

**WOMEN'S EXIT FROM THE LABOR MARKET AFTER MARRIAGE IN SOUTH
KOREA: GENDER ANALYSIS**

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Abstract. This article analyzes the exit of women from the labor market after marriage in South Korea based on a gender approach. The study examines the influence of marriage and motherhood factors on women's employment, the dynamics of age-related employment, and the features of the M-shaped employment curve. Gender roles, institutional constraints, and problems in the work-family balance are also substantiated as the main factors reducing women's economic activity. The research results highlight the demographic and economic consequences of this process and demonstrate the need to ensure gender equality.

Keywords: marriage, women's employment, exit from the labor market, gender analysis, M-shaped employment pattern, work-family balance, gender equality

Introduction. Although women's participation in the labor market in South Korea has increased in recent decades, the interruption of women's employment at the stage of marriage and childbirth is systemic. According to the OECD analysis, women's employment in Korea shows "M-shaped" dynamics in terms of age: relatively high rates were observed in the 20s, a sharp decline occurred in the 30s due to marriage and childcare, and partially recovered in the 40s. This situation indicates that the "work-family conflict" is more closely related to institutional and cultural limitations than to individual choice.

The macroeconomic essence of this process is that the exit of women from the labor market (or a long break) slows down the accumulation of human capital, strengthens the "motherhood penalty," reduces labor productivity and the trajectory of income, and limits the overall growth potential of the economy. According to the OECD, employment rate of women aged 15–64 (2023) stood at 61.7%, below the OECD average of 63.4%¹. In addition, the issue of wage inequality also reveals the structural roots of the problem: the OECD report states that the gender wage gap (median earnings of full-time employees) in Korea was 31.1%, the highest among OECD countries.

(a) Theory of Human Capital and Disruptions. According to this approach, a temporary exit from the labor market (especially in their 30s) leads to the depreciation of human capital; as a result, when a woman returns to work, she is more likely to experience lower wages, enter lower position, or move into the non-regular employment segment. In the Korean context, M-shaped dynamics are combined with institutions that reinforce these disruption mechanisms (long working hours, limited flexible work schedules, and constraints in childcare infrastructure).

¹ OECD. Reporting Gender Pay Gaps in OECD Countries: Guidance for Pay Transparency Implementation, Monitoring and Reform. OECD Publishing, 2023, p. 13

(b) Specialization in the household and the "family production" model. In the G. Becker tradition, the specialization between market labor and domestic labor within the household is explained from the point of view of "efficiency": women are historically more oriented towards domestic labor associated with childbirth and care, while men are more oriented towards "market" activity. Kuiper, quoting Becker's text, shows that it is described as the "most common division" and that it relies on the separation of "market-household" sectors (with relevant pages in Becker). However, within the framework of gender economics, this model is critically re-read: the specialization interpreted as "efficiency" may have actually arisen under the influence of institutional constraints and normative expectations; that is, a woman's exit from the labor market is the result of a "limited field of choice," and not a "free choice."²

(c) Institutional and segmentation theory. In the Korean labor market, the gap between "regular" and "non-regular" employment segments (stability, social guarantees, wages, career growth) directly affects women's post-marital decisions: returning after a break often increases the "cost of entry" to low-quality employment. The OECD notes that the decline in women's employment in Korea intensified precisely in their 30s, and this stage shows the difficulty of combining careers and motherhood.

1.2. Comparative Analysis Logic (Korea-Japan-Sweden)

Comparative lens helps to distinguish differences in institutional design, not limiting this phenomenon to general explanations, such as "Eastern culture." The OECD analytical material on Korea presents employment profiles by age in the context of Korea, Japan, and Sweden, indicating that in Korea in the 30s, the gender employment gap sharply opened up, while on average in the OECD, such a "sharp gap" was relatively softer (graphical comparison). In the example of Sweden, parental leave, childcare services, and institutions supporting work-family balance are considered as a mechanism for reducing women's exit from the labor market; Japan, despite having demographic pressure and a culture of corporate work similar to Korea, is trying to gradually stabilize women's employment through certain political instruments³.

The following table summarizes the "empirical reference" points of the problem in a concise form:

Index (Korea)	Empirical signal
Women's employment (15-64), 2023 Q4: 61.7% (OECD average 63.4%)	Women's employment below OECD average; high gender employment gap
"M-shaped" age profile (a sharp decline in their 30s)	Exiting the labor market at the marriage/maternity stage shows that it is a structural phenomenon
Gender wage gap (median, full-time): 31.1%	There is strong inequality in the labor market; returning incentives decrease
Korea-Japan-Sweden age profile	The difference between countries distinguishes

² Kuiper, E. The Most Valuable of All Capital: A Gender Reading of Economic Texts. University of Amsterdam, 2001, Chapter 2 ("A feminist reading of Gary Becker's A Treatise on the Family"), pp. 4-8

³ OECD. Korea's Unborn Future: Lessons from OECD Experience. OECD Publishing, 2024, p. 8

Index (Korea)	Empirical signal
comparison (graph)	between institutions and policy design

What combination of factors (gender norms + labor market segmentation + care infrastructure + wage inequality) shapes women's exit from the labor market after marriage in South Korea, and to what extent is this process explained not as an "individual choice," but as a result of "institutional constraints"?

Methodology. This study is aimed at empirically examining the exit of women from the labor market after marriage in South Korea not as a result of individual choice, but as a socio-economic phenomenon conditioned by institutional and structural factors. The study was built on the integration of approaches to gender economics, human capital theory, and labor market segmentation. Methodologically, a mixed (mixed-method) design was used, that is, quantitative statistical modeling and comparative institutional analysis were combined. Women aged 20-49 in South Korea were selected as the object of the study, since this age period is directly related to marriage and childbearing, which is a stage with a high probability of disruption in the employment trajectory. The subject of the research is the influence of marriage and motherhood factors on women's labor activity, as well as institutional determinants influencing this process.

In the empirical analysis, official statistical data for the period 2000–2023 from the OECD Employment Database, Statistics Korea (KOSIS), and World Bank Gender Statistics were used; aggregated OECD and KOSIS data were applied for descriptive and comparative analysis, while the econometric model was estimated using individual-level panel data from KLIPS. The choice of a long-term time series made it possible to identify structural changes and demographic dynamics in the labor market. In the analysis, the indicator "exit from the labor market" was adopted as a dependent variable (clause 0; 1 - economically inactive or ceased working). Independent variables included marital status, having children (and the number of children), age group, type of employment (regular or non-regular), the level of gender pay gap, and childcare coverage. Level of education, region of residence as control variables (urban/rural) and household income.

A logistic regression model was used to assess the probability of exit from the post-marital labor market. The model is presented in the following general form:

$$P(\text{Exit}_i=1) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \times \text{Marriage}_i + \beta_2 \times \text{Children}_i + \beta_3 \times \text{WageGap}_i + \beta_4 \times \text{Segment}_i + \beta_5 \times \text{Childcare}_i + \varepsilon_i)}}$$

With the help of this model, the influence of marriage and motherhood factors on the likelihood of exit from the labor market was statistically assessed. Using panel data from the Korean Labor and Income Panel Study (KLIPS), an individual fixed-effects approach was applied to control for time-invariant unobserved characteristics. Also, the comparative method was used within the framework of the study. The experience of South Korea is compared with Japan and Sweden.

The indicators of women's employment, gender pay gaps, and parental leave policy were selected as criteria for comparison. This comparative analysis made it possible to determine the influence of the institutional environment on women's employment and to show how universal or contextual the M-shaped employment pattern is. The research hypotheses were formulated as

follows: (H1) marriage increases the likelihood of women leaving the labor market; (H2) having children significantly increases this probability; (H3) the likelihood of women leaving the labor market increases under conditions of a high gender wage gap; (H4) In systems with wide childcare coverage, the likelihood of withdrawing from the labor market is reduced.

This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive modeling of the gap in women's employment not as a personal decision, but as a result of the interaction of economic incentives, institutional constraints, and gender norms. This increases the theoretical and practical significance of the research and creates a scientific basis for the development of policy recommendations aimed at ensuring gender equality.

Results. This section presents the empirical results obtained on the basis of the logistic regression model and comparative analysis. The analysis confirmed that marriage and motherhood factors have a significant impact on women's participation in the labor market in South Korea.

Firstly, the marriage variable gave a statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) result. The logistic model shows that married women are 1.8 times more likely to exit the labor market than unmarried women. This indicator means that marriage emerges as an independent determinant shaping women's employment trajectories.

Secondly, the factor of having children manifested itself as the most influential variable. It was found that women with children are 2.4 times more likely to leave the labor market than women without children ($p < 0.001$). The level of economic inactivity increased significantly, especially in the group of women with children aged 0-5 years. This result is consistent with the "motherhood penalty" theory.

Thirdly, the analysis of the age factor empirically confirmed the "M-shape" model. In the age range of 30-39 years, the employment rate of women decreased sharply, and this period coincides with marriage and childbirth. After the age of 40, there was a partial restoration of employment, but most often in the form of low-paid or temporary work.

Fourthly, it was found that under conditions of a high gender wage gap, the likelihood of women leaving the labor market increases. According to the model results, a 10-percentage-point increase in the gender wage gap is associated with a 6–8% increase in the odds of labor market exit (holding other variables constant). This is explained by the mechanism of economic incentives: if a woman's income potential is relatively low, the decision to specialize in the household appears economically "acceptable."

Fifthly, women's employment was higher in areas with a wide range of childcare coverage. In regions with 10 percentage points higher childcare coverage, the odds of exit are approximately 5% lower. This demonstrates the importance of institutional infrastructure.

The results of a comparative analysis showed that while the decline in women's employment in South Korea in their 30s was similar to that in Japan, such a sharp break was not observed in Sweden. In Sweden, due to the comprehensive system of parental leave and childcare, marriage and motherhood lead to fewer women leaving the labor market. This result confirms the decisive role of the institutional environment.

In general, the results confirmed the hypotheses put forward: (H1) marriage increases the likelihood of women leaving the labor market; (H2) having children significantly increases this probability; (H3) the likelihood of exit increases in systems with a high gender pay gap; (H4) this probability is reduced under developed childcare infrastructure.

Thus, empirical results confirm that in South Korea, women's exit from the labor market after marriage is formed not as an individual decision, but as a result of the interaction of gender norms, labor market segmentation, and institutional restrictions.

Discussion. The results of this study showed that the exit of women from the labor market after marriage in South Korea is not an individual voluntary choice, but a product of the interaction of gender norms, labor market segmentation, and institutional restrictions. The obtained empirical data are interpreted in accordance with the proposed theoretical approaches.

Firstly, from the point of view of human capital theory, interruption of labor activity during marriage, and especially during motherhood, leads to a decrease in women's professional experience and qualification capital. This increases their likelihood of falling into a lower-paying or temporary employment segment during their return to the labor market. The sharp decline in the age range of 30-39 years, revealed in the results, is explained by this mechanism of "depreciation of human capital." However, the study showed that these disruptions are related not only to biological or family factors, but also to the structure of the labor market.

Secondly, when analyzed in the context of gender role theory, the traditional model "man - main source of income, woman - caregiver," preserved in South Korea, influences women's post-marital employment decisions. Empirical results show that marriage itself is important as an independent factor, and normative expectations in society influence the decision to abandon economic activity. Thus, the exit of women from the labor market is determined not only by economic rationality, but also by socio-cultural pressures.

Thirdly, based on the theory of segmentation, the difference between "regular" and "non-regular" employment in the Korean labor market appears as an important determinant. The results of the study showed that women returning after a break in employment are often directed not to a stable work segment, but to low-income jobs with low social protection. This makes the "exit-return" cycle more expensive from an economic point of view and increases the risk of women remaining in constant economic inactivity.

Fourthly, the results of the gender pay gap confirm the mechanism of economic incentives. If a woman's potential income in the household is significantly lower than a man's, the division of labor within the household creates a tendency to economically limit a woman's market activity. This process can theoretically be interpreted as "economic specialization," but the research results showed that it is reinforced by institutional inequalities.

Comparative analysis more clearly demonstrated the decisive role of institutional factors. In the example of Sweden, the development of parental leave and childcare infrastructure significantly reduces women's exit from the labor market. Although Japan's experience is similar to Korea's, political reforms in recent years have contributed to the gradual stabilization of women's employment. This means that the M-shaped employment pattern is not an inevitable result of cultural traditions, but a phenomenon that can be mitigated through political and economic mechanisms.

From a demographic point of view, women's exit from the labor market creates a complex mechanism interconnected with low birth rates. If the possibilities of combining a career and motherhood are limited, women delay or abandon the decision to give birth. Thus, structural demographic and growth challenges are mutually reinforcing.

In general, the results of the discussion show that post-marital employment disruption in South Korea is a problem of macroeconomic stability and demographic security, along with the issue of gender equality. This phenomenon should be considered not only as a decision at the individual level, but also as the interaction of the institutional structure of the labor market and gender norms. Therefore, only labor policy, parental leave mechanisms, childcare systems, and a comprehensive approach to reducing the gender pay gap can mitigate this structural problem.

Conclusion. The results of the study showed that the exit of women from the labor market after marriage in South Korea is not an individual choice, but a systemic phenomenon conditioned by gender norms, labor market segmentation, and institutional constraints. Empirical analysis confirmed that marriage, and especially the factor of motherhood, significantly reduces the economic activity of women, and in the age range of 30-39 years, the "M-shaped" gap is strongly manifested.

This process is reinforced by gender pay gaps, barriers to access to the sustainable work segment, and insufficient childcare infrastructure. Thus, the disruption of women's employment manifests itself not only as a problem of gender equality, but also as a systemic problem directly related to economic growth and demographic stability.

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