

Fathers' Use of Parental Leave in Korea: Motives, Experiences and Problems

Seung-Ah Hong¹

Inseon Lee²

Abstract

With the increase of working parents, childcare issues are emerging as a critical policy agenda. Though paternity/parental leave systems exist, they don't fully support childcare issues faced by working parents. There is also no substantial change in the number of men who participate in childcare. In 2010, only 2.8% of those using parental leave were men. This research explores how other countries have encouraged men's participation, and suggests policy recommendations. It also explores problems men face when using parental leave through in-depth interviews with 18 men who have used paternity leaves. Substantial concerns are low wage compensation during leave and disadvantages men might face when they resume working. These findings suggest the following recommendations: a) strengthen and reform the paternity/parental leave system; b) change corporate culture which hinders men's use of parental leave; c) consistently conduct campaigns to expand social awareness in support of men's use of paternity/parental leave.

Keywords: parental leave, paternity leave, equal parenthood, organization culture, father's rights

Introduction

Discussions about caregiving, started in Korean society around the 2000s but have mainly focused on issues concerning caregiving by women. The mainstream of discussions tackles women's labor force participation, "care deficits" due to accelerating family nuclearization and the subsequent socialization of caregiving (Chang et al., 2005; Choi, 2010; Jang, 2011).

¹ Research Fellow, Korean Women's Development Institute

² Associate Research Fellow, Korean Women's Development Institute

Discussions about caregiving have made it an issue that only concerns women, and the issue of childcare by fathers or fathers' rights has rarely been on the agenda. When it comes to claims of rights to childcare as part of efforts to socialize it, gender equality is a critical factor. In spite of that, the issue of gender equality has been mostly dead and buried throughout these discussions (Yoon, 2006; Cho & Min, 2012; Haas, 2003; Haas & Hwang, 2008; Harrington et al., 2011). A basic social demographic is that it is women who have been required to leave their jobs or experience career interruptions because of caregiving needs. It is hard to find cases of men experiencing the same for reasons related to caregiving.

Recent studies, however, suggest that fathers also have the desire to stay with their children during early child-rearing years as well as being at their births. Some fathers are even willing to take parental leave to participate in childcare, not minding the disapproving attitudes around them. They are trying to participate in childcare, risking their chances for advancement at work as well as loss of economic benefits, in a society where a competitive and merit-oriented corporate culture forces men to sacrifice their family life in order to succeed at work (Ministry of Employment and Labor, 2012; Hong & Lee, 2012).

As the number of working parents continues to increase, childcare issues, including childbirth and childrearing, have become some of the most important social policy issues in our society. Recent developments in most countries indicate that many are breaking away from the past practice of leaving the main responsibility for childbirth and childcare to women, whereby only they have been granted maternity leave and parental leave. Policy efforts are now being extended to encourage fathers to share childcare responsibilities. Such policy changes are aligned with the recent emphasis on "equal parenthood" where fathers and mothers share equal opportunities, rights and responsibilities. In other words, with the emphasis on parents' rights and equal parenthood, policies are starting to support use of parental leave in a way that child-rearing and other family responsibilities, as well as work responsibilities, apply equally to men and women (Hong and Chang, 2006:21). It is believed that existing discussions of equal parenthood are having a positive effect on parent-child relationships as well as on gender equality.

First, it has been analyzed that a father's use of parental leave has a positive impact not only on themselves but also on father-child relationships and a child's growth and development.

Second, a father's use of parental leave is seen as an important policy measure to encourage changes within the family and to realize gender equality in the labor market. It is emphasized as one of the most important measures in strengthening women's position in the labor market, reducing the gender wage gap, and alleviating gender discrimination in the labor market (Cools, Fiva and Kirkeboen, 2011).

Third, positive use of paternity leave by men will facilitate a woman's return to the labor market, alleviating the problem of career interruption for women. If both parents take the

leave one after the other, it reduces the duration of absence from work on the part of the mother, which will in turn help cut down on the loss of human capital and the risk of income loss caused by childbirth (Hassengger et al., 2003, recited by Reich, 2010:3).

Therefore, we are at a stage when we should start discussing a father's right to caregiving in earnest. Many Western countries have a system in place for fathers in support of their rights to childcare and positive results have been achieved from the execution of these systems. For example, Sweden, Germany and Norway, which have higher parental leave participation rates among fathers, also have fathers' rights to take the leave firmly in place. Against this backdrop, the Korean government has recently introduced a "paternity leave" system that allows fathers to take parental leave for up to one year, separate from the mother's leave. Despite such institutional support, however, recent statistics show that Korean men's parental leave take-up rate is still very low, at 2.8% of all parental leave taken in 2010 (Ministry of Employment and Labor, 2012).

This study examines Korea's institutional progress in encouraging fathers to take parental leave. It also looks into actual use and effects of parental leave through the experiences of fathers who have taken leave, as well as offering some suggestions for improvement.

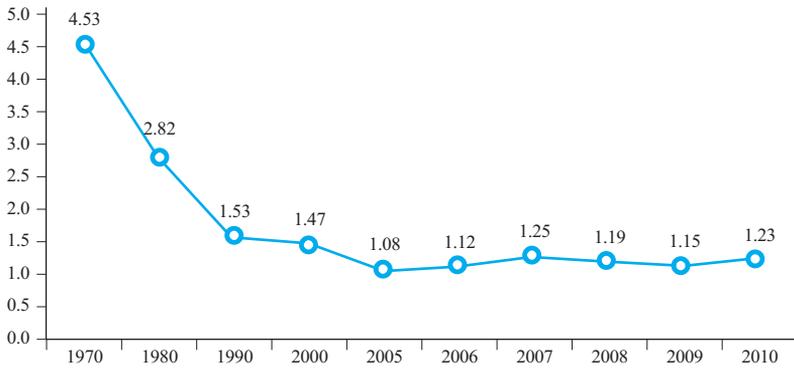
Changes in the Population, Labor Market and Family³

Demographic Changes

Korean society has witnessed a drastic fall in fertility rates over the past four decades and has reported the lowest fertility rates among countries worldwide since 2009. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) decreased from 4.53 in the 1970s to 1.59 and 1.23 in the 1990s and in 2010 respectively. Korea's average birth rate has decreased significantly since the 1990s and is showing no palpable signs of growth after posting the lowest birth rate of 1.08 in 2005 (Figure 1).

The fall in the birth rate is not merely a demographic issue. Although multiple reasons have been pointed out for such low fertility rates, the reason that is presented as the prime culprit for Korea's falling birth rate is the heavy burden of raising and educating children. Childbirth and childrearing were considered essential life tasks in the past when people lived within a big family structure. These days, however, childbirth and childrearing are more of an individual choice rather than an essential life task. In addition a growing number of people avoid or delay childbirth, or reduce the number of children they bear, due to work and/or the demands of today's highly competitive society.

3 This part is updated from Hong(2010).

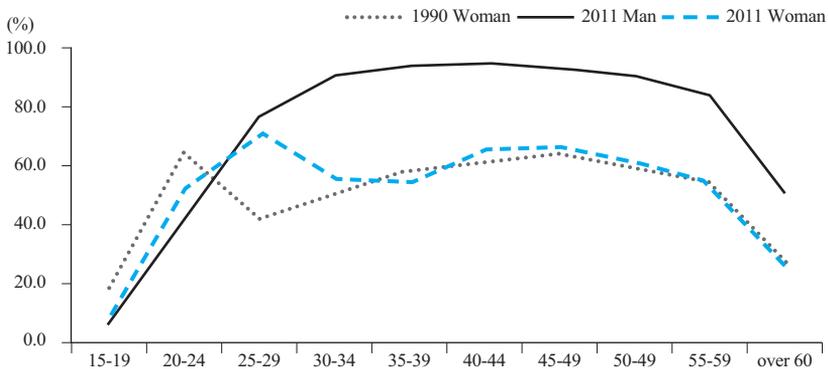


Source: Statistics Korea

Figure 1. Changes of Total Fertility Rates (1970~2010)

Changes in the Labor Market

Participation of Korean women in the workforce has remained below 50% for the past two decades: specifically 47% in 1990, 48.8% in 2000 and 49.7% in 2011. The comparison of men’s and women’s economic participation by age shows that a man’s economic participation draws an “inverted-U shaped curve” while a woman’s shows an “M-curve”. This indicates that a woman’s economic participation plummets between the ages of 30 and 44, which correlates to the time when they experience pregnancy, childbirth and child raising. That is why a woman’s economic participation rate is very low between the ages of 30 and 44. As

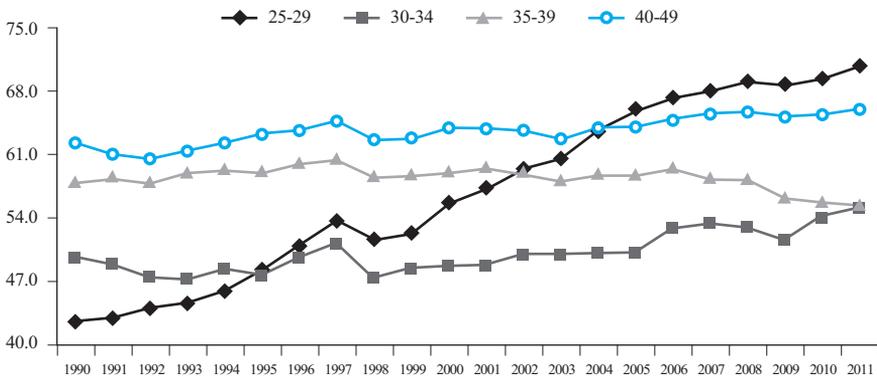


Source: Statistics Korea

Figure 2. Economic Participation Rate by Gender and Age

a matter of fact, the economically inactive female population is as high as 42.1% during the ages of 30 and 44, contributing to “an M-curve phenomenon” in which a woman’s economic activities decline sharply due to childbearing and child raising responsibilities.

Such patterns are also observed in the changes to economic participation rates by age group. Though a growing number of women has entered the labor market, during the period 1990-2009, the age groups of 35-39 and 40-49 showed no increase in economic participation, and the age group of 30-34 reported a slight increase (Figure 3). Meanwhile, the age group of 25-29 posted a sharp increase in economic participation. Therefore, it can be assumed that most women in this age group are unmarried. In other words, the age group that reported a rise in economic participation rates was the age group of mostly unmarried women while the age group of women over the age of 35 - the group which includes most married women - showed little change in economic participation.



Source: Statistics Korea

Figure 3. Women’s Economic Participation Rate by Age

The above-mentioned statistics highlight the fact that women are experiencing career breaks due to marriage, pregnancy and childbirth. Women’s career breaks have a detrimental effect on their efforts to seek employment. Women are often ruled out or restricted when they try to enter and/or reenter the labor market, which results in the marginal status for women in the labor force (Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Anderson, 2005).

The research on dynamic changes to women’s employment status indicates that a woman’s career breaks are caused mainly by family responsibilities, not because of problems with human capital (Kim et al., 2007). Moreover, the analysis of job movement patterns for women, based on Korean Labor Panel Data (1st-9th), show that the average time period from leaving the labor

market to reentering the labor market is about 10.2 years. Most cases of long-term career breaks are reported during this period of time when women experience marriage, pregnancy, childbirth and have to perform other family duties (Min et al., 2009).

Changes in Family

For the last twenty years, Korean families have undergone significant changes not just in terms of their size and structure but also in terms of family relationship, roles and responsibilities.

If we take a look at family structure first, the number of big families with three generations living together has declined rapidly while nuclear families have become more common. Moreover, nuclear families have been divided into smaller family structures. That is, in addition to the traditional form of nuclear families, consisting of parents and their unmarried children, new types of nuclear families such as elderly couple households or one person households have emerged in Korean society. Overall, the percentage of nuclear families rose sharply to 82.8% in 2005 from 64.6% in 1975, and the percentage of couples with no children rose significantly to 18.1% in 2005 from 2.1% in 1975. Meanwhile, the percentage of one person households increased to 20.1% in 2008 from 4.8% in 1980(Statistics Korea).

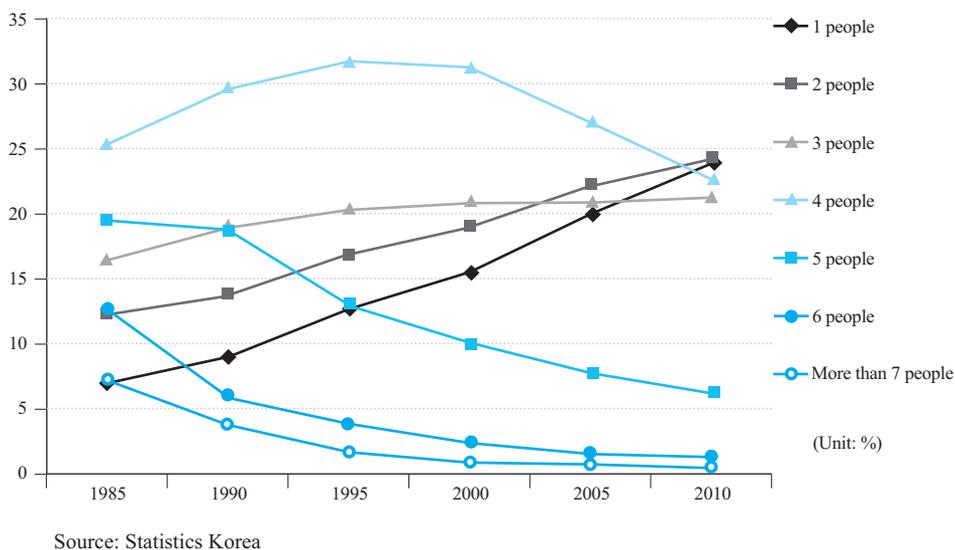
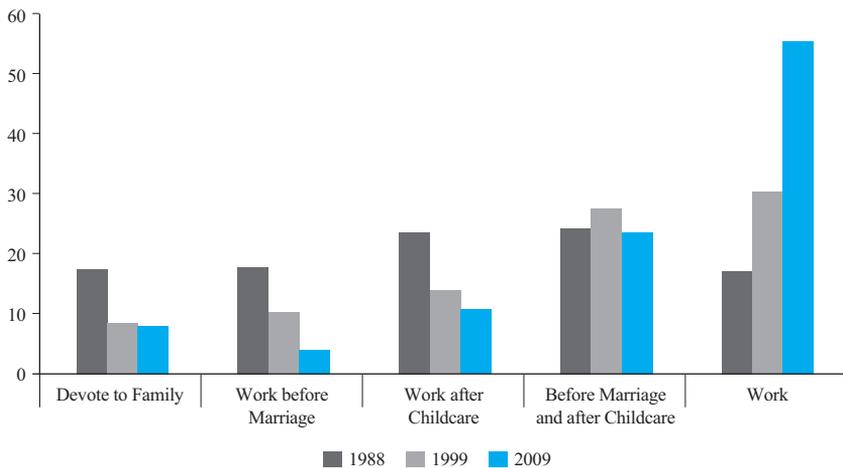


Figure 4. Change of Household Size (1985~2010)

In addition to such changes in the structure of family, Korean families have also experienced changes in terms of relationship, roles and responsibilities. As the number of dual-income families rose, a considerable portion of the family’s traditional caring functions and responsibilities have fallen to society. The most obvious changes were observed in childcare and elderly care. Furthermore, a growing number of working parents in nuclear families face a reality where they have to balance work and childcare, thus making reconciliation of work and family one of the most critical issues facing Korean society.

Contrary to changes observed in family responsibilities, a steadily increasing number of women have expressed their willingness to remain employed regardless of marriage or childbearing. For instance, the percentage of women who said they intend “to devote themselves to family duties” decreased from 17.5% in 1988 to 8.5% in 1998 and to 8.0% in 2009 while the percentage of women who responded that they intend “to hold their jobs regardless of marriage and childbirth” increased significantly from 16.7% in 1988 to 30.4% in 1998 and to 55.9% in 2009. Meanwhile, most women cited the burden of childrearing as the main obstacle to seeking employment: The percentage of women respondents who cited the burden of childrearing as the main obstacle to seeking employment increased from 29.3% in 1988 to 31.4% in 1998 and to 49.9% in 2009 (Statistics Korea, 1988, 1998, 2009). Based on the survey results, it can be inferred that women are determined to have careers but major conflicts caused by the demands of childcare versus the demanding work environment tend to discourage them from having babies. Instead, they tend to choose to pursue careers, which results in the issue of low birth rates.



Source: Statistics Korea. Social Survey

Figure 5. Women’s Attitude toward Employment (1988, 1999, 2009)

Parental Leave Policy in Korea

Korea's work-family balance policy has two characteristics: social interest in work-family balance and policy concerns which started to develop later than in other OECD countries. Nevertheless, the development and introduction of the system has been accelerated. The development of policy started in the childcare field and has moved to maternity leave, parental leave and finally to flexible work arrangements.

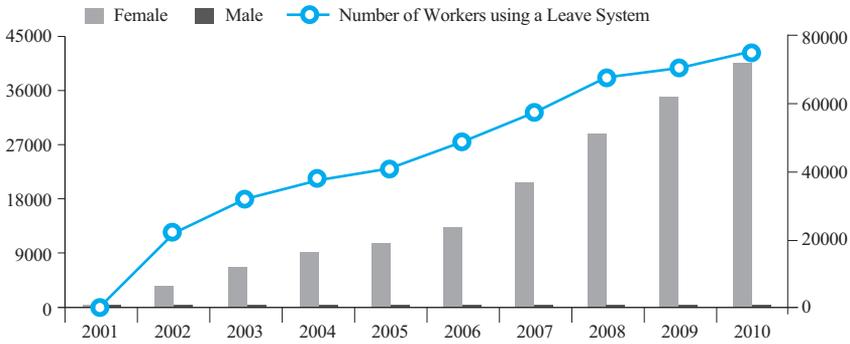
Historically, it began with the introduction of maternity leave as stipulated by the Labor Standards Act of 1953 and much later parental leave by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1987. It should be noted that the Korean parental leave system in particular began initially in the form of "unpaid leave of less than one year to female workers with infants aged less than one year." In 1995, the scope of target recipients was extended to include male workers. In 2001, amendments to the three laws governing maternity protection changed the unpaid leave to paid leave. In 2006, the scope was extended again to "workers with infants and toddlers aged less than three years"; in 2008, mothers and fathers were both given parental leave of one year each; and they could divide the days of parental leave between themselves as they wanted.

In other words, the amended laws provide parents flexibility and choice in terms of when and how to take leave in order to make it easier to use parental leave. An entitlement to take leave for one year was granted separately to fathers as an encouragement for them to take parental leave. It is also stipulated by law that workers raising young children have a right to reduced work hours. Furthermore, in 2010, parental leave compensations were changed from a flat-rate to pro-rata scheme, which had the effect of raising the compensation level to some extent (40% of ordinary wages, with 1 million KRW as the upper limit and 500,000 KRW as the lower limit).

Also, to provide support for women at childbirth, the paternity leave system was extended from three days (unpaid) to five days (three paid and two unpaid days), so that men could take leave without suffering economic loss.

Amid these changes, actual take-up rates also appear to be on a steady increase. The use of maternity leave has continued to increase significantly since the implementation of the system in 2001. If we look into the proportion of women who took maternity leave and parental leave, they were 21.2% in 2003, 24.1% in 2004, 26% in 2005, 55.1% in 2010 (Figure 6). However, these figures were based on the records of employment insurance contributors. It should be noted that there are still groups of mothers who desire to use the leave but excluded from the benefits of the system.

On the other hand, comparisons of parental leave take-up rates between men and women tell us that men's participation is extremely poor. It has remained below 2% since 2001 and went up slightly to 2.8% only as recently as 2012, indicating that parental leave use is still dominated by women (Table 1).



Source: Ministry of Employment and Labor, Employment Insurance DB

Figure 6. Take-up Rates of Parental Leave by Gender (2001-2010)

Table 1. Number of Persons and Days for Those Who Used Parental Leave by Gender

Unit: persons, %, days

Category	2005		2010		2012	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Users	10,492	208	40,913	819	62,279	1,790
Ratio	98%	2%	98%	2%	97%	3%
Average Days	211	185	281	240	289	238

Source: Ministry of Employment and Labor, Statistics Korea

Fathers' Experiences with Parental Leave: In-depth interviews

Based on the institutional characteristics of the parental leave program mentioned above, we conducted qualitative interviews to understand where Korean men stand in terms of parental leave use. These case studies were carried out through in-depth interviews with fathers who were on parental leave or had taken leave before. Interviewees were recruited using the snowballing sampling method, and a total of 18 men were chosen. Twelve of them worked in the public sector, while five were in the private sector, with one working for a non-governmental organization (NGO). In-depth interviews were performed from November 26, 2012 to December 26, 2012. These interviews were recorded and documented with prior consent of interviewees.

Motivations

Motivations for fathers to take parental leave can be divided into two categories: Active choice by fathers with the strong intent to participate in caring for children and a somewhat passive choice by fathers for whom such problems as their wives' health, circumstances at the workplace or difficulty in obtaining adequate childcare services make it necessary for them to take leave.

In the former case, fathers are determined to care for their children and accept shared parenting as an undisputed right and duty. Case 4 and his wife are both public servants. He said that he and his wife took it for granted that they would both take parental leave because they had promised to raise their children together before they got married. He took leave first, and his wife planned to take leave at the end of his one-year leave.

“I think that people should not have a baby in the first place if they are not ready to play their roles as parents. My wife and I have agreed that the first caregivers for the child should be us; the second, our parents. When she got pregnant, she did a lot of research about childcare. Experts say that how children are cared for until they turn five years old greatly affects the rest of their lives. That’s why we thought that it’d be better if we took care of our child ourselves.” (36 years, civil servant)

Case 9, who worked for a non-governmental organization (NGO), said that he himself had made up his mind to take parental leave. When his wife got pregnant, he let the company know that he was going to take the leave. Case 12 also took the leave, convinced that it’s good for parents to be with their children, for at least the first two years.

On the other hand, passive choosers cite their wives' health as the first reason and workplace circumstances and lack of caring services as other main reasons. Case 5 took two months of leave to help care for his child at least for a short time because his wife, who had quit her job after giving birth, was having a hard time caring for the baby all by herself. Case 7 said that his wife took maternity leave but was asked to return to work, so he took advantage of parental leave to care for their child in her place. Also, Case 7 had chosen to take parental leave himself, considering his family’s economic conditions, as he and his wife couldn’t find good affordable caregiving services. He was staying at home to take care of the child.

“My wife had so much stress that she was having it hard mentally and physically. She needed time to herself, away from the baby. I thought that I should come in and give her a little break.” (34 years, programmer)

“My wife finished her maternity leave, and she was on parental leave when her company called to ask her to come back to work or they were going to get a new recruit. It was not that they were firing her, but they were going to recruit a new team lead. She is the team lead now. If a new team lead is brought on board and stays on, then she will have to go back as a regular team member after finishing her leave. So I thought, ‘Maybe I should take leave.’ At first we were going to find a babysitter, but we decided that it’s better for the father to take care of the baby. That’s how I ended up taking the leave.” (35 years, civil servant)

Experiences of Child Caring

Fathers’ experiences with parental leave were found to be very positive. They not only felt a considerable sense of accomplishment from their childcare experiences but also feel more attached and connected with their children. They said that they felt that they could be supportive of their wives’ career pursuits and that they learned to take it easy and be more understanding in their relationships with their wives. Case 10, who had taken one year of leave, described the time as a blessing in his life and recommended that other fathers not miss such an experience.

“The biggest joy is to watch my child change and grow, and that I could witness and affect the changes. Most mothers and fathers agree, as was also reported on an EBS documentary film. I’m talking about ‘Father’s Effect.’ I read a few books about it. They say that how much time the father spends with his children affects their intelligence. I clearly feel the effect.” (34 years, white-collar worker)

“You can feel a sense of achievement from your work, but [you can also feel it from the time you spend with your child.] I can see my child growing every day, and it’s a different experience from what I used to have when I only saw him briefly after I came home from work. I have the joy of watching him grow, and I feel relieved, too. Some people hire a babysitter and install CCTV to monitor her. We don’t have to do that. We don’t have to be worried. That’s what I liked the best about it.” (35 years, civil servant)

The fathers also said that caring for children is “not an easy job,” although being able to connect with their children is itself meaningful enough. It requires a lot of patience, physical strength and technical knowledge. In the course of caring for their children, fathers sometimes faced physical and psychological difficulties that they could have never imagined while at work, learned to handle many kinds of childcare situations and gained

a greater appreciation for the role of the mother at home. Nonetheless, the working fathers in our study said that one of the good things about their participation in childcare was being able to support their wives to focus on their work without having to worry about the child.

“After I took parental leave, my wife could focus on her work without worries. If both parents work until 8 or 9 pm, then the kid will have to stay at the nursery school or kindergarten until 8 or 9 pm, too. How fretful will you be all the time? You have to hurry home, rush around to get things done and never feel relaxed. We went through this for one year. Now I think we are a lot more relaxed.” (38 years, NGO)

“If my wife has something to do that can't wait, she can take as much time as she needs to finish it because the kid is with someone she can trust. I always feel anxious when both of us work.” (37 years, office worker).

Problems with Using Parental Leave

Lastly, let us look into the obstacles which prevent men from using parental leave in light of their experiences. They are classified largely into financial and corporate culture issues. First, a majority of dual-income fathers found it difficult to live on the current level of parental leave compensation, and single-income fathers in particular find it extremely hard to make a living with the reduction in pay. Case 12, who used three months of parental leave after giving birth to twins, said that the financial loss was a real problem, although he was too desperate for leave to worry about it under the circumstances at that time. Case 3 and Case 13 told us that they made up for living expenses with their own savings.

“In my case, I think I lost almost 20 million won altogether, including three months' pay, bonuses and other expenses. If only I could have been paid just my basic pay, I could have considered taking the leave for six months or even more. The pay reduction by the company was so big that we had it hard. We even got a credit line extended. So I want to make sure I say this to other men. They should be aware that, if they can't afford it financially, there is a financial pitfall that they must face before they can enjoy the bliss of childcare.” (40 years, white-collar worker)

The next reason for being reluctant to take parental leave is the corporate culture in which men take a big risk of being at a disadvantage for promotions and job arrangements. Case 11 was eligible for a promotion before he took leave. Requesting parental leave removed him from the promotion list, and he thinks that he will also be at a disadvantage in salary negotiations. He is comforting himself with his own personal calculations that the

immediate financial loss is small considering the cost that would have otherwise been required in terms of his child's character development.

"If I hadn't taken leave, I would have been up for promotion. But I was bypassed. When I go back next year, I'm supposed to have a raise after a salary negotiation. I always got good reports. Now, when I return to work, my reports will be lower than my usual; I guess I would get about the average. I expect to be at a disadvantage in pay and promotion. Still, I remind myself of the factors affecting the development of my child's character. Dad being at home with the child during his or her early childhood years contributes...maybe...50 or 60% to that; financial stability, 30%; and the rest, 10%, I guess. You can add up the others, but they can't beat the 60% odds, right? That's why I can say, "It doesn't matter." (34 years, white-collar worker)

Case 7, a civil servant, was promoted right before he took parental leave. Therefore, he wasn't burdened by significant constraints, but he still says that use of parental leave does pose the risk of causing a disadvantage at work.

"I didn't feel much pressure when taking the leave because I had just gotten a promotion. Of course, I would still have taken leave even if I hadn't gotten the promotion. If I had been about to be promoted or an important event in personnel affairs had been around the corner, I don't think it would have been as easy to take the leave. I know it's a legally-protected right, but there surely are disadvantages in real life (35 years, public servant).

Conclusion

To summarize, while there has been some progress in the legislation of the parental leave policy, substantial barriers remain in its implementation and management at the workplace level. Overall, the implementation of parental leave for men needs to be considered since the process involving effective implementation and solutions, both in the workplace and in society, means we have to manage such challenges as low fertility and women's participation in the labor market etc.

Indeed, the percentage of Korean fathers taking parental leave is still very low. There should be more men like those who participated in this study. One of the study subjects is known as "the first man to take parental leave" at work (Case 12). This proves that fathers taking leave are still seen as a rare thing in our society. However, our future starts here. As fathers, however small in numbers, take parental leave and experience the joys and

rewards of caring for their children and sharing their positive experiences, a new culture will be created.

With the outlook that Korea, too, will migrate to a society of “dual-income families,” the issues of childcare, including childbirth and childrearing, which are faced by working parents will become an even more important social policy agenda. Recent developments in most countries indicate that they are moving away from the past practice of women taking the main responsibility for childbirth and childcare by only granting parental leave to them, and are expanding policy efforts to encourage fathers to participate in the care of their children. Such policy changes are aligned with the recent emphasis on “equal parenthood” where fathers and mothers share opportunities, rights and responsibilities. In other words, Korea needs to move in the direction of supporting parents to use parental leave in a way that childrearing and other family responsibilities, as well as work responsibilities, will apply equally to men and women, with an emphasis on parent’ rights and equal parenthood.

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