” ideology (賢母良妻) of their parents’ generation. This resonates with older findings in a study of Japanese dual-income families with young children in Toyama Prefecture (North 2009).

From a moral standpoint, asking ageing parents to engage in labor intensive childrearing weighed heavily on the more emancipated mothers in the sample. For instance, Eun-Kyung (33) articulated “most women ask their mothers to take care of their children. But I really don’t want to do that because she has her own life to enjoy. She already had a hard time taking care of me, I don’t want to put her through taking care of my baby too. She should not have to do that. She has to enjoy her life, as I want to enjoy my life.” Eun-Kyung felt so sorry for the arduous life her mom had taking care of 14 family members that she accepted the financial burden of hiring a full-time baby-sitter to look after her toddler. The preference to spend a significant portion of their salaries for childcare services instead of free support from parents—which would appear irrational from a market economy standpoint-- shows women do not merely act like *homo economicus*⁷⁹ when it comes to childrearing behavior. Members of Eun-Kyung’s generation with similar sentiments spoke about “not wanting to burden their parents who already had a tough work life of their own” or “were struggling with health issues.” These statements show one’s belief about being a “good daughter” (*filial piety*) is an additional cognitive dimension that pushes current mothers towards marketized childcare. From a gender perspective, these cases exemplify that today’s mothers do not necessarily reproduce the interpersonal relations of the family structures that produced them (Chodorow 1978). On the contrary, gendered childhood parenting models can also propel university educated working mothers with egalitarian family attitudes in the opposite direction when starting a family of their own rather than reverting to the configurations they were socialized under.

Although working mothers in other neo-liberal capitalist societies are also more subjected to social scrutiny than fathers, moral beliefs about a child’s emotional dependency on mothers

⁷⁹ A point frequently made by sociologists in the context of motherhood decisions of middle-class urban women in the United States such as Hayes (1996).

and entitlement to maternal care have been particularly resilient in Korea and Japan to this day. It is, therefore, not surprising nearly all mothers interviewed irrespective of age or education were susceptible to the critical gaze of relatives, friends, educators, and other parents in their communities. The women raised by mothers who worked when they were young believed it was natural to continue work after childbirth and share parenting and housework with their partners, yet very few could escape dominant mothering images. Despite rejecting the logic of intensive mothering on a personal level, these women acted as primary caretakers in the evenings and weekends once their children were born to compensate for their absence adjusting their behavior as if there was an “invisible audience” inside the home.

The analysis thus far shows there were some common patterns in the women’s life stories despite some individual variation. Firstly, earlier ideas about how to be a “good mother” changed a great deal after actually becoming a working mom with newer *intensive mothering* norms replacing older *good wife, wise mother* ideals, and the significance of motherhood ideologies typically declined after children entered elementary school. Secondly, during transitions (nursery to elementary school, entry to high-school/college) in their children’s lives women were most susceptible to cultural models in reconciling their identities as devoted professionals and mothers as they juggled demands on their time by employers and educators. Thirdly, mothers who felt fulfilled in work and marital life had less gendered beliefs about maternal care (dual-earner/dual-parenting) and a mother’s role in child education (viewing a child as “individual being” responsible for his or her own achievements). Lastly, as could be expected, women went through several phases of motherhood in which they increasingly contested various systems holding mothers primarily responsible for childrearing (or education) and developed personalized interpretations of being a “good mother” with a career (work life) of her own as well as a

renewed view of children as “independent beings.” Altogether, these findings confirm women adjust their work to family identities and not the other way around (Bielby 1992) and work-family commitments are socially constructed and influenced by normative ideas about motherhood and ideal workers (Blair-Loy 2003).

Women’s daily experiences of the “Second Shift”

How exactly did the working mothers navigate between the ideal and realistic allocation of their time and energy? The first thing working mothers in both countries talked about when asked about their own work-family balance was severe and continuous time (and energy) deprivation. This sentiment was particularly strong among the Korean and Japanese mothers of preschoolers whether they had help from parents or not. In the extreme, women bluntly responded “I have none.” Much like the employees of a family-friendly American corporation in Hochschild’s *The Time Bind* (1997), women with strong career aspirations prior to motherhood often perceived the ‘second shift’ at home as more strenuous, and perhaps less rewarding, than the hours spent at work confessing “I’m busier when I return home in the evening.” Interestingly, none of the Korean but quite a few Japanese women mentioned positive spillover between work and family life⁸⁰. For instance, Megumi (48) recalled feeling refreshed at work, “sipping coffee alone or eating lunch someone else prepared” after returning from one and a half years childcare leave. In the office, she wore the hat of professional fully concentrating on her work and forgetting about her children’s troubles. Once home, doing simple routines like cooking meals or

⁸⁰ Given the sample limitations, the question remains whether this between country difference reflects diverging work-family attitudes such as a depreciation of domestic work on a general-level. Nonetheless, when taking women’s perceived freedom to schedule their own worktimes or use personal days the contrast (flexibility stigma in the Korean sample; normalization of flexibility policies in the Japanese sample) suggests the family-friendly culture in their workgroups, not women’s dispositions, made the difference.

putting children to bed helped her to reset her mind and forget about troubles at work. The emerging picture was that home became a place of work in addition to the workplace for Korean mothers while both were complimentary sites to recharge for some Japanese mothers. Now I will return to a deeper exploration of women's experiences of the second shift (time bind) in conjunction with constraining and mitigating situational factors.

For many, the second shift already started in the mornings before work. Women married to spouses with corporate careers for whom family support networks were unavailable had hectic mornings trying to get their toddlers ready for a day at the nursery. Before going to work, these women had already finished a "morning shift" characterized by emotionally exhausting battles with their children to brush teeth, finish breakfast, and get dressed. When they finally managed to get to childcare facilities on time during rush hour, many first-time mothers felt more guilt than relief. Nozomi (43) recalled "In the mornings, I went to the nursery with my children...and they cried. Then I left the nursery and cried in the park." The mixed bag of emotions, logistical issues, and intense time-pressure sometimes took its toll on women's health as several mentioned "feeling stressed," "burned out," or "exhausted" by the time they started work. The fate of women who had costly but reliable nannies or relatives coming to the house was better in that they, at least, were spared intensive labor in the mornings but not in the evenings. In contrast to their less fortunate counterparts, they experienced less negative spillover from home-to-work and were able to focus on their jobs while in the office.

The descriptions of daily routines corroborated women's perceived strain by far exceeded objective standards. Women spent nearly every waking moment at home on maternal duties (making sure the children's needs were met from bathing, clothing, preparing meals and lunch boxes, playtime, to bedtime stories) or arranging substitute maternal care. Yet, they still

expressed feelings of not being able to do enough as a mother. For instance, Mi-young (34) a mother of two offers a glimpse of a normal day of the week.

Once I am done getting myself ready for work, I need to arrange the meals and clothes for my daughter. Whatever time I have left in the morning is spent on that rather than having breakfast. I eat something small when I arrive at work now. In fact, the situation changed only recently. In the evening, my father provides dinner for us, but I still need to prepare the side dishes. When I come home, I immediately freshen up and have a rushed meal. Then, I immediately wash the dishes and do the laundry. After I put the laundry in the wash machine, I clean the house. When I am finished with that, I tend to my daughter. I bath her, shampoo, and comb her hair. When that is done, she wants to play for at least an hour. In between, I hang the laundry, prepare the clothes she will wear tomorrow, put lotion on her skin, put rice in the cooker and make side-dishes. Then, I read a book to my daughter and put her to sleep. I usually go to bed around 12:30. I just crash from fatigue.

Although Mi-young received structural help from her parents, her self-reported second shift at home (nonstop sequence of domestic chores and childrearing activities with no time to rest) still seemed excessive to an outsider. Mi-young's hectic schedule was not unique. On average, women with preschoolers slept about four to five hours a night feeling physically and emotionally overwhelmed to make it through the day. There were a handful of women relying on marketized childcare who declared relatively little work-family strain. Their days, while also busy and unpredictable, were more balanced in the sense it allowed both flexibility in task allocation and energy to enjoy time spent at work and with the family. What enabled these exceptional cases to feel enriched and content with their functioning in both domains? When putting women's *and* their spouse's work situations under the microscope, it became evident that the answer lies in the increased involvement of husbands who are self-employed or have autonomy in time management.

My interpretation of the limited impact of gender egalitarian values on the daily realities of women with young children is that during this phase of motherhood the entitlement of a child

to maternal care outweighs women's own sense of entitlement to well-being the most. This is simply because the unpredictability of early childrearing leaves little room, if any, for self-reflection. As one Korean mother of two recalled, "I cannot even remember the first ten years after my children were born. It takes until the children enter the fourth year of elementary school... it is inevitable that most energy goes to the child. About 70% of time and energy is spent on child rearing, and the remaining 30% on work...working women with young children don't have enough energy left." What is telling about her choice of wording is that Soon-ja, a seasoned human resource manager in charge of work-family balance policies, did not question "why it is inevitable." This reveals the power of what some feminist scholars call the contemporary version of domesticity that rests on "the entitlement of employers to hire ideal workers [with immunity from family work], for men to be ideal workers, and for children to have mothers whose lives center around caregiving (Williams 2001, p. 39)."

Negotiating Fair Divisions of Domestic Work

How women assert themselves in the workplace is connected to their agency at home. First of all, I must emphasize that the Korean and Japanese women in my samples appeared far more assertive in negotiating a more balanced division of unpaid labor with their spouses than the image of superwomen who accept their fate working full-time and doing all the housework and caregiving. In many of the stories about spousal interaction and marital life, women described occasions where they "trained" their husbands to do more over the years using various strategies. When spouses did not respond to repeated requests, women resorted to other ways from positive encouragement by praise or reducing their own tasks, to simply forcing them to take over housework by being less available at home for work reasons. A common pattern was

that these women did less at home and increased the time spent at work while their husbands did more and more over the years, mostly out of necessity.

On the whole, women's narratives about childrearing typically described routine activities (getting kids ready for school, helping with homework, bathing, telling bedtime stories) by mothers or other women (mothers-in-law, grandmothers, nannies, au-pairs) and helping out (occasional scolding, taking kids to nurseries/schools or picking them up) by husbands. Although most women in both countries expressed some dissatisfaction with their husbands' inertia or incompetence in childrearing and homemaking, especially in the early parenthood years, years of persuasion bore some fruits. Several mentioned their old-fashioned husbands now took some initiative preparing meals or cleaning up and spent more time with the kids on weekends. For example, Chie (48) explained she was so busy with business trips and nightshifts that her husband "had to do the housework himself because there was no one to make dinner." Nowadays her husband took initiative getting up earlier than her to make breakfast and boxed lunches for her and their 17-year-old son and also started ironing. Like Chie, Haruna (50) mentioned her husband now buys groceries and waits for her at home whenever she works late and added jokingly "the secret is that women should not do household chores too much. If women do everything, men will take it for granted." In both cases, the women's working conditions were primarily responsible for the increased time their husbands spent on housework.

There were some exceptional cases in which wives took on helper-roles while their husbands acted as managers⁸¹. High-achievers like Hina (40), Haruna (50) and Soo-jin (37) had

⁸¹ Coltrane made a useful distinction between managing versus helping dynamics in his explorative study of how twenty dual-earner couples with school aged children in California divide household labor and parenting. In manager-helper family dynamics, mothers take charge over planning and initiating various tasks while fathers wait until they are told what to do. In families with sharing dynamics, fathers take initiative and also assume responsibility over at least some childcare matters and housework tasks (Coltrane 1989).

in common that they earned more than their husbands, had managerial jobs with unpredictable working hours (and overwork) in highly competitive and male-oriented fields, and married partners who would support their single-minded pursuit of a career. These women did not however engage in reversed gender role compensation behavior (doing more at home so their husbands would not be hurt in their masculinity)⁸².

The case of Yuki (43), a mother of three, illuminates that the help of parents/in-laws also changes the gender role dynamics when dividing housework. Although raised by parents with strong gender roles expectations saying “you should smile a lot as a woman and your brother needs courage as a man,” she did not agree with it at all and asked her spouse repeatedly during the early years of marital life. When asked why her husband does not help so much, she responded “His mother helps us, so I guess he thinks she is substituting his place.” Yuki’s example illustrates that the presence of a helping parent can enable fathers to reproduce gendered housework patterns and constrain mothers’ sense of entitlement to negotiate greater involvement of their spouses. Having said that, support from in-laws did not always reinforce a gendered housework division. For instance, the hard-working Eun-joo (32), a mother of two boys, had a husband with an even more challenging job at a bank and longer working hours than her. His parents (who lived far away) moved in with them and helped a lot during weekdays as both of them came home after their children’s’ bedtimes. Nonetheless, she felt her husband did a lot during weekends saying “If I do the dishes, he does the laundry or watches the children on his own initiative. He is very attentive. If I want to go out sometimes to meet my friends, he is supportive and watches our sons.” Her spouse also took responsibility as a parent in emergency

⁸² Lee (2014) argues that Korean women are particularly sensitive to their husbands feelings when they earn more money or have better jobs and tend to increase housework activities to compensate for the reversed gender roles.

situations using vacation days whenever their children had high fevers and his parents could not take care of them.

Interestingly, the only women who believed they shared housework entirely equally with their husbands were married without children. These women like Mai (28), Yuka (38), and Jimin (31) all had husbands of similar ages, wages, and job ranks. They rationalized the equal division foremost by their financial contribution to household income and working hours, not gender role beliefs⁸³. For them, dividing housework was not something that had to be negotiated or preplanned, it was more an ad hoc collaboration with each performing tasks within time constraints. This indicates that the presence of children matters for the perceived naturalness of gendered divisions of housework.

When combined, the cases reveal who does what at home is not set in stone, and how couples negotiate tasks, varies over the years depending on each spouse's employment situation, age of children but also the role of other family members such as in-laws, parents, and children in housework. The contrasting experiences of women are of theoretical significance in two ways. First, the presence of preschoolers appears to increase the time most wives (not husbands) end up doing housework regardless of egalitarian gender role beliefs, earnings, job responsibilities, or work schedules⁸⁴. This underscores the limitations of the time availability hypothesis, especially when both husbands and wives have corporate jobs, and confirms socially constructed mother-centered parenting beliefs sometimes override both spouses' egalitarian beliefs (Harris and

⁸³ These individual cases challenge the observation that paid work and economic bargaining power of wives barely account for husbands' housework participation based on the 2009 Time Use Survey Data of Statistics Korea of 2,654 couples in their late forties (Lee 2014).

⁸⁴ Bianchi and colleagues observed a similar pattern in their analysis of time-diary data from samples of American adults between 1965-1990. They found that children of all ages increase the gender gap in time spent on housework with the greatest increase for preschoolers. While children increase housework hours for both mothers and fathers, it does so relatively more for mothers (Bianchi 2000).

Estevez 2017). Second, when younger cohorts of husbands and wives have similar ages, levels of education, equivalent jobs (social status/job rank) *and* salaries, they are more likely to not just believe it is natural but actually share housework more equally. This could indicate that wives' relative resources carry relatively more weight than other factors (e.g., gender ideology, socialization, practical demands, perceptions of fairness, family composition, etc.)⁸⁵ to explain housework divisions when applied to younger generations of Korean and Japanese dual-earner couples than commonly believed. Although the small number of observations does not offer substantive evidence to make strong claims, the observations above do resonate with previous statistical analyses of survey data on dual-earner couples' housework/time arrangements in Korea and Japan (Strober and Chan 1998; Tsuya and Bumpass 2004). More importantly, my findings indicate that at least more university educated dual-earner couples with regular jobs are reconfiguring less gendered housework divisions in response to new macro-economic realities and shifting societal norms. The last section of this chapter explores how this all relates to how women assert themselves in the workplace when negotiating a better work-life balance.

Mothers' Agency Freedoms in the Workplace

The presence of work-life balance policies and services in the workplace says very little about the lived experiences and actual uptake (accessibility of policies) of female employees. I will now disentangle the multitude of factors that improve women's choice freedoms to make work-life balance claims at work and benefit from them. The analysis focuses on the ways

⁸⁵ Theoretical approaches used by family sociologists to explain the degree of equity in time allocation to housework generally focus on a combination of factors such as relative resources (education, income, occupation), socialization, ideology (sex role attitudes, other nontraditional attitudes), time availability (wives/husbands market work), demand/capability (number of children), and lifecycle (age of wife/husband, years married, stage in family life cycle) (Godwin 1991).

women utilize the two most common policies, that is parental leave and flexible work arrangements.

Parental leave uptake: How do women convert capabilities into agency?

All the women in the Korean sample were entitled to 12 months parental leave after childbirth according to company regulations. For the women in the Japanese sample, the length of childcare formally allowed by their companies ranged between one and two years. Lack of awareness was clearly not an issue for the women interviewed. All knew about their formal entitlements to work-family policies, as well as the ways to request them. Consistent with previous studies, most leave takers restricted the time away from work to a maximum of six months because of negative career concerns (motherhood penalty) and becoming a burden to coworkers (Kim 2018; Takahashi 2013).

Nevertheless, all women in this study exerted their rights to some extent including those with superiors who expressed hostility towards uptake. By requesting leave, albeit shorter than desired, and resuming their duties at work after return, they challenged the conservative ideas about motherhood among senior male managers with full-time housewives. What do the exceptional cases of women who actually took the whole leave period reveal about the conversion process from policies to practices?

Eun-kyung (a 33-year-old sales assistant manager) explained what enabled her to take the full period of 12 months parental leave.

I talked to my team leader first. My manager really understood my situation. In fact, my absence would affect the work process in my whole team since I built a big client base over the years. Now, my manager told me he was very concerned about that when I said I am pregnant and I need to take leave. Yet, he understood it was a very important time for

me as a woman... Another very important reason for being able to take such a long leave was that I wasn't really in sales at that moment... I took a step back and asked to be transferred to the sales support team... My team leader is really understanding... He once told me that he wants to work with me for a long time. To make that possible, he shows understanding of my family responsibilities.

What is telling about the narrative is that the arrangement between Eun-kyung and her supportive supervisor unintentionally reproduced gendered notions about working mothers with young children. While her job change after entry into motherhood (to a less challenging job) enabled her to continue work, ideal worker expectations attached to sales professionals nevertheless thwarted her career trajectory (to a supporting role). It is hard to interpret Eun-kyung's decision to take a step back as a free choice, rather it seems to have been a reaction to structural constraints in her work group. Without alternative workstyle models (she was the only woman with a child in her team), she perceived the step back as the only way to have a long career in sales. Moreover, Eun-kyung did not view her situation as unfair but considered herself lucky saying "All the people in my surrounding like team leader and coworkers are really understanding of my situation as a working mother. But my friend who works at another department feels uncomfortable to hang out with her male manager and colleagues even now. She feels a little left out because she does not go drinking with them. It is hard for her to nurture personal relations." Eun-kyung later admitted she no longer aspires to get promoted to the top as she once did before becoming a mother. To an outsider, Eun-kyung's justification of the promotion system and practices may seem puzzling as these indirectly pushed her to lean out the managerial track. However, social psychology studies show it is not unusual for people, especially when they are dependent upon authority figures, to defend and reinforce existing social arrangements and support social hierarchies even when it is not in their own interest (Toorn et al. 2011). Although system justification theory is beyond the scope of this dissertation,

it helps to understand why several women in the Korean sample did not perceive biased practices against working mothers in their companies as unfair. Since subordinates in Korean companies are highly dependent on immediate superiors for promotion, this power dynamic motivates them to justify and rationalize the system.

Mi-young (a 34-year-old assistant manager, mother of two) was one of the few women in her company who used more than eight months parental leave twice.

I was lucky that my team manager and co-workers were very understanding. Since other team members also have children, they were considerate of my situation even though they are men. I was able to take sufficient time off because my team leader did not tell me to return quickly. In fact, during my absence someone was recruited from outside to do my work. Due to the specialist contents, my work could not be transferred to other team members, and they hired another specialist that took over my tasks and stayed afterwards. I was very fortunate as I did not have to worry about placing a burden on other team members. My experience truly is a rare case in our company.

This unusual case shows how general staffing practices are connected to workplace dynamics that strengthen or weaken women's sense of entitlement to use their rights to childcare leave provisions. Mi-young was fortunate that her boss hired a temporary replacement-- a rare practice in Korean and Japanese firms (Brinton and Mun 2015; Takahashi et al. 2013)-- which prevented hostile attitudes from coworkers towards her uptake as her workload was not transferred to others. Indeed, as these scholars addressed, the transfer of workloads on other team members when someone takes leave is a major hurdle for employees' policy uptake.

The experiences of Eun-kyung and Mi-young confirm the importance of supervisor support in normalizing work-family policy uptake found in previous studies (Brinton and Mun 2015; Mun and Brinton 2015). In contrast to mothers with managerial positions, both women were able to escape the working time regime and work overload due in part to their relatively

junior status. However, not all assistant managers were in a position to use their right to parental leave. In addition to supervisor attitudes and women's job rank, the size of the work group and dominant views of policy utilization among senior managers organization-wide also mattered. For instance, assistant manager Ha-eun (34) worked for a gender-skewed pharmaceutical company and did not believe any policy could change the actual utilization of female employees because "the senior managers still have male-oriented views about the utilization of parental leave and many are against it." As the interview progressed, it became clear that her skepticism was grounded in a first-hand experience.

In reality, I was only able to go on maternity leave. My team is rather small and only me and one other member are in charge of education and HR. In larger teams, it is easier to divide the workload among several members. In my case, my colleague had to do twice as much work, so I had to come back quickly. There are other women who just use parental leave expecting that they may quit later mid-career anyways or move to another company with better conditions. But ambitious women, deliberately use short periods of leave. That is the reality.

By the end of the interview, Ha-eun candidly said "I think policies cannot help. They just look good for the outside world but don't make a real difference for working mothers. It is not that the existence of a policy enables you to use it freely." Ha-eun's case shows at the work-group level, both vertical (supervisor-subordinate) and horizontal (team members) relations are relevant in shaping the agency freedoms of female employees who intend to make use of work-family policies. The fact that even the Korean working mothers employed by the gender-balanced fashion company mentioned systemic bias of supervisors against leave takers (lower performance evaluations after resuming their duties) indicates a high ratio of female employees with availability of policies does not naturally speed up normalization of policy use and additional measures are needed to improve accessibility. The interviews with five male

supervisors in their company corroborated that these women's perceptions reflected a shared reality. A team manager (50) articulated the common stance of male supervisors in their fifties and above.

From the perspective of a manager, dealing with that [working mothers' leave requests] issue is the hardest. When a woman goes on leave, we cannot replace her by some temporary worker. The workload has to be divided among existing team members since she will return to work eventually. This has implications for the grading as well. We also have to facilitate the comeback to work. This is for both the company and the person who goes on leave the most difficult part... There is also a non-monetary burden involved with parental leave. 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. Then, 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.

All men interviewed believed managing subordinates who intend to and use parental leave to be "burdensome," "problematic for workflow," or "disruptive to team dynamics and harmony." Although some did appreciate the business case argument (retention of female core workers), they lacked enthusiasm for (and willingness to fully practice) work-family policies. They clearly framed the policies through a gender lens as "women's issues" or "private matters women should solve on their own without hurting the company."

These accounts corroborate that, at the organizational level, a hostile atmosphere towards policy uptake in middle management and (in)direct discouragement by supervisors are major impediments for normalization and could potentially lead to policies losing internal legitimacy when individuals perceive a large and persisting gap between policy and practice. On this point, I agree with Mun and Brinton (2015 p. 358) that internal legitimacy of parental leave is critical for women's use of leave. This also suggests, as Takahashi and colleagues (2013) pointed out, policies that do not address the underlying assumptions (ideal worker image, working time

regime, mother's primary responsibility in childcare) have little potential to improve the discrepancy between the promises of work-life balance policies and individual employees' perceived accessibility to the services.

Working mothers' access to flexible work arrangements

Caregiving responsibilities obviously continue after return from leave. Flexible work arrangements have the potential to alleviate some of the work-family strain and enrich family life during the intensive childrearing years but only if individuals feel free to use them (Breugh 2008; Kelley et al. 2008; Kim and Parish 2020). While childcare leave policies aim to increase the time an employee spends in the workplace, flexible work arrangements intend to do the opposite. What then are preconditions that enable working mothers to reap the benefits from work-life arrangements that reduce time spent in the workplace?

Several Japanese firms in this study, following the global trend among industry leaders, experimented with flexible work initiatives to help female regular employees juggle their dual responsibilities. What encourages professional and managerial women in Japanese firms, where flexibility stigma and motherhood penalty are particularly prominent, to demand more autonomy in work scheduling once they resume their duties? And how do women on reduced hours or telework schedules resolve moral dilemmas that arise from competing cultural schemas (work devotion vis-à-vis family devotion) and confront flexibility stigma (gendered notions of ideal/devoted workers)? The following analysis deals with these questions and is restricted to the experiences of Japanese women since their Korean counterparts were not entitled to individual flexible work arrangements.

The types of flexible work arrangements used by the women were reduced working hours (6/7 hour work-days, 4 workdays/week), flextime (individual control over start and finish times), telework (home-based, satellite office, café, business trips), and free agent workspaces (non-fixed desks shared across departments). According to the HR informants, working time restriction (no overwork, reduction of regular office hours) and flextime were typically targeted at working mothers. All women on reduced working hour schedules and alternative working hours in the Japanese sample were indeed mothers with young children. The perception and utilization of telework and free agent workspaces were less gendered. In most surveyed companies, women and a growing number of men regardless job rank or family situation were among the users. It is noteworthy that many women interviewed who used other arrangements aimed to increase autonomy over work schedules and place of work were single and childless. This may reflect the recent change in discourse by Prime Minister Abe's administration and major employers to promote work-life balance in terms of "work- and lifestyle reform of all employees." The change in discourse from a gendered "work-family balance of women" to a gender-neutral "improving work-life balance of all workers" could have indirectly broadened the scope of alternatives for a more diverse group of women in the corporate world. Having said that, a shift in terminology from work-family to work-life does not guarantee individual employees, middle managers or executives perceive arrangements that increase personal control over work schedules and place in a less gendered way as shown by Daverth and colleagues (2016) in their study of Irish organizations.

Among the users of flexible work arrangements, there were quite a few who previously adhered to the devotion to work schema and often worked long hours like their male peers throughout their careers. Yet, these high achievers began to question habitual overwork practices

and critically re-evaluate their own ways of working prior to their decision to use the new flexible work arrangements. The multitude of factors that set this transitional process in motion is hard to disentangle. However, enthusiasm for work-life reforms and utilization among male and female employees alike, a cultural shift from focus on employee productivity to efficiency (at the organizational-level), and expectations that uptake would not have negative career consequences (on the individual-level) were clearly prerequisites. Chiyako (50-year old, cohabiting without children), a sales manager who used to work long hours throughout her career of 27 years at her firm trying to keep up with her male peers explained:

I can find time for myself these days. Prime Minister Abe has started to promote work-life reform, and the company has introduced flextime system in sales... I use it myself. Managers need to take the initiative in using it [flextime] these days. The company has suddenly started to value people who spend their time effectively rather than those who work long hours.

For senior employees like Chiyako, who previously embodied the ideal worker, legitimacy of flexible work policies and incentives to use them provided the necessary push. This echoes findings from studies on parental leave uptake in Japanese firms that usage increases when organizations have accountability structures (e.g., adding a board member in charge of HR issues) in place for leave policies (Mun and Brinton 2015).

Yumi (40-year-old senior IT specialist) used the reduced working hours and telework provision since her return from childcare leave almost seven years ago. When asked about her superiors' attitudes she said "they were not really supportive." Although keenly aware of the normative emphasis on "face time," she was able to explore alternative workstyle options.

...they [superiors] did not look offended when my child had a fever and I had to go home. I was able to work not because my superiors were very supportive, but because there were rather many working mothers around me... I looked for information about the shorter working hour program and asked my coworkers. Not every superior knows about the program.

Her case reveals the presence of other working mothers in the same department can be a source of reassurance for individual women to utilize flexible work arrangements when lacking supervisor support. The interviews with HR informants indicated managers' awareness of employees' legal entitlements to flexible workstyles typically lags behind that of childcare leave stipulations in Japanese (and Korean) organizations. This implies that when norms stressing face time and long working hours are still particularly strong, working mothers' informal exchange of information about available systems and personal experiences requesting (and using) them is of vital importance.

For some, however, being on a reduced work hour schedule intensified the perceived social pressure to conform to the ideal worker image. For instance, Yuki (43-year-old office manager, mother of three) said:

I was very concerned. I thought I knew what the situation would be like by listening and reading beforehand, but when I really started working on a short working hour basis, I started feeling so sorry for my colleagues. I felt myself being a burden or debt... Also, I was not happy being paid less and unfavorably evaluated for the bonus because of the short working hour. I felt as if I was penalized both mentally and economically. I had not imagined I would have such a feeling. Therefore, I thought it would be better to come back to the full-time basis at an early stage.

When probed further, it became clear instances in which she was treated as "a person gotten off the career track" by others hurt her professional identity and, in part, led to her decision to return to full-time employment. Yuki's experience being on a reduced working hours

scheme when it was primarily targeted at women, shows changing the narrative (healthier workstyles for all) is at least a first step to strengthen employees' sense of entitlement to alternative workstyles.

The following story of Kayoko (56) is noteworthy since it illustrates the limitations of flexible work arrangements when they are implemented without additional measures to fundamentally change the way employees are evaluated, especially in higher positions. The general manager at an IT firm used flexible working hours after her first born. At the time, she was in the non-career track but had subordinates who were cooperative and adjusted to her sometimes irregular office hours. When asked how her superiors responded to her leaving work earlier than others, she answered "They could not have any objection because I did my task properly. I always tried to achieve better results than expected." Kayoko actually compensated for leaving early by coming into the office earlier the next day to reassure superiors her job commitment had not changed. Although the flexible working hours allowed her to manage emergency situations, it made little difference in her daily work-life balance and she remembered being extremely busy juggling work and family during those days. After her second child was born, a male HR director "pressured her to use childcare leave" as they just created the system and "needed to pave the way for younger women." After return, her supervisor's boss recognized her hard work and offered her a chance to change to career-track and be promoted to manager. Her earlier experience working flexible hours did not alter her workstyle and after becoming the first female manager at her firm, she worked until the early morning hours and weekends. In fact, she stopped reporting her overtime hours because she exceeded the monthly limit. Although her company increased efforts to promote workstyle reform and reduce overtime in recent years,

Kayoko continued to overwork and now referred to younger women who “want life-life not work-life balance.”

Kayoko’s story brings to life that some older mothers in managerial positions reproduce long-standing ideal worker norms even when they practice flexible work arrangements and organizational awareness for healthier workstyles is growing. In those cases, merely offering and broadening the scope of policies is not sufficient to strengthen an individual’s sense of entitlement to fully benefit from them. Indeed, a recurrent theme in the stories of women in their fifties with first-hand experience using flexible work arrangements was the explicit encouragement from a male authority figure to use them. For Chiyako (50), it was the company president’s message to managers to take initiative in workstyle reform that encouraged her to try flextime when it became available to sales managers. At the time of the interview, Chiyako was still using it and felt she “had more time for herself now” and no longer went out for drinks with clients every night like she did earlier in her career. For Natsuko (49), it was her CEO who started a lifestyle innovation task force and personally took an interest in the work-life needs of female engineers that nudged her to do telework. Another conducive factor was the unexpected collaboration of the firm’s labor union (with only male members) to promote a healthier workplace that benefits all employees through diversity policies. Without these (official) endorsements, uptake would have probably remained inconceivable to women who had to conform to dominant work values in their organizations from the start of their careers.

The predominantly negative attitudes of Korean senior managers towards flexible work arrangements⁸⁶ suggest that a gendered narrative of policy initiatives (services only applicable

⁸⁶ Only one out of ten interviewed male team leaders felt positive about flexible work and appreciated the potential advantages for individual and team performance. The common stance of the other men was that particularly telework and flexible work schedules are detrimental to the efficiency of work processes and team cohesion.

and beneficial to women) can have undesirable consequences such as flexibility stigma that feeds into stereotypical views of mothers being less committed or suitable for important jobs and normative pressure on male employees/fathers who desire greater control over their own work schedules. Both are associated with underutilization of flexible work policies in competitive organizations (Daverth et al. 2016; Hochschild 1997) and, in my view, occur more frequently in certain intra-organizational contexts (highly competitive/performance centered organizational culture, social pressure to conform, culture in which employees show dedication in the currency of time) and work-group situations (dependency on immediate superior for advancement, lack of diversity in gender/age/family situation, polarizing coworker relations). In such environments, where flexible work is largely perceived as “company’s favor to women”, it is understandable that individual employees have a narrow range of perceived options or agency freedoms (fear to be perceived as lacking in ambition/commitment) to escape from dominant working time regimes.

To finish on a positive note, the experiences of female users in Japanese firms indicates that when flexible work arrangements are framed (and perceived) in a gender-neutral way, and enforced top-down, individual employees in lower levels of hierarchical organizations can be encouraged to try them because it reduces some of the flexibility stigma. Furthermore, the positive cases of Japanese companies⁸⁷ where flexible work seemed relatively normalized among female and male employees underscore accountability structures and incentives for middle and

⁸⁷ The HR manager of a chemical manufacturing firm explained they require executives to make plans how to reach the D&I targets in their departments and give incentives to departments if their male members use parental leave. Then they had five male employees who took five days leave in three months. Moreover, within two years of implementing telework at its headquarters, utilization increased from eight women to more than 200 women and men. Several other HR managers/D&I officers (of an IT services provider, a technology trading company, lifestyle/beauty products company) created accountability structures to get policies practiced such as the addition of D&I judgement scales on middle managers’ and executives’ performance evaluations, 360 degree performance evaluations (subordinates can rate their superiors as well), top-down approach in dissemination.

senior managers to practice them can significantly speed up the process. In any case, diversity/workstyle innovation initiatives seem to thrive the most when powerful men are actively involved especially given the respect for hierarchy in Japanese (and Korean) firms.

5.3 CONCLUSION

To begin with, I have shown that women's own conceptualizations of work-life balance differ qualitatively from the dubious systematic, goal-oriented approach to life widely used by organizational scholars, practitioners, and employers (Caproni 2004) and are not simply about spending 50/50 on work and other responsibilities. The working mothers in my samples found such a balance measured in time impossible to achieve in their unpredictable and hectic lives. Instead of striving for the unattainable, they redefined work-life balance as being able to give meaning to their professional and familial identities without having to compromise too much on either one. In contrast to the official discourse in their companies, they personally believed employee's work-life balance should be a collaborative effort in which employers, government, schools, and family members all partake and not an individual's (woman's) own responsibility. In reality, however, the ongoing balancing act was about adjusting priorities, making hard (involuntary) choices within the realm of possibilities, and compromising on personal dreams.

My analysis of women's parenting beliefs and experiences shows that current working mothers in Korea and Japan are also continuously redefining what it means to be a mother with a career of her own. Their version of a good mother with time constraints varied depending on the years into motherhood, number/age of children, relation with their spouses, involvement of parents (in-laws), career stage, and social dynamics at work (not in order of importance). Despite some variation in level of intensity, the significance of pre-existing motherhood ideologies

typically decreased with years of parenting experience. Although women in both countries were somewhat concerned about societal expectations of maternal care before becoming a mother, they gradually adjusted their standards to what was reasonable given their physical and emotional limits. Unlike some middle-class women in North American studies, the mothers in my samples did not display behavior associated with maternal gatekeeping (Allen 1999). In fact, they continuously encouraged their spouses to be more involved as fathers and delegated responsibilities to parents or paid a significant part of their earnings for marketized childcare services. As expected, university-educated mothers who gave birth after the spread of gender egalitarian values were in a better position to negotiate a fair division of childrearing responsibilities with spouses and other family members. On the other hand, mothers with older children at the time of interview often felt conflicted about the lost family time when their children were young or having prioritized childrearing over their own careers. For these women of older generations, it took far more years into marital life and motherhood before they started to assert themselves and trained their husbands to be more involved. These findings propel us to challenge the underlying assumptions of American-centered conceptualizations of motherhood ideologies, intensive mothering, and maternal gatekeeping and their applicability on younger generations of mothers.

The comparison of life stories of current mothers across generations revealed that while childrearing remains a gendered domain, with “good parenting” equating heavy involvement for extensive periods in child education of mothers not fathers (Hirao 2007; Yu 2001), dual-career couples’ beliefs are slowly shifting towards shared parenting. The picture that emerged was current mothers with corporate careers in Korea and Japan are far more agentic at home than popular depictions of supermoms. The positive cases of mothers who received structural support

from their husbands reveal that spouse's employment (self-employed, control over work schedules, flexible working hours) and gender beliefs are crucial conditions for women's improved work-life balance outcomes. Moreover, women married to husbands with similar ages and job status/wages were found to be better situated to negotiate less mother-centered divisions. Similar to Oh's interview study of 100 Korean mothers, job prestige, long-term financial stability, and career prospects clearly justified mothers' lower involvement to themselves and other family members (Oh 2018). Though, when women felt stuck in dead-end jobs, they frequently questioned whether it was acceptable from a moral standpoint to sacrifice time with young children and perceived greater work-family strain. This is of importance to practitioners and scholars as it indicates that it is not the perceived work-family conflict in early motherhood per se that pushes many careerist women out of corporate jobs (most women reported chronic sleep deprivation and no time for themselves when their children were preschoolers). In most cases, it is the inability to give meaning to their identities as valued professionals and good mothers during prolonged periods especially at major transitions in a child's life (kindergarten/school entries) when gendered expectations from work, family, and schools mutually reinforce each other.

The analysis of women's descriptions of the second shift indicates that, in comparison to childrearing, sharing of housework/routine chores is less gendered. To be fair, most women of older generations were unsatisfied with their husbands but received at least some help with cooking, cleaning, and doing groceries. In some cases, husbands supported out of necessity (when wives worked late, had work dinners or business trips). However, in most cases they did so because it was perceived as only fair when both spouses are working full-time and have overloaded schedules. Despite help from relatives, mothers' weekday schedules left no room for

rest or personal time from early morning to midnight until their children reached the age of 12 (elementary school), especially when they had more than one child. Not surprisingly, there was a clear generation difference in how couples actually divided housework. The women in their fifties took on the manager role (planning, organizing, telling husbands what needed to be done, doing the lion share of routine tasks) while the women in their thirties and forties more frequently collaborated with their husband and decided ad hoc who did what. None of the women interviewed had any problems relinquishing control over housework or seemed to perform gender by running a picture-perfect home. In line with time use surveys in both countries, women in my samples decreased the time spent on housework and increased their time on childcare while their husbands slightly increased time on both housework and childcare (Korean Statistics 2019; Statistics Bureau of Japan 2016). On a theoretical note, this suggests gender beliefs may be losing relative weight vis-à-vis time availability and bargaining power in negotiating equitable divisions of housework now that younger couples socialized with newer work-family values are facing new economic realities (e.g., loss of job security, inflated education costs and housing prices).

My findings validate that Korean and Japanese female employees are particularly discouraged to take advantage of work-life benefits because they fear becoming a burden to superiors and coworkers (Takahashi et al. 2013). Like male employees who are fathers, careerist mothers also hesitated to take long leaves, personal days, and generally negotiated less than what they are legally entitled to (or desire) due to valid concerns about facing a motherhood penalty that reduces their long-term chances of having a financially and psychologically rewarding career instead of merely a paying job in the margins. In fact, almost all mothers in my samples had experienced some form of negative career consequences (e.g., lower performance

evaluations, less challenging tasks, loss of supervisor's confidence, exclusion from important projects, delayed promotions, etc.) after return from childcare leave despite their companies' increased efforts to nurture a family-friendly environment over the years. This underscores that middle managers' gendered perceptions and responses to progressive policies explain much of the observed gap between policy goals and real impact on individual employees' lives. As others (Brinton and Mun 2015; Daverth et al. 2016; Takahashi et al. 2013) pointed out, middle managers who are supervisors are indeed the gatekeepers of work-life balance in hierarchical organizations that can block or provide access to their subordinates.

In positive cases, supervisor support enhances individual's agency freedoms to decide the period of leave without having to worry about negative consequences in terms of career advancement. Furthermore, team diversity, temporary hire of substitute workers, and equitable workloads can potentially reduce organizational constraints such as becoming a burden to team members (Kim 2018; Takahashi et al. 2013) or being stigmatized informally by coworkers (Bailyn 2006; Hochschild 1997; Ogasawara 1998). In negative cases, a supervisor's hostile attitude and dominant ideal worker beliefs that women in the managerial track should resume their duties with the same single-minded dedication as if motherhood never happened (Mun 2015) particularly constrain the choice freedoms of current mothers who are dependent on immediate superiors for promotion and women in higher positions.

These conditions also apply to the normalization of flexible work arrangements aimed to reduce time spent in the workplace and increase personal control over work schedules. In theory, such arrangements are less costly or disruptive than extended childcare leave as they do not require replacement or transfer of duties (Dulk and Ruijter 2008). Nonetheless, the observed underutilization in some Japanese firms after many years of implementation corroborates that if

they are merely added to the mixed bag of policies without efforts to reduce gendered perceptions of utilization and flexibility stigma, ambitious women (and men) will not easily perceive them as realistic options (Williams et al. 2013). My interviews with team leaders and women who used telework, reduced working hours, or flexible working hours confirm that major challenges and opportunities are not only changing the organizational culture (working time regime) or individual employees' awareness and perceptions of policy use. Utilization is also related to work-group context (team members' tenure/seniority, composition, nature of jobs, distribution of workloads) and social dynamics (collaborative/competitive relations, legitimacy of supervisor's authority, codependence) between coworkers as working from home or flexible office hours require more coordination and different modes of communication (Dulk and Ruijter 2008).

The successful cases of Japanese companies with gender-neutral workstyle reform initiatives reveal that the way flexibility policies are framed can make a big difference in how they are understood and practiced in lower layers of the organization. I believe the shift from an organizational narrative of work-family balance (based on the belief such policies only apply to women) into workstyle innovation (that emphasizes the universal benefits for all employees), although not by itself, was an important first step for these companies to increase utilization rates among female and male employees. Some diversity scholars have argued that a theoretical shift to a gender-neutral business-case rhetoric of diversity based on the flawed assumption individuals/organizations behave with economic rationality (Noon 2007) obscures unequal power relations in organizations and the ability to challenge them (Zanoni et al. 2010). More seriously, using genderblind terms in discourses about work-life balance or managing diversity marginalizes social justice arguments, does not deconstruct work-life choices as primarily

choices for women in organizations (Smithson and Stoke 2005), or creates a false impression that gender equality has been achieved (Liff and Cameron 1997). While I share these concerns, I do believe that in the context of Korean and Japanese work culture and social dynamics, a social justice and positive diversity approach can complement one another. My interviews with implementers who experimented with both revealed that a gender-neutral diversity approach, but not naïve gender-blind⁸⁸, can be instrumental to mitigate initial backlash against initiatives, but on the long run continuous emphasis on social/gender equality goals is necessary when policy fatigue (or disillusion when targets are not met) sets in. The observed contrast in how flexible work arrangements were interpreted by Korean and Japanese managers/employees further substantiates the merit of a combined approach.

On a final note, my intra-organizational analyses based on interviews/focus panel sessions with HR officials and several female employees of the same company underscores accountability structures that incentivize middle managers to take initiative in encouraging subordinates' uptake of new family-friendly policies (and reprimand those who don't comply), whether childcare leave or flexible work arrangements, are instrumental to exert top-down pressure so individuals on the work floor feel free to use them as they wish. This is particularly so in the context of Korean and Japanese companies where employees look up to authority figures for cues about how to practice policies and managerial discretion in decisions who deserves to utilize work-life services is strong. Only when senior managers, executives, and company presidents explicitly endorse and encourage uptake irrespective of gender or family

⁸⁸ Liff and Cameron (1997) argue that naïve gender-blind approaches to equality policy and culture are inadequate because they fail to consider that discrimination is not only perpetuated through unfair treatment of individuals but also through processes like job requirements and conditions. Such approaches are prone to lead to a return to the earlier (and flawed) merit-based approach that disregards that gender is built in the structures and practices of organizations.

situation, people on the work floor will believe the policies have internal legitimacy (Mun and Brinton 2015) and are integral to a shared goal to improve employees' well-being with respect for individual diversities in work-life needs and desires. Thus, I strongly believe that this is a crucial precondition for the normalization of policies when they are not fully institutionalized yet in rigid bureaucratic organizations such as many Korean and Japanese firms with long histories. The lack of accountability structures or internal legitimacy of policies (especially among men and senior managers) within large establishments, and limited access to work-life balance benefits for irregular workers and employees of SMEs, then are largely responsible for the lack of progress observed at a national level in both countries. Nonetheless, there are undoubtedly cultural shifts at localized levels and behavioral changes of employees working at large firms in both countries.