

# CARE WORK AND THE ECONOMY

Advancing policy solutions with gender-aware macroeconomic models

POLICY BRIEF | 21 – 08

## IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON WORK-FAMILY BALANCE IN SOUTH KOREA:

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### 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the importance of care, and the deep-seated gender inequality stemming from carework. Recent studies show that while both male and female working parents have increased unpaid childcare work during the pandemic lockdowns, mothers have taken on a much greater amount than fathers. The South Korean (hereafter Korea/Korean) government introduced a COVID-19 social distancing measure from end of Feb to May 2020 in an effort to curb the COVID spread. During this time childcare centres and schools were closed, but most of businesses remained open. But because of the childcare/school closures many parents were forced to stay home to work and care for their children.

We conducted a national survey of working parents to find out how this social distancing measure affected their work-family balance and wellbeing. Our survey shows that the measure had significantly affected parents with small and school-aged children economically and psychologically. However, the impacts were greater on mothers than fathers. We found that: 1) fathers took shorter time out of workplace to work from home compared to mothers; 2) mothers were having more difficulty managing work and childcare while working from home; and 3) work-care conflict has led a significant proportion of mothers to quit or consider quitting their jobs, whereas few fathers considered quitting, and none quit because of the COVID-19. To support working parents, we offer three policy recommendations.

### 2. Literature Review and Contexts

#### 2.1 COVID-19's Impacts on Parents

Recent studies show that pandemic lockdowns have resulted not only in increased unpaid care and domestic work, and care-related stress for parents and caregivers, but that these impacts have been disproportionately greater on women than men. For example, the UN Women's (2020) surveys show that in the Asia-Pacific region, 60% of women and 54% of men surveyed claimed that they have increased their unpaid carework since the COVID-19. This is impressive, and disconcerting, because "this is on top of evidence showing that in the Asia-Pacific region, women are already spending four-times as much time as men in unpaid carework prior to the crisis." (UN Women, 2020b: 9). Similar patterns are also observed in Europe, Central Asia and the Arab States (UN Women, 2020b, c, d).

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In North America and Europe parents are also doing more childcare as a result of full or partial lockdowns and/or school closures. In almost all cases, both employed and non-employed mothers are doing more carework than fathers (Adam-Prassl et.al. 2020; Seville and Smith, 2020; Andrew et.al. 2020; Statistics Canada, 2020; Leclerc, 2020). For instance, Adam-Prassl et.al.'s (2020) study found that mothers in the US, the UK and Germany were doing more homeschooling and childcare than fathers. They also found that women were more likely to lose jobs than men as the result of the COVID-19 lockdowns, and women's job losses were positively associated with their care responsibilities. The UK fathers increased their unpaid childcare time only if they were furloughed or lost their jobs due to the pandemic, suggesting that fathers' involvement in unpaid childcare at home is closely dependent on their employment status while mothers' had no relationship to their employment status (Andrew et.al., 2020). Indeed, other studies argue that the persistence of unequal gender childcare division of labour pre- and post-pandemic is "characterized by women specializing in caring activities regardless of changes in their employment status" (Sevilla and Smith, 2020: 2).

The impacts of the COVID-19 on families are not limited to parents' increased unpaid childcare load; there are also direct emotional and mental health consequences. A national survey of families with school-age children in Canada found that children's care and homeschooling responsibilities fell primarily on mothers (Leclerc, 2020). It also found that 74% of parents were "very" or "extremely" concerned about "balancing childcare, schooling and work" due to the COVID-19, and 61% were also "very" or "extremely" concerned about managing their "child's or children's behaviours, stress levels, anxiety and emotions" (Statistics Canada, 2020).

## *2.2 COVID-19 and Work-Family Balance in the Korean Context*

Korea has one of the most gender unequal labour markets in the world. It has the largest gender wage gap amongst the OECD, at 32.5%, in 2019—more than double the OECD average (12.9%), noticeably higher than that of the US (18.5 %) and Canada (17.6%), and comparatively higher than the next highest OECD gender wage gap country, Japan (23.5%) (OECD, n.d.). This is mainly because of its labour market structure that penalizes women. Korean labour market is horizontally and vertically highly gender segregated. Korea's dualistic labour market also pushes women to the periphery (into small and medium enterprises, and to non-standard positions), thus marginalizing them within the labour market (Peng, 2012; Lee and Kim, 2020). Korea now has highest rate of non-regular employment among the OECD, with 38.5% of female workers employed as non-regular workers (KWDI, n.d.).

Korea has had progressive work-family balance policies since 2000—including paid maternity and parental leaves and free childcare for children aged 0 to 5—however, they have had little impact in ameliorating gender inequality in the labour market (An and Peng, 2015; Peng, 2011, 2012b; Lee, 2017; Estevez-Abe and Kim, 2014). This is because these policies were more aimed to shore up the country's very low fertility rate and to stimulate women's employment than addressing gender inequality in the labour market. By maintaining the dualized labour market structure, not countering employer bias for male workers, and regulating the widespread use of female non-regular

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## 3. The Survey

We surveyed a national sample of 1,252 individuals who were married (but not to each other within the sample group) and who were parents of at least one child aged 0-12 to find out how the social distancing measure had affected their work, childcare arrangements, and their wellbeing. The samples were drawn based on the distribution of children aged 0-12 in 2020 National Resident Registration Data in Korea. The online survey was managed by Gallup Korea and carried out between June 12 to July 6, 2020.

## 4. Findings

We found that while both men and women were affected by having to multi-task paid work and unpaid childcare at home, mothers were more adversely affected than fathers. In particular, we found the following:

### 1) *Unequal distribution of childcare time and intensity between mothers and fathers.*

While most of mothers and fathers took some time off from their workplace to work and care for their children at home, fathers were more likely to take shorter time, while mothers took longer periods of time out. Moreover, when working at home, mothers were more likely to be the main carer of their children than fathers.

- 25% of fathers and 34% of mothers worked from home at some point during the social distancing period.
- 45% of fathers and 30% of mothers who worked from home worked for a total of a week or less, while 46% of mothers and 27% of fathers worked from home for four weeks or more.
- While working from home, 71% of employed mothers said that they were the main carers for their children, whereas 39% of employed fathers said so.
- Mothers in dual-earner households increased their total daily childcare hours by 104 minutes, (from 309 to 413 minutes ( $p < 0.0001$ )) before and after the COVID-19 social distancing, while fathers in dual-earner households increased their childcare hours by 41 minutes (187 to 228 minutes ( $p < 0.0001$ )), and sole-earner fathers by 29 minutes (from 179 to 208 minutes,  $p < 0.0005$ ).

### 2) *Mothers were more likely to experience difficulties managing work-childcare responsibilities while working from home.*

- 65.3% mothers felt that their productivity had declined as a result of working from home compared to 58.4% fathers.
- 50.7% of mothers and 41.3% of fathers claimed that they were somewhat or very worried that working from home would disadvantage their career or in their workplace.
- When asked about the specifics of their worries, 40.7% of mothers said they felt guilty towards colleagues and that their employers and colleagues might think that they are not really working while working from home.

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3) *Mothers are more likely to quit or considered quitting their jobs than fathers.*

- 61.2% of mothers and 51.4% of fathers were worried that they may lose their jobs, and therefore all or part of their household income, during the social distancing period.
- 16.6% of mothers had to quit their job while 54.5% considered quitting their jobs because of difficulties associated with work and childcare, whereas 31.4% of fathers considered quitting and none quit.

## 5. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the pre-existing gender inequalities and the importance of care and carework, and opened a rare opportunity to examine how families organize and practice care and caring. Our survey found that rather than facilitating a better redistribution of unpaid carework within the household, the COVID-19 social distancing restriction in Korea, may have instead further entrenched the pre-existing unequal gender division of labour. The difficulties associated with balancing work and childcare responsibilities during the social distancing period have had direct negative impacts on mothers' economic and mental health wellbeing. Korean government would need to implement more effective short-term and longer-term policies to ensure gender equality and sustainable social and economic development.

## 6. Policy Recommendations

- 1) Social distancing measures should harmonize childcare/school closures with business closures. Social distancing measures that are focused only on childcare/school closures are ineffective and misguided, and only serves to penalize working parents, particularly mothers. Studies show that factories, workplaces and other crowded public and private spaces are the main sites of COVID transmissions, not childcare centres and schools. Social distancing measures therefore should target more general and broader workplace and community/social interactions and gatherings than focusing on childcare centres and schools.
- 2) Moving forward, Korean government should invest more in care and care economy. The case of childcare/school closure highlights the importance of childcare services in supporting working parents' labour productivity and economic and mental health wellbeing, and the detrimental consequences of the lack of such services for working parents, particularly women. Investing in care and care economy will not only contribute to increased worker productivity and family wellbeing and generate direct and indirect employment, but also to nurturing and raising the next generation of productive workers.
- 3) Korean government should also develop a robust gender equality policy that will include: a) gender equity targets for organizations and institutions; b) anti-discrimination trainings in workplaces and other key institutions aimed to raise public awareness and change workplace cultures; c) guidelines and monitoring mechanisms to measure and ensure gender equity targets are met; and d) meaningful penalties for non-compliance.

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