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Gender and East Asian Welfare States: from Confucianism to Gender Equality?

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Abstract

How can we understand the gender logic underpinning the welfare states/systems of East Asia? Does the comparative literature, which has largely been concerned with western Welfare states, whether in *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Esping-Andersen 1990), or in gender-based analysis of the male breadwinner model (Lewis 1992, 2001, 2006), have anything to offer in understanding the gender assumptions underpinning East Asian welfare states? Are the welfare systems of East Asian countries distinctive, with Confucian assumptions hidden beneath the surface commitment to gender equality? We will use the (mainly western) comparative literature, but argue that Confucian influences remain important, with strong assumptions of family, market and voluntary sector responsibility rather than state responsibility, strong expectations of women's obligations, without compensating rights, a hierarchy of gender and age, and a highly distinctive, vertical family structure, in which women are subject to parents-in-law. In rapidly changing economies, these social characteristics are changing too. But they still put powerful pressures on women to conform to expectations about care, while weakening their rights to security and support. Nowhere do welfare states' promises bring gender equality in practice. Even in Scandinavian countries women earn less, care more, and have less power than men. We shall compare East Asian countries (Japan, Korea, Taiwan where possible) with some Western ones, to argue that some major comparative data (e.g. OECD) show the extreme situation of women in these countries. Some fine new qualitative studies give us a close insight into the experience of mothers, including lone and married mothers, which help us to understand how far the gender assumptions of welfare states are from Scandinavia's dual earner model. There are signs of change in society as well as in economy, and room for optimism that women's involvement in social movements and academic enquiry may be challenging Confucian gender hierarchies.

Introduction

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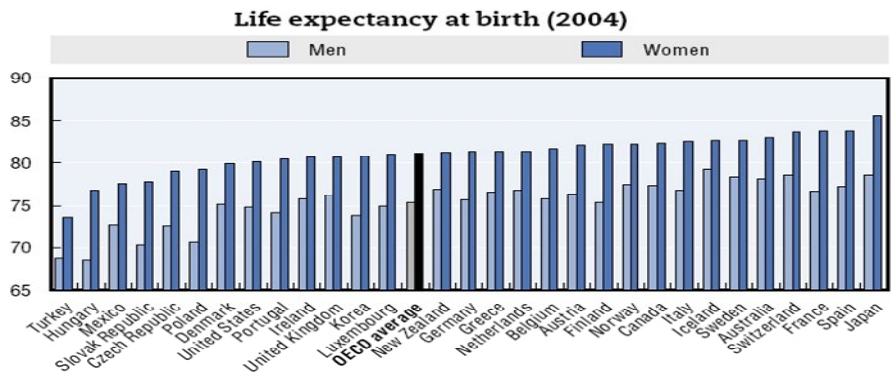
We shall compare East Asian countries (Japan, Korea, Taiwan where possible) with some Western ones, to argue that some major comparative data show the extreme situation of women (especially younger women) in these countries. Some fine new qualitative studies give us a close insight into the experience of mothers, including lone and married mothers, which help us to understand how far the gender assumptions of welfare states are from Scandinavia's dual earner model. Welfare states direct responsibilities towards families, families make strong demands on younger women as daughters-in-law, while economic development brings them into the labour market as well. If married women with children come under particular pressure, the situation of lone mothers in Korea, Japan and Taiwan is exceptionally difficult. Lone mothers in Taiwan are described as 'permanent family outsiders' with many obligations for family care, in contrast to lone fathers who are 'permanent family insiders' with rights to support from their families (Lee 2001: 415).

We shall ask about the combination of change and tradition in East Asian welfare states. Rapid economic development makes East Asian economies remarkable, as 'tiger economies' where economic, and political life are bringing a transformation of living conditions. These changes bring social benefits too, with women's life expectancy in Japan the highest among OECD countries, and with Korean women's life expectancy increasing at a higher pace than any other OECD country. Political changes bring gender equality legislation, which is important for improving women's rights in employment and family law. There are signs of change in society – including gender - as well as in economy and polity. Detailed study of women's experience in practice, particularly as mothers in marriage and out of it, shows the persistence of some traditional family hierarchies which put younger mothers under unusual pressures, and which could not be

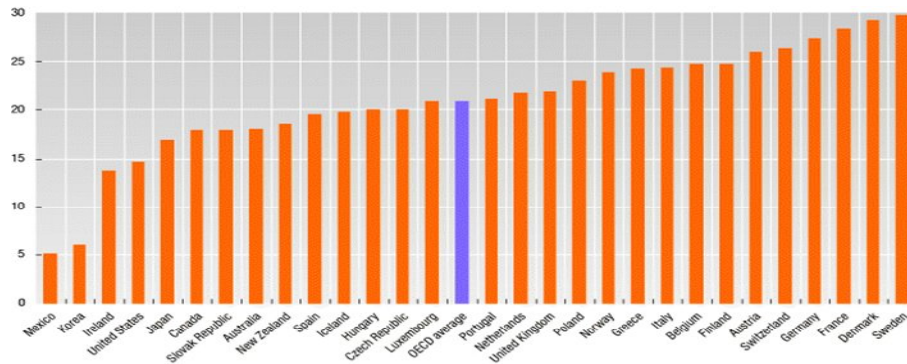
described as gender equal. But there is room for optimism that women’s involvement in social movements and academic enquiry may be challenging Confucian gender hierarchies.

Economic and social change

Rapid economic and social changes are a crucial backdrop for understanding East Asian welfare states and the changing legislative framework impacting on gender. Korea is one of the fastest growing economies, with a growth rate over recent years (1992-2005) exceeded only by China, Ireland and India. Economic change brings clear benefits: life expectancies are among the highest in the world, with Japanese women expecting to live to 85+, while Korea’s women have just higher life expectancy than UK women, despite per capita income around 2/3 the UK figure. Japan has nearly the lowest Infant Mortality Rate, among the social democratic countries Iceland, Sweden, Norway and Finland, while Korea’s is again close to the UK’s, despite Korea’s lower per capita income. These are both clear indications of women’s health and show very good records of women’s health and life expectancy. Public social expenditure, on the other hand is low – especially in Korea at 5% of GDP – at the other end of the spectrum from Scandinavian countries, and may give rise to doubts about governments’ commitments to the social care activities which have tended to define women’s domestic lives and contain their public ones (OECD Factbook 2007, online database). For the public expenditure on pre-primary education (3-6 year olds only), Korea is at the lowest end of the OECD distribution. In 2005, Korea spent less than 0.1% of GDP for the early childhood education, whilst Norway and Sweden spent over 1% of GDP (OECD 2006:111).



Public expenditure: OECD 2006
As a percentage of GDP, 2001



Policy changes, bringing gender equality legislation, are important. In Japan the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society in 1999 described a gender-equal society for the first time in Japan, and required the state to promote gender participation and gender equality. The opening article of this law proposes “a ‘gender-free’ society that does not reflect the stereotyped division of roles on the basis of gender but rather has as neutral an impact as possible on the selection of social activities by men and women as equal partners” (Takao 2007:153). Japan’s mandatory long-term care insurance started in 2000, bring entitlement to those aged 65 and above rights to institutional and community based care, according to need, bringing an ‘abrupt shift of gender policy’ (Takao 2007: 154) from earlier assumptions about the obligations of daughters-in-law. The government’s perception of a need to bring women into employment while increasing the birthrate are seen as crucial contributing factors to this change, while women activists have also played a vital role (Takao 2007). In Korea too, there have been important developments in gender equality legislation: since 2001 the Ministry of Gender Equality has been the focus for state policy, operating through women’s bureaux, and through legislation: the Gender Equality Employment Act, Framework Act on Women’s Development, and Employment Insurance Act (Won 2007). These are clearly significant symbolic moments in women’s action towards gender equality, but we need to ask about their significance in practice under Confucian conditions.

Culture and gender: East Asian culture in transition?

Confucianism has been identified as the main cultural heritage in East Asian countries by many western and eastern scholars. Some argue that Confucian traditions, such as diligence and hard work, a great emphasis on education, and dutifulness, helped East Asian countries to achieve rapid economic growth in the first place. However, others downplay economic growth in favour of the disadvantages imposed, particularly in relation to gender issues. As Palley and Gelb (1992:3) argued, “in traditional Confucian societies women were in a disadvantaged position”. The Confucian influence on women’s position in society can be best represented with the virtue of three obediences: ‘to the father, husband and the son’ (Lee 2005a). After marriage, women have to belong to families-in-law and become strangers to their natal families (Sung 2003).

These strong Confucian traditions on women are indeed changing, as a result of industrialisation, changes in family structure, women's increasing participation in the labour market, and the recent development of equality policies on gender. However, in East Asian countries, the tradition and modernity co-exist; the western influence of gender equality ideas and traditional Confucian patriarchal family systems are intertwined within these societies. As Lee (2005b:166) pointed out in her research on women and Korean family, "*although the Korean family resembles the nuclear family in structure, in terms of the actual activities undertaken within it, the principles of the stem family and the extensive influence of the traditional conceptualization of the family have not diminished*". Married women are still more responsible for their family-in-laws than their own families. In her research, women often felt duty and responsibility to their parents-in-law, although they were emotionally closer to their natal families. Women also often gave priority to their husbands' families over their own, while men did not feel the same way for their wives' families. This shows that the Confucian tradition still has strong influence on women in Korean families. In Japan, though less strong influence of Confucian traditional gender role than Korea, women's status was often considered as secondary in the society and it limited roles for women (Palley and Gelb 1992). In Taiwan, it still seems women's primary roles as carers and domestic workers have not substantially changed, despite of the increasing numbers of women entering the labour market as wage earners (Wu 2007). While women's increasing participation in the labour market represents the social and cultural changes in East Asia, it is also important to note that traditional gender roles still prevail within the family and society in general. In this transitional period, East Asian women may encounter conflicts within the family and society, as well as within themselves.

Family law and gender equality legislation

The family's key role in society as a provider of social welfare is common to East Asian welfare systems. Welfare systems have been described as 'productivist', emphasizing economic objectives with strong education and health services to reproduce human resources (Holliday 2000, 2005), or Confucian, to emphasize the role of the family in welfare and of Confucian values in social harmony. Confucian values may be seen as a cover for welfare states pursuing economic growth at the expense of everything else, in particular real Confucian values of social solidarity (Chan 2006). While welfare states everywhere have a place for family responsibility, East Asian ones draw on Confucian values to give families a special responsibility for social welfare.

A Confucian tradition of patri-lineal and patri-local families has influenced family living arrangements, with three-generation households, sons expected to live with their parents and daughters expected to move away on marriage. Filial piety underpins this, with a hierarchy based on gender and generation. While these traditions persist in ideology and reality, households are shrinking and becoming less complex. A change towards nuclear family living arrangements increases younger women's ability to make their own decisions.

Family law has protected men's interests and male dominance in Korea and in Taiwan. In Taiwan, rights to property and decision-making were seen under family law as belonging to male breadwinners, while wives were pressured to leave their families of origin and take up their husbands' domicile. Family law also protected men's guardianship of children after divorce, which made it very difficult for wives to leave unhappy marriages. Women have fought for revisions of this legislation and have achieved – by a third round of revisions in 2002, parity in decisions over domicile, surname and parental rights, while men's economic dominance in family law has been reduced (Wu 2007: 92-4). Similarly in Korean civil law protected the male line and male dominance through the ho-ju system. Ho-ju means 'head of the family' and men's rights to be head of the family have been protected, through a hierarchy in which – when a ho-ju dies, a male of any generation takes precedence over the ho-ju's wife. Family law changes in 1990 have reduced the implications of this, but it is not to be abolished until the end of 2008. Jini Kim (2007) found difficult consequences for some of the lone mothers she interviewed:

I learned that divorced mothers become strangers to their children even though they are their real and biological mothers. Like me and my child, we are not family but simply 'two-strangers-living-in-the-same-place' in the (official household registry) entry. The council even suspected me as if I had borrowed a young child from somewhere in order to get a council house. There was no way to prove I was her mother (respondent in Kim 2007: 95-6).

Changing family law in Taiwan (Wu 2007) means that women can contemplate life as lone parents in a way their mothers could not. Older mothers stayed with men fearing that family law would support their husbands' right to children over their own:

I know he has been unfaithful and he always ignored the needs of our children and our family... but I can't divorce him. I would lose my children (Nama 56 in Wu 2007: 206).

Meanwhile Jing described putting pressure on her husband, expressing confidence that family law had enhanced her rights to guardianship of their children:

I have told my husband that if he carried on doing nothing to care for our children, I would divorce him. I know judges nowadays tend to give the guardianship to the mother (Jing 32-year old in Wu 2007: 206).

The different perceptions of these two Taiwanese mothers about their rights to their children, their perception of their negotiating power within marriage, and their ability to look to divorce and beyond, speak volumes about the extent of social and economic change in Taiwan. Divorce is indeed increasing, with 80% more in the early 2000s compared with the 1970s (Wu 2007: 85). In crucial respects family law has changed to enable mothers to survive divorce and live independently with their children. Changing legislation is crucial to underpin mothers' rights to guardianship of their children and to living independently. But we should ask whether Confucian cultural assumptions continue to bring gender inequality in East Asian societies, despite the climate of change – and political action – which brings legislation for gender equality.

Gender in welfare regimes: Equality legislation in a Confucian context

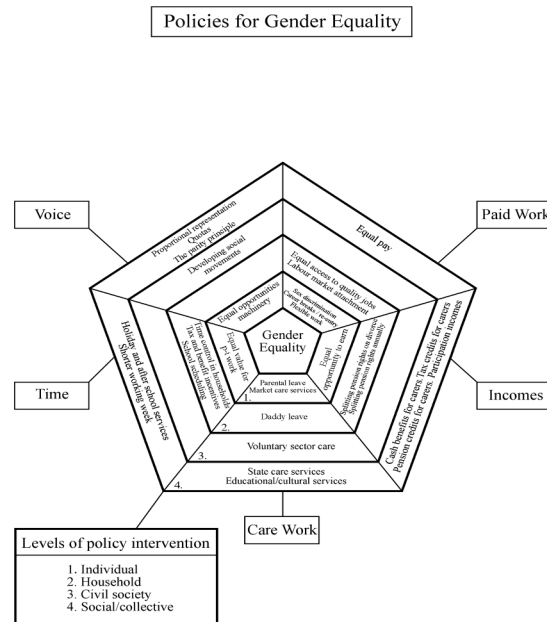
How can we understand the gender logic underpinning the welfare states/systems of East Asia? Does the comparative literature, which has largely been concerned with western Welfare states, whether in *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Esping-Andersen 1990), or in gender-based analysis of the male breadwinner model (Lewis 1992, 2001, 2006), have anything to offer in understanding the gender assumptions underpinning East Asian welfare states? Are the welfare systems of East Asian countries distinctive, with Confucian assumptions hidden beneath the surface commitment to gender equality? We will argue here that – while there are differences between East Asian welfare states – they have some features in common: in particular a hierarchical Confucian model of the family, prioritising male breadwinners, which has only recently been challenged by feminist movements and gender equality legislation.

The characterization of gender regimes based on the male breadwinner/dual earner spectrum (Lewis 1992) puts gender at the centre of comparative analysis and is a starting point here. Gender regimes are understood as systems of gender equality or inequality through which paid work is connected to unpaid, state services and benefits are delivered to individuals or households, costs are allocated, and time is shared between men and women in households as well as between households and employment. The decline of the male breadwinner model has widespread implications in Western Europe (Creighton 1999, Lewis 2001a, 2001b). Welfare states are analyzed here in component parts of the male breadwinner/dual earner spectrum: paid work, care work, time and power, asking to what extent they can be seen as systems of gender equality or as systems of traditional gender roles in each of these parts.

We thus use the (mainly western) comparative literature, but argue that Confucian influences remain important, with strong assumptions of family, market and voluntary sector responsibility rather than state responsibility, strong expectations of women's obligations, without compensating rights, a hierarchy of gender and age, and a highly distinctive, vertical family structure, in which women are subject to parents-in-law. In rapidly changing economies, these social characteristics are changing too. But they still put powerful pressures on women to conform to expectations about care, while weakening their rights to security and support. Nowhere do welfare states' promises bring gender equality in practice. Even in Scandinavian countries women earn less, care more, and have less power than men. We shall compare East Asian countries (Japan, Korea, Taiwan where possible) with some Western ones, to argue that some major comparative data (e.g. OECD) show the extreme situation of women in these countries.

We also need to ask about the level and nature of policy intervention. The *Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Esping-Andersen 1990) are relevant to gender, because the Social Democratic countries have had gender equality as well as social equality at their heart (Ellingsaeter & Leira 2006). Social democratic regimes have also underpinned gender equality with social policies, social spending and social commitment to parents and

children. Elsewhere, commitment to traditional gender difference or to free markets may play a greater role than gender equality.

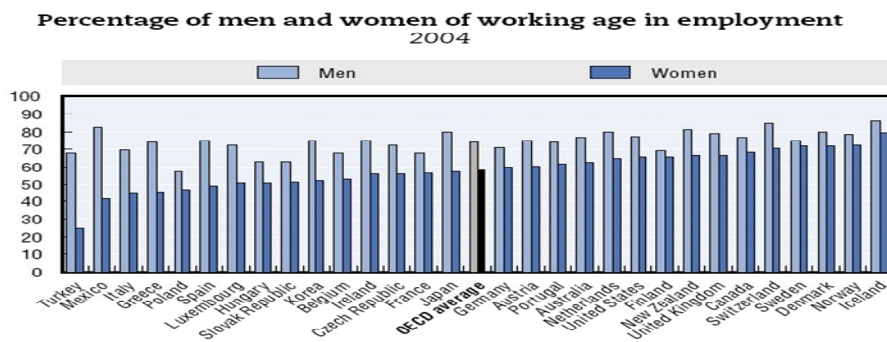


Are there alternative scenarios for a more gender equal future? The idea of making men’s lives more like women’s is at the heart of Nancy Fraser’s Universal Caregiver model, in which all employees would be assumed to have care responsibilities, while developments in civil society would enable care to be shared (Fraser 1997). But it is argued here that gender equality needs more systematic support, beyond the capacity of civil society. The French working time model also has something to contribute to thinking about how to turn the one and a half earner model into a two x three-quarter one in which men and women have time to care as well as to work and to earn. Government commitments to gender equality need underpinning with regulation of time and with social investment. Comparative data clearly show that Scandinavian social democratic countries are the most gender equal: but they have still prioritized women’s employment over men’s care. In a model of Universal Citizenship gender equality would go beyond paid employment – important as that has been – and attend to gender inequalities in care, time and power: men’s and women’s obligations to paid work and care as citizens would be underpinned by regulation of working time and electoral systems and by social investment in citizenship rights.

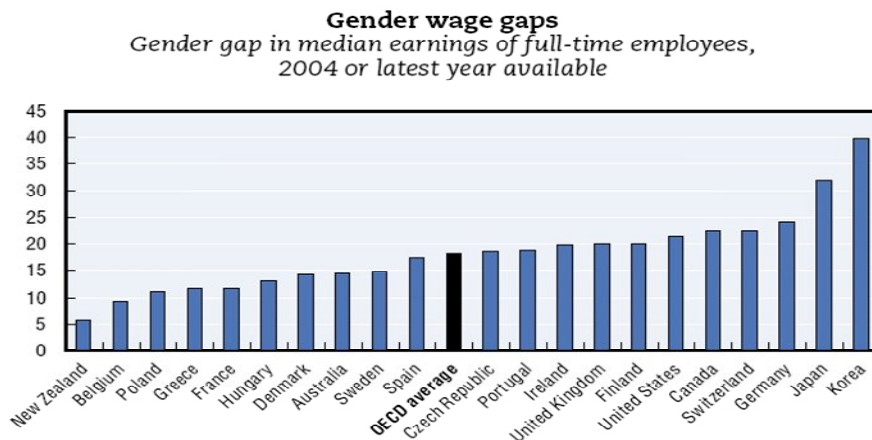
Work

The gaps between men’s and women’s employment have been falling in most OECD countries. Governments have wanted and enabled women’s labour market participation for economic reasons, and women themselves have increasingly seen earning as key to their independence and security. Everywhere still – even in Scandinavian countries -

men's labour market participation is higher than women's. Among the most economically developed countries of the OECD Japan and Korea have notably high gaps between men's and women's employment. Nearly 80% of men are in employment, while for women the figures are, Korea 53% and Japan 60% (OECD: 16). In Taiwan the numbers of women in the labour market have risen dramatically, from under a million in 1966 to 4.5 million in 2005, but this is still a participation rate of 47% in 2003 (Wu 2007: 65). These figures are below the OECD average, and well below Scandinavian countries, Iceland, Norway, Denmark, where women's participation rates are over 70% (OECD: 16).



Earnings gaps in Korea and Japan are also strikingly high. Again, women's earnings are below men's in all OECD countries (on average 15% lower) and in all EU countries (again on average 15% lower). In Taiwan the pay gap is above this average, at 20% (Wu 2007: 72). But in Korea and Japan these gaps are around 35% and 40% (OECD: 15).



High pay gaps are among reasons families prioritise men's employment. In Korea, discussing whether fathers might take parental leave, economic reasons were an element in the decisions:

My husband earns quite big money ... even if I didn't work for a year ...there would be no problem at all (MrsYoon in Won & Pascall 2004: 281-2).

As we shall see they are not the only element, but large pay gaps make it difficult for women to press their claims to keeping continuity of employment and developing careers.

Despite lower pay, economic needs are prominent among women's reasons for labour market participation:

My family will become very poor, if we only have my husband's earnings. Raising children is really money consuming (May 34-year old in Wu 2007: 148).

But these mothers also saw it as important to play a public role. Yi saw a connection between her earning and her negotiating power with her husband. This could be paralleled in Western research, though the 'Obedience' she describes is a stronger term than might be found among Western married women:

I think it's important for me to have a job. I fear being isolated from society. I cannot imagine being out of joint from society. Besides, if I am not working, it means I need to ask for money from my husband, and I would probably have to obey him completely (Yi 30-year old in Wu 2007: 148).

Employment is indeed a crucial component of security if women can look beyond marriage to life with children.

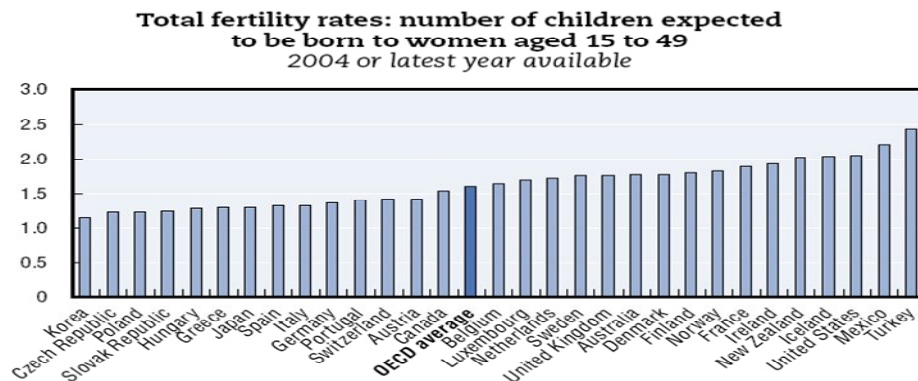
Women's ability to support themselves independently of partners is less than men's in most countries. In Korea, Japan and Taiwan several factors keep women's earnings well below men's. The high pay gap, a tendency for participation to dip (more than comparable countries) when women become mothers (Won 2004: 273), long uncontrolled working hours which make it difficult for mothers to sustain their labour market position: all of these limit the extent to which women's employment brings independence. But they are still crucial changes towards more independence and towards at least one aspect of gender equality.

Care

Childcare and care for older relatives are key components of gender differences in employment and public life. Government strategies to increase women's employment have included socialising childcare, regulating employers to provide leave so that mothers can combine childcare and employment, and – much more rarely – encouraging a new division of labour so that men's responsibility for childcare can be supported through dedicated 'Daddy leave'. Women's increasing labour market participation has been widely encouraged, as a solution to economic pressures and family change. But while gender differences in care are converging, they are also deeply entrenched (Gershuny 2000) and have been much less subject to government policy, even in

Scandinavian countries, where fathers' responsibility for childcare has been promoted by governments.

Comparative data are hard to come by, because national systems are varied. The EU plans to increase women's employment and has established childcare targets, and funded research to compare childcare coverage and quality, to measure gaps between the end of 'effective parental leave' and the beginning of school (Plantenga and Siegel 2005). OECD data, on which we have drawn here, do not offer comparative data on childcare, though most countries have national data on time-use, including unpaid care. OECD data do allow us to compare fertility and changes in fertility. These may reflect many different pressures, and are not a direct indicator of pressure on mothers' time, but they may be the best we have now to compare these countries. For total fertility, Korea is at the lowest end of the OECD distribution, with just over one child, and Japan a little above some CEE countries, which have been experiencing extreme economic and social pressures in the wake of transition from state socialism. In Taiwan by 2005, the rate was 1.10 (while in Hong Kong it has tipped below 1). Korea shows one of the most rapid declines, from around 2 in 1970 to just over one in 2004. Norway, Denmark and Sweden have higher fertility, while Finland's has been the most stable over the period from 1970 to 2004. The Scandinavian countries are still below replacement threshold, but are stabilising. According to Gelb (2003:114), in Japan the rapid decline of birth rate has affected the policy changes; in direction to "attempt to reconcile aspects of family and work life". As a 1997 survey in Japan found, most respondents stated that the main reasons for the decline of birth rate were the heavy cost of education for children (58.2% of respondents), the lack of financial security (50.1%) and the difficulty of raising children while continuing work (44.7%) (Foreign Press Centre, 1997:4, in Gelb 2003:114). This suggests that very low fertility and very rapid decline could indicate great pressures on families in Korea, Japan, Taiwan and other East Asian countries (OECD 2007: 8).



Debates about the relationship between government, NGO, market and family responsibility for childcare take place everywhere. Most of these debates are premised on the need to sustain mothers' employment, and say nothing at all about men. Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands are exceptions to this. Iceland has the most developed and successful scheme of dedicated Daddy leave (with three months for mothers, three for

fathers, and three to share between them) which encourages men to stay at home with their children for the three months paid leave to which they are entitled. What debates flourish in East Asian countries about who should parent, take leave and responsibility? The Gender Equal Employment Law (2002) in Taiwan has given rights to parental leave for men and women and obliges (in principle) larger employers to provide childcare facilities (Wu 2007 for Taiwan). In Korea the Gender Equality Employment Act was revised in 2001, to extend childcare leave to working mothers or fathers to 52 weeks, while Infant Care legislation again makes larger employers responsible for childcare (Won and Pascall 2004). Also, the maternity leave pay has increased from 250,000 won per month in 2001 to 500,000 won (approximately £250) in 2007 (Kim 2007). In Japan, economic pressures to bring women into the labour market have brought expansion of the Childcare Leave Law in 1999, to include a three-month nursing care leave, which means the scheme was expanded to a close relative as well as children, and was renamed as the Childcare and Family Leave. In 2005, the law was revised again to allow parents to five days of leave a year to care for a sick child (Lambert 2007). Childcare services in Japan have also improved, as a result of the 1994 Angel plan, which was to tackle low fertility through a widened welfare state based social care network. The services offered extended hours, infant care, and after-school care programmes. In 1999, the numbers of babies admitted to public day care were increased, as the New Angel plan was introduced (Gottfried and O'Reilly, 2001; Peng 2001:46, in Gelb 2003:116) .

Although the recent development of family policies indicates the improvement of gender equality in East Asian countries, there are still a big gap between the policies and practice. For instance, there is evidence from Sook-yeon Won that at least some Korean men feel that taking leave for childcare would threaten their jobs and their reputations as men:

My employer would respond: why don't you stay at home forever' ... not only in my office, but almost all jobs in Korea...Don't even think about it' (Mr Kho)

For us, taking leave for childcare means 'I want to resign' (Mr Yang in Won 2004: 282)

Parental leave is widely available on a gender-neutral basis, and widely taken by women rather than men. So these male respondents are not unusual in dismissing taking leave to care for children. But perhaps they are more vehement than their Western counterparts in their negative expression of men's responsibility for childcare. European Foundation data show men and women in Europe with gender-neutral values about childcare even if they do not carry it out equally: 'most people of Europe believe that childcare is basically a non-specific task: both mother and father are expected to carry out childrearing' (Fahey and Spéder 2004: 60).

Is the situation of East Asian mothers distinctive? Korean mothers interviewed by Sook-yeon Won (Won 2004) described childcare as a state of war:

It's a sort of war! From 6 in the morning to 11 at night and beyond...What my husband does in the morning is going to the toilet and reading a newspaper...he usually comes home around midnight (Mrs Byun)

Every single day is a terrible war ... I can't give it up because I have to do it (Mrs Lee)

Jessie Wu interviewed mothers of two generations in Taiwan, and found some egalitarian households even among the older families. Xiao was a 56-year-old school nurse. Her father-in-law took night-shift employment to care for his grandchildren, while her mother-in-law established a household in which tasks were shared:

She was also a career woman and she relied on this (housework sharing) to manage her dual roles. I benefited. Since I married my husband, four adults in our household shared the housework. I like this life style, a sharing style of life. Everyone was in charge of something within the household; hence no one had to make a sacrifice of his or her career (in Wu 2007: 118-9).

But a Confucian hierarchy, in which parents-in-law have the authority of age and generation, can put young mothers under particular pressures:

At the very beginning, I preferred to seek my own mother's help with childcare, because she has a good educational attainment. However, my mother-in-law wanted to "keep" her grandchildren around. She has a lot of taboos, as a traditional countryside woman, so our childrearing methods and ideas are sometimes in contradiction to each other (Yi in Wu 2007).

My mother-in-law has been living with us since we bought this house. However, she only helps me to look after my son, not my daughter. She treats the boy much better, though both of them are her grandchildren. But what can I do? I cannot change the sex of my daughter (Hua in Wu 2007).

If I were well-to-do enough I probably would not ask for (mother-in-law's) help...I would probably enrol my children in a kindergarten to receive education' (Jing in Wu 2007: 153).

While East Asian mothers depend on both mothers-in-law and their own mothers for housing and for childcare, some acknowledge that relationships with their own mothers are less stressful:

I'm lucky to have such a nice mother who fully supports me, especially in terms of childcare. She wants to see me as a successful civil servant ... my colleagues whose mothers-in-law look after their children tend to feel more pressures combining and care than those whose mothers support them (Mrs Jin in Won 2004).

In Korea too, childcare was complicated by Confucian relationships between married working women and their parents-in-law. Some married working women described feeling indebted to parents-in-law, in return for the mother-in-law's caring role for

their children. They saw it as making them responsible for looking after their parents-in-law in the future:

I feel that I have responsibility for looking after my parent-in-law when they are older or unwell, because they are looking after my children now. I think it is immoral to abandon them in their old age, after all the caring role they played for my children. (Mrs. Wang in Sung's research in 2007)

However, it was a rather different story when their own mothers were looking after the children. One respondent said that her mother looks after her children during weekdays, but she still said that she feels more responsible for her parents-in-law. When asked why she feels more responsible for her parent-in-laws, rather than her own parent, she said:

Because I am a married woman, if I am not married and single, then I can do more for my own parent. In my generation, it is still not acceptable to put more importance on my own family, when there are things to do for my family-in-law. ... In my family, I have my brothers to look after my parent.

She continued to explain the Korean women's responsibility for their family-in-law by giving examples of her friend.

I know a case, a case of my friend, her father and father-in-law's memorial service was the same day. Every year she had to go to her father-in-law's memorial service, but couldn't go to her own father's, because she has her duty as a daughter-in-law (Mrs Seon in Sung's research in 2007).

This shows the strong influence of Confucian family culture that married women are more responsible for their parents-in-law than their own family. More importantly, asking mothers-in-law for childcare brings indebtedness, with women feeling responsible for parents-in-law in old age, in a way that does not enter into relationships between daughters and their own mothers. This represents strong Confucian patriarchal relationships between the daughters-in-law and parents-in-law.

Mothers also comment on the very small support offered by government. According to a doctor interviewed in Taiwan:

The government should be aware that most of the policies in our workplace are not put into effect. The regulations are more like decorative ornaments rather than a compulsory prescription (Wen in Wu 2007: 215).

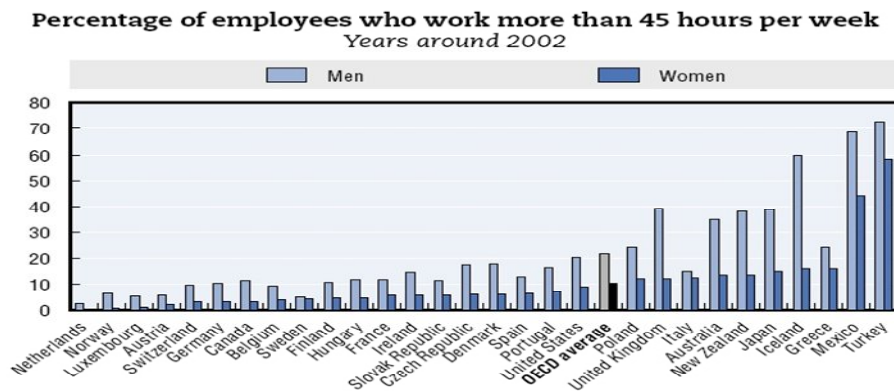
I never cherished any illusions concerning the government. Getting any resources to help with childcare from the government? This is the last consideration (Yangyi in Wu 2007: 213).

In studies of gender in East Asian countries, governments are portrayed as pushing responsibility for children and childcare towards the family. Spending is described as a very small proportion of government spending and responsibility. Legislation has

changed gender inequality and responsibility for childcare in principle, but in practice there is little support. East Asian mothers are not alone in this experience of governments. In Western countries too, governments have legislated for gender equality but failed to provide the means to support it. However, the state of war described by these mothers is extreme, and has some distinctive features. Public social spending is particularly low, with the Korean government's 5% at the bottom of this OECD league. In Japan, it is often difficult to find day care centres that accept children younger than one year. Also, only small numbers of day care centres offer extended hours to meet the needs of working parents who often work more than forty hours per week (Mainichi Interactive, 2001:2, in Gelb 2003:116). Confucian values appear to lurk beneath governments' powerful sense of family responsibility, and the limits to policy implementation in practice. The battle-ground described by mothers shows distinctive features, as they negotiate with parents- in-law from a position at the bottom of the family hierarchy. Some men see themselves as responsible for care. But embarrassment about responsibility for 'women's issues' appears to characterize men as fathers and as policy makers.

Time

Long working hours are a feature for men and women in East Asia, and a part of the climate in which unpaid care work is difficult to manage and difficult to share. Recorded working hours in Japan are near the high end of the international spectrum, with around 60% of men and nearly 20% of women working more than 45 hours per week. Japan also has few part-time workers, either male or female (OECD: 19).



While hours recorded in comparative data are high, there is room to question whether – in the long hours culture in East Asia – the real picture is of even longer hours, putting pressure on men and women to show commitment through staying at their desks. Korean respondents felt pressured to work beyond the legal limit. Male respondents described this as putting care out of the question:

I don't even think about the legal working hours (8 hours) ... But I desperately want to leave the office at 8pm (12 hours) ... on weekdays I usually leave home at 7.30 and I'm back around 10 or later...even holidays, sometimes I'm required to work...how and when can I take care of them? (Mr Jun in Won 2004: 282).

Meantime, mothers felt squeezed between employers' expectations and their families' expectations:

The management want us to work harder, even through the night.... Basically I've tried to... but sometimes I can't meet their expectation... My mother-in-law really hates me to come back late...She can stand until 7 pm, but beyond then, she can't...around 6pm I begin to fret... I watch the time on and on (Mrs Kang in Won: 2004: 282).

Mothers in Taiwan also felt under pressure because of working hours:

My boss asked me to work 12 hours per working day. The reason that I had to work long hours was that he only hired two employees for the shop. When my child was four months old, I was shocked to find that he did not like to be held in my arms. Rather he liked his grandmother (Nancy in Wu 2007: 150).

There is little part-time work in Taiwan. It's even rare for public servants like us. I want to do a part-time job if it is an available option for me. It's worthwhile working part-time even earning a reduced salary' (Judy in Wu 2007: 176).

While Judy claims the need for part-time work, she also acknowledges a problem. Not everyone could afford to work part-time. Zhang suggests reduced working hours for herself:

It would be better for me, if my working hours could be reduced (Zhang in Wu 2007: 217).

Other problems are clear from the comparative literature: part-time work often marginalizes women in low paid work, and may not bring enough earnings, especially in the context of increasingly fragile marriage. It may also affect women's career prospects, if they continued to be part-time workers in the long term.

One Korean female respondent described how her experience of doing part-time work in the past disadvantages her situation in the workplace now, in terms of promotion in particular.

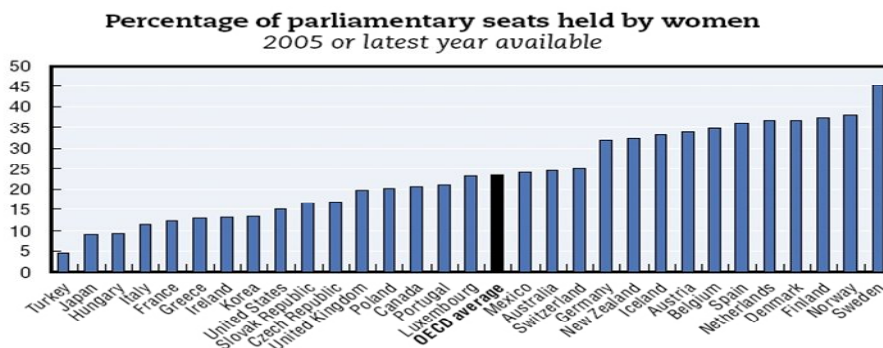
After I got married my husband went to the US to study, so I had to quit my job and followed him. At the time, there was no maternity leave or anything. I only had 1month leave after having the baby. I came back from the US and started as a part-time worker.I don't expect that I will be promoted. I feel that I am far too behind, compared with my colleagues in the same age group. I feel that my experience as a worker before marriage and during part-time work is not counted (Mrs Ann, in Sung's research in 2007).

While part-time working can be helpful for women to reconcile paid and unpaid work, there are some certain disadvantages as illustrated above. Again, there is much to be said for a shorter working week, but if it applies to women or to mothers rather than to men or to fathers, then this may bring gender inequality, and high risks for mothers when marriages break down. Are there any debates in East Asia about reducing working hours, or at least applying existing legislation on working hours? In Europe, too, most policy debates have been about making women's lives more like men's. Sweden is the most gender-equal country, and has achieved this through high social support and spending on childcare, underpinning women's labour market participation in as continuous manner as found anywhere. Making men's lives more like women's is an alternative, advocated by Fraser in advocating a 'Universal Caregiver' model, in which both men and women are assumed to have care responsibilities and to need time to care (Fraser 1997). The French working time model also has something to contribute to thinking about how to find time for both men and women to earn and to care. The 35-hour week in France brings more gender equality of working time than elsewhere in Western Europe, while allowing time for care. Research suggests that both mothers and fathers in France are able to spend more time with their children since this legislation (Fagnani & Letablier 2006). There is also evidence of preferences for more equal working time, with the current French model not far from widespread preferences in Europe (Fagan & Warren 2001).

With the big gender wage gap in East Asian countries, it is still more likely to be women who will stop employment or turn to part-time work, rather than men. Traditional gender roles may make it difficult to see the Universal Caregiver model or French 35-hour week as real possibilities in East Asian countries. But we ask – in the conclusion – whether silence about gender inequalities in time, care and power is the better option?

Power

Women's political representation in most countries is well below the 50% which might be expected if power were distributed equally between men and women: Japan and Korea are at the far end of the spectrum of OECD countries, with both countries well under 15% of parliamentary seats held by women. Taiwan has a complex quota system nearly 25% women members (OECD, Matland 2006: 286-289).



At the opposite end of this spectrum are Sweden, at 45%, with Norway, Finland, Denmark following close behind. We might ask why these East Asian countries have so little room for women in parliamentary politics, with what implications, and are there prospects for increasing this? We would argue that the small minority of women in public decision-making positions undermines women's representation and the representation of core issues for women, such as gendered expectations of care. Women's political representation in national parliaments has been shown to relate positively to their level of employment, education compared with men, length of time since enfranchisement, secularization, social democratic political parties and electoral systems based on proportional representation. But even where women's employment, education and mobilization have brought steady improvements in representation, these have not brought parity with men. Increasingly women's low level of political representation is being targeted by quotas (Dahlerup 2006, 2007).

Can these low levels of representation in parliamentary politics be understood as women's choices? There may be a case for this in East Asian countries, in the context of cultural values encouraging women to be obedient rather than dominant. Accumulated (Western) research evidence suggests that discriminatory processes are more important (Philips 1991). Scandinavian countries have achieved high levels of women's representation through long political work to increase the acceptability of women in politics and decrease the acceptability of men's over-representation. But arguments for equality as parity, rather than as equality of opportunity, have brought campaigns for quotas, which make a direct assault on discriminatory electoral processes, and hope to reduce the time-lag between women's suffrage and their full representation in representative parliaments. In some countries (Rwanda for example) these have lifted women's participation above Sweden's 45%. There seems a good case for looking at these in Europe as well as in East Asia, as a means to bring representation of women, and of issues important to women higher up the agenda, rather more quickly than seems likely under current political conditions.

Parliamentary politics is only a small part of the political process. The Ministry of Gender Equality in Korea, a 'focal point for gender equality since 2001' (Won 2007) seems an impressive achievement for women, with development and reform of women's bureaux giving a strong impression of attention to gender issues on the part of government legislature and bureaucracy. Sook-yeon Won's qualitative study gives fascinating insight into the experience of men and women working in these agencies.

I feel like we're striving against an enormous tide 'without backing': no money, no staff, no power. Nevertheless, what we've got are complaining, blaming and neglect. I've worked really hard and have even left my family behind. But these days I ask myself, 'Do I have to work this hard? For what?' (Ms F in Won 2007: 268)

We (civil servants for childcare) can't go to supervise childcare facilities even once in a year because of the lack of human resources. Theoretically, it must be problematic, but do you have any 'magical solutions' under the current situation? (Mr C in Won 2007: 269).

This sense of lack of resources for the task may be echoed everywhere there are social policies, whether for gender equality or other objectives. But male and female respondents express an acute sense of powerlessness. Male and female respondents also express a problem of gender identity for men working in gender equality units, which seems to us distinctive. Ms E described male colleagues as ‘continually suffered from identity crises’, while Ms H argued: ‘They’re just policymakers concerned with women’s issues, and therefore nobody asks them to be women. Nevertheless, it seems to me that they feel like they have done something they shouldn’t have done as men.’

Mr C expresses this embarrassment about his job as a man concerned with gender issues:

When I was placed here, I received a few words of consolation from my colleagues and friends. That was because they thought it was not a proper job to do as a man. Frankly, I do care about the way my work is perceived from the outside as well as my status inside. It may sound silly, but sometimes, if not always, I’m reluctant to give people my business cards (Mr C in Won 2007).

Both men and women found the environment of women’s bureaux difficult to reconcile with their personal ambitions and personal lives, and wanted to leave. It is not surprising that Won draws a rather negative conclusion about ‘institutionalised powerless’ in Korea: ‘The potential of the women’s bureaux to protect women’s interests and to achieve genuine gender equality through state policy is in serious question’ (Won 2007: 275).

These accounts may not be all there is to say about gender equality in the Korean welfare state. But that men could admit such embarrassment does suggest that the ideologies underpinning welfare structures in Korea are antithetical to the gender equality which the legislation appears to promote. Time may bring Korean women more benefits from their gender equality legislation. Perhaps the Korean gender environment is the most extreme, and women in other East Asian countries may have more to hope for from legislation which puts gender equality on the statute book and into the public domain? OECD data show women’s parliamentary representation slightly worse in Japan than in Korea. But there have been increasing numbers of female members in the House of Representatives in Japan from 1.6 percent in 1985 to 7.3 percent in 2000. The numbers of women members in the House of Councilors also increased from 7.7 percent in 1985 to 17.1 percent in 2000 (PMO 2002, in Kobayashi 2004). Moreover, there is evidence of grassroots politics developing in Japan to foster women’s participation in formal politics and to sponsor gender equality legislation and issues important to women, such as long-term care insurance (Takao 2007). It is possible to take an optimistic view of developing political processes which have become more open to women through activist groups and academic expertise (Peng 2006). But the current picture of East Asian women’s political representation and the implementation of gender equality legislation in bureaucratic settings suggest that Confucian values of gender hierarchy may lurk behind the Ministry of Gender Equality as well as behind the unequal representation of women in politics.

Conclusion

Gender equality legislation in a Confucian context has been in some ways a triumph for those who have argued the case and fought for women. A great deal has been achieved.

But systems which sustain gender inequality are complex, as well as underpinned by powerful Confucian ideologies. The gender model which depended on different roles enhanced men's power in public life and decision-making as well as private life and decision-making. Increasing women's participation in the labour market is a crucial part of increasing their income, security and power in private life and public. But this is to address only part of the very complex system which keeps men and women unequal. Women will not be able to earn equally unless they have equal time at work as well as equal pay. And while they have sole responsibility for care they will struggle to compete with men in employment and public decision-making. Is it possible – in a Confucian context – to think of policies for more equal care, time and power as well as more equal earnings?

Considering the circumstances of East Asian countries, some may well think it is unrealistic to imagine an equality which includes men in care, more equal time, and more equal power. But unless we can articulate the problem as a problem of men as well as a problem of women, we are unlikely to find ways of addressing it that are rooted in an understanding of men's domination of public and private life. As Cornelius Grebe argues, drawing on Bacchi (1999), the way that problems are conceptualised limits the solutions that can be offered:

If the current discourse of incompatibility as a women's 'problem' were replaced by a discourse of incompatibility as a 'problem' of male advantage and bias in society, policy interventions might be more likely to address the male-biased organisation of paid employment and men's behaviour and attitudes towards paid employment and care work (Grebe 2007: 315).

So, it may be 'unrealistic' to think of solutions involving men, time, care and power rather than only women's employment. But unless we say the unsayable, debates may be rather partial, and policy solutions unlikely to reach the roots of gender inequality.

The European evidence is that the social democratic countries, which are built on high levels of public spending, and a commitment to gender equality as well as to social equality, have been the most successful in supporting women's position in the labour market, with a high quality of provision for children, enabling more equal working time, while bringing women into public life and politics. These socio-economic environments are also favourable to economic growth and social well-being. Overall there is no question that gender equality – while legislated everywhere – has been nearer to achievement where governments have a strong ideological commitment to equality, and to the spending to underpin it.

The Confucian context is deeply challenging to ideas about gender equality and women's role in public life and decision-making. But there is plenty of evidence of feminist

movement, women's organisations and changes in law and life which would have been inconceivable in the middle of the twentieth century. There is room for optimism that women's scholarship and political action can challenge the deeply unequal Confucian gender hierarchies.

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