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Korean Women's Labor Force Participation Attitude and Behavior

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and Karen Oppenheim Mason**

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CHAPTER 16

*Korean Women's Labor Force Participation:
Attitudes and Behavior*MINJA KIM CHOE, SAE-KWON KONG,
AND KAREN OPPENHEIM MASON

This study focuses on the employment of married women in the Republic of Korea, especially on married women's attitudes toward employment. Although the data we analyze were collected at only one point in time, our ultimate concern is with change over time. Census data and earlier surveys have shown that married women's employment in the Republic of Korea is changing, both in kind and in amount (Kong & Choe 1989). Overall rates of participation in the workforce have been rising, while the percentages of women employed in agriculture and as unpaid family workers have been declining. What is less clear is how married women view employment outside the home and whether changing views have been either a determinant of changing work rates or an outcome of these changing rates. Is there growing support for the idea of married women working outside the home, regardless of whether they have children or what the children's ages are, or does support for the right to work remain limited? The analysis that follows focuses on this question.

Although we are unable to study changes in attitude directly, we are able to assess likely changes indirectly in two ways. One is to examine variation in attitudes according to women's ages, which represent the years in which they were born and hence the period in which they grew up. If the situation for women during their formative years molded their attitudes in a more or less permanent fashion, then current differences in attitude that vary with age may tell us how attitudes have changed in the past. We also examine the social and economic correlates of attitudes in order to see whether women with more "modern" traits—who have higher lev-

els of education or who live apart from the husband's parents after marriage, for example—are more favorable to the idea of married women's employment than are more "traditional" women.

There are several reasons to think that women's support for work outside the home has increased over the past decade or two. One is the tendency for attitudes to be consistent with behavior; for instance, rising rates of employment among married women suggest growing support for the idea of employment. To be sure, studies elsewhere (e.g., the United States; see Oppenheimer 1970: chap. 2) have observed a lag between the changing reality of married women's employment outside the home and their support for such employment. Women may come to regard their extradomestic employment as right and good only after the numbers of wives working outside the home becomes very large. Whether Korea has reached this point is unclear.

Also auguring for changed attitudes toward women's employment is the general modernization that has occurred in South Korea in recent years. Women's educational levels have risen sharply over the past several decades (Tsuya & Choe 1991), the country has urbanized rapidly, advanced electronic media have become widespread, and levels of wealth have risen sharply. All of these seem likely to contribute to a view of women's roles that is relatively supportive of their employment outside the home after marriage.

Finally, also suggesting a trend toward greater support for married women's employment is the example provided by women in other industrialized countries in the West and in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, the other East Asian newly industrialized countries (NICs). Korean women are likely to have become aware that married women elsewhere in the industrialized world tend to work in large numbers, often at a growing rate. This may have increased their support for the idea that it is right and proper for married women to work outside the home.

Nevertheless, there are also several reasons to think that support for married women's employment may have changed very little. In addition to the possible lag in attitudes noted above, studies in the other NICs (e.g., Taiwan; see Lu 1980) have shown that married women often define employment outside the home as an extension of their domestic roles and consequently support such employment only if it does not interfere with their primary obligations as wives and mothers. Given the strong emphasis in Korean

culture on a woman's duty to be a wise mother and good wife (Tsuya & Choe 1991), a similar view toward wives' extradomestic employment may prevail in Korea. Indeed, the pronounced M-shaped relationship between age and labor force participation by women in Korea suggests a tendency for women to drop out of the labor force during the period when they have young children at home (Tsuya & Choe 1991), something that in turn implies a traditional view of women's roles. Thus, whether Korean women's attitudes toward employment have changed and are generally supportive of employment today is open to question.

The remainder of this study is organized as follows. In the next section we elaborate some of the recent changes occurring in the Republic of Korea that are relevant to understanding changes in women's roles and in their attitudes toward their roles. We next detail recent changes in women's employment. This is followed by a description of the data and methods used to study changing attitudes, and discussion of the statistical analysis of attitudes. The paper ends with some comments on needed research and policy issues.

Socioeconomic and Demographic Changes

In this section, we examine recent socioeconomic and demographic changes in Korea. Especially since 1960, Korea has been transformed from a predominantly rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrial one. As is shown in Table 1, the proportion of the population living in urban areas increased nearly threefold between 1960 and 1990, while the proportion of workers in the primary sector of the economy (farming, fishing, forestry, and mining) decreased from two-thirds to one-fifth. Over the same

TABLE I
Selected Indicators of Socioeconomic Conditions: 1950-1990

Year	Percentage urban	Percentage of workers in primary industry	Per capita GNP in U.S. dollars
1960	28	66	87 (in 1962)
1970	41	51	243
1980	57	34	1,592
1990	74	20	4,968 (in 1989)

SOURCES: Republic of Korea, Economic Planning Board, *Korean Economic Indicators*, various years; Republic of Korea, National Statistical Office, *Population and Housing Census Report*, various years.

TABLE 2
Senior High School Enrollment Rates: 1975–1990

Year	Percentage enrolled	
	Male	Female
1975	51	35
1980	74	62
1985	83	75
1990	90	85

SOURCE: Republic of Korea, Ministry of Education, *Statistical Yearbook of Education*, 1990.

TABLE 3
Female Age at First Marriage and Total Fertility Rate: 1955–1990

Year	Female age at first marriage	Total fertility rate
1955	20.5	5.6
1960	21.5	6.0
1965	22.8 (in 1966)	5.0
1970	23.3	4.5
1975	23.7	3.3
1980	24.1	2.7
1985	24.7	1.7
1990	25.1	1.6

NOTE: Age at first marriage is estimated from census reports on proportions of single persons by age.

SOURCES: Republic of Korea, National Statistical Office, *Population and Housing Census Report*, various years; Ansley J. Coale, Lee-Jay Cho, and Noreen Goldman, *Estimation of Recent Trends in Fertility and Mortality in the Republic of Korea*, Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1980; Republic of Korea, National Statistical Office, *Population Projections for 1990–2021*, 1991.

period, per capita gross national product (GNP) increased from less than \$100 to nearly \$5,000. As Table 2 shows, the level of female education, although lagging behind that of males, also improved dramatically in this period. Indeed, by 1990, 85 percent of the female population eligible for senior high school was attending school.

Recent demographic changes in Korea are equally substantial. As Table 3 shows, women's age at first marriage has been increasing since 1955, reaching 25.1 years in 1990. During this same period, the level of fertility, as measured by the total fertility rate,¹ declined from about six children per woman to less than two children.

These changes are conducive to women's labor force participa-

tion, including the labor force participation of married women. The traditional role of Korean women was that of the "inside" person who was limited to childbearing, childrearing, and caring for household members (Tsuya & Choe 1991). The modernization of Korea's economic structure is likely to have created an increased demand for female labor, while higher levels of education have better prepared women for work in a modern economy, and lowered fertility and the increasing availability of domestic appliances have reduced the amount of work in the home, thereby freeing married women to enter the workplace. In the following section, we examine the trends and patterns of female labor force participation in Korea.

Female Labor Force Participation

Women in farming households in Korea have been participating in the labor force at a substantial rate for several decades. The labor force participation of women in nonfarming households, however, has become common only recently. Table 4 shows that the proportion of women participating in the labor force has been increasing both in farming and nonfarming households, but the increase has been much more pronounced among the nonfarming households. Overall, the level of labor force participation among females aged 15 and over rose from 25 percent in 1960 to 46 percent in 1990. Among males of the same age, the labor force participation rate has remained quite steady for several decades at about 74 percent. Thus, the proportion of the workforce that is female has been increasing.

TABLE 4
 Percentage of Female Population Aged 15 and Over
 Currently in Labor Force by Type of Household: 1960-1990

Year	Type of household		Average
	Farming	Nonfarming	
1960	31	17	25
1970	48	28	37
1980	53	34	40
1990	61	43	46

NOTE: For 1960, the base is female population over 13.

SOURCE: Republic of Korea, National Statistical Office, *Population and Housing Census Report*, various years.

TABLE 5
Percentage of Female Population in Labor Force by Age: 1960–1990

Age	1960	1966	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990
15–19	22	33	41	34	27	19	17
20–24	28	37	40	42	46	52	62
25–29	25	31	30	29	30	35	42
30–34	28	34	38	36	41	43	49
35–39	32	43	44	49	55	52	58
40–44	34	48	50	53	60	58	60
45–49	34	46	50	53	64	59	64
50–54	32	41	43	54	58	52	60
55–59	28	32	37	47	50	47	54
60+	12	12	15	18	18	19	25

SOURCE: Republic of Korea, National Statistical Office, *Population and Housing Census Report*, various years.

Whether women's labor force participation depends on marital status and childbearing can be estimated from age-specific participation rates. Table 5 shows that in 1960, when most of the female labor force consisted of women from farming households, and when women were not receiving much education, were marrying at young ages, and were bearing large numbers of children, the participation rate remained moderate before age 40, rose somewhat higher between the ages of 40 and 50, and declined after age 50.

Changes in the age pattern of female labor force participation between 1960 and 1990 partly reflect changing socioeconomic conditions. Participation increased at all ages, except 15–19, which showed an upward trend until 1970, and then drifted back down. In general, the changing economic structure seems to have created more employment opportunities for women at all ages, but since 1970, those aged 15–19 have been choosing schooling over employment.

It is interesting that the participation rate among women aged 25–29 continues to be much lower than the rates for adjacent age groups. The most likely explanation is that women are leaving the labor force to marry or to bear and raise children, and are returning only when the children are older. An earlier study of the factors associated with married women's labor force participation identified the presence of children under age 6 as one statistically significant factor negatively affecting their participation (Kong & Choe 1989).

TABLE 6
Percentage Distribution of Occupation of Female Workers by Age: 1990

Age	Professional, technical, and clerical	Sales	Service	Production	Farm- related
15-19	52	10	8	29	1
20-24	57	10	8	24	1
25-29	37	14	14	28	6
30-34	13	22	20	33	11
35-39	8	23	22	31	15
40-44	6	22	26	28	18
45-49	5	20	22	23	29
50-54	3	18	18	21	40
55-59	3	14	15	17	50

SOURCE: Republic of Korea, National Statistical Office, 1991 *Annual Report on the Economically Active Population Survey*, 1992.

Table 6 shows age-specific occupational distributions of employed women for the year 1990. Although the proportion of women employed in production-related occupations was approximately 25-30 percent at all ages, the other occupations varied greatly with age. Among women under 24 years old, most of whom were unmarried, more than half of the workers were in the professional, technical, and clerical occupations. Service and farm-related occupations were rare among these women. Among women 25-29, the age group with lowest rate of labor force participation, professional, technical, and clerical occupations still constituted the single most common category, but the proportion working in this category was much lower than among women 20-24 years old. At the same time, substantial proportions of women 25-29 years old were working in sales and services.

After age 30, the proportion of workers in professional, technical, and clerical occupations decreases drastically, while the proportions in the sales and service sectors increases just as sharply. The observed pattern of age-specific occupational distributions no doubt partly reflects differing levels of education in different age groups. The age differences in occupation, however, seem too big to be explained entirely by educational differences alone. A likely additional explanation is that women in professional, technical, and clerical positions who leave the labor force upon marriage or the birth of their first child are likely to enter sales or services occupations when they return to the labor force after childrearing.

In summary, educational and economic modernization in Korea

has resulted in increased labor force participation among women, including married women. Women's participation, however, is still affected by their family cycle and family roles, especially, we suspect, by whether they have any children or by the ages of their children. We now turn to our analysis of the attitudes toward labor force participation in a sample of married Korean women.

Data and Methods

The data used in our analysis are from the Survey on Family Life Cycle conducted in 1989 by the Korean Institute for Health and Social Affairs (formerly the Korean Institute for Population and Health). This survey collected information on marriage, fertility, employment family roles, and attitudes from a nationally representative sample of 3,013 married women under age 65. Information on employment before and after marriage was collected, along with data on attitudes toward employment.

To examine attitudes, we analyze women's responses to the question, "What do you think about women having jobs?" This question was followed by a series of precoded responses among which women were asked to choose. These included: (1) women should never have jobs; (2) women should have jobs only before marriage; (3) women should have jobs only before having their first child; (4) women should have jobs only after all their children are grown; and (5) women should have jobs anytime they wish, regardless of their marital status or the age of their children. Women who were uncertain or unable to select an answer were classified in a separate category. Because of the skewed distribution of responses, categories 2-4 were grouped together. Thus, the dependent variable we initially analyze consists of four categories of responses: that women should *never* work, that they should work only under *certain conditions*, that they should work *anytime* they want to, and that the respondents were *not sure*. After examining the zero-order correlates of these responses using simple cross-tabulations, we dichotomize the dependent variable between *anytime* and the other responses in order to conduct a multivariate analysis.² The latter is done using logit regression.³

Results

Women's attitudes toward the labor force participation of married women should, in principle, depend on four factors: (1) the nor-

mative climate with regard to women's roles while they were growing up; (2) their socioeconomic characteristics (especially educational) while growing up; (3) their experience with labor force participation before marriage; and (4) characteristics of their marriage, such as their age at marriage, who decided on the marriage, their postnuptial residence, and differences between their own age and education and their husband's.

If women's attitudes toward labor force participation by wives are molded during their formative years, their attitudes should depend in part on conditions during their childhood and adolescence, both in their immediate environment and more generally in the nation at large. As indicators of formative conditions, we include in our analysis level of education, age, and rural versus urban residence during childhood. The first of these variables is likely to tap current socioeconomic status as well as formative experiences during childhood and adolescence. Age and childhood residence, however, should primarily reflect women's formative experiences. We expect older women and rural women to support employment for wives less unconditionally than do younger, urban women. Because women currently living in Seoul are likely to have been exposed to the most modern conditions of all, we expect current residence in Seoul to predict the most supportive attitudes toward women's employment. Better-educated women should also be more supportive of working wives.

Women may participate in the labor force before marriage for various reasons. They may work primarily because they want to, or they may end up working primarily because of the family's economic needs or the nature of the family business. In either case, women who have experienced work before marriage may favor employment for women more strongly than do women without previous employment experience, although their level of commitment to work may be weaker if their premarital work was motivated by the family's needs rather than by their own personal aspirations or desires.

Korean women have traditionally considered marriage to be extremely important, and have placed high value on successful married life (Tsuya & Choe 1991). For this reason, the type and timing of women's marriages may index their overall dedication to traditional versus nontraditional roles for women, including whether married women should work outside the home. We would expect women who married young, who had little or no say in deciding their marriage, who resided with their in-laws after

marriage, and whose husbands were considerably older and better educated than themselves to be least supportive of unconditional employment for married women.

Table 7 shows the distribution of women's responses to the questions on attitudes toward employment according to these explanatory variables. The table shows that the majority of married women in Korea in 1991 felt that women should work any-time, regardless of marital status or the presence of children. This strong support for women's unconditional employment is quite different from the actual pattern of female labor force participation, which depends on marital status and the presence of children (Kong & Choe 1989). Is this a case where attitudes have changed more quickly than actual behavior, rather than lagging behind? We have no way of answering this question, but the possibility is intriguing.

Turning to the correlates of women's attitudes, although most show the expected relationships, those relationships are typically weak or even nonexistent. Older women are somewhat more likely than younger women to say that women should "never" work, but the percentages unconditionally endorsing women's employment vary little by age. This may indicate that, contrary to the "cohort succession" hypothesis (Mason & Lu 1987), the historical conditions under which women grow up do not determine their attitudes for the rest of their lives, especially with regard to issues such as employment, where behavior and social conditions are shifting rapidly.

In a similar pattern, although women who grew up in urban areas are more likely to support women's employment than those raised in rural areas, the difference between these groups is small. So, too, is the difference between women with the most and least schooling, although once again the better-educated are, as expected, more supportive of women's employment than are the less-educated. Contrary to expectations, current residence has no apparent effect on employment attitudes. Women living in Seoul are no more supportive of working wives than are women living elsewhere. Women who worked before marriage, however, are somewhat more supportive of women's employment than are women without premarital employment experience. Their reasons for working, however, seem to have little effect on their attitudes. Thus, to the extent that early socioeconomic conditions and social environments influence women's attitudes toward female employment, they do so only weakly.

TABLE 7
Percentage Distribution of Wives' Opinions on Married Women's Participation in the Labor Force, by Selected Characteristics

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Never</i>	<i>Condi- tional</i>	<i>Any- time</i>	<i>Not sure</i>	<i>N</i>
All women	7	35	57	1	2680
Age					
< 25	3	39	57	0	191
25-29	3	37	59	1	637
30-34	4	38	57	1	481
35-39	8	33	59	1	372
40-44	13	35	50	2	308
45-49	9	28	63	0	291
50-54	13	32	55	0	220
55+	11	33	56	0	180
Childhood residence					
Rural	8	36	55	1	1770
Urban	5	32	63	1	910
Wife's years of education					
Under 6	15	34	50	1	157
6-8	10	34	55	1	548
9-11	7	38	54	1	592
12 and over	5	34	60	1	1383
Residence					
Seoul	8	35	57	1	638
Other urban	6	34	59	1	1207
Rural	8	35	56	1	835
Worked before marriage					
No	10	35	54	1	1352
Yes, family reasons	2	36	61	0	894
Yes, other reasons	7	31	61	0	434
Wife's age at marriage					
Below 20	10	36	54	0	687
20-24	6	35	58	1	1612
25 and over	5	33	61	1	381
Parents decided husband first					
Yes	10	34	56	1	1343
No	4	36	59	1	1337
Postnuptial coresidence with in-laws					
No	6	34	59	1	1480
Yes	8	36	55	1	1200
Husband's age minus wife's age					
6 years or more	8	36	56	1	728
1-5 years	7	35	57	1	1641
0 or less	7	32	61	1	311
Husband's education - wife's education					
Wife's > Husband's	10	25	64	1	105
Wife's = Husband's	7	35	57	1	1140
Wife's < Husband's	7	36	57	1	1435

The results in Table 7 for marriage-related variables resemble those for the measures of women's formative experiences: the relationships are mostly in the expected direction, but very weak. A woman's age at marriage relates positively to her support for married women's employment; so, too, does having had more say in her marriage, and having avoided coresidence with the husband's parents. Women married to men considerably older than themselves are somewhat less supportive of married women's employment than are other wives. And those married to men with less schooling than themselves are more supportive of women's employment than other wives.

In order to understand whether any of the correlates examined in Table 7 has a direct relationship to women's attitudes once other variables have been held constant, we estimated a series of models using logit regression. As noted earlier, the women who answered "not sure" are excluded from these regressions, and the remainder are dichotomized between those supporting women's work unconditionally (who were scored 1) and those who gave some other response to the attitude question (who were scored 0). Gross (zero-order) relationships between each correlate and the dichotomized attitude measure as estimated by univariate logit regression models are shown in the first column of Table 8.

Five of the correlates included in Table 8 have a relationship with women's attitudes that is likely to have occurred by chance less than 10 percent of the time. These are (1) rural versus urban childhood residence, (2) level of education, (3) work before marriage, (4) age at marriage, and (5) postnuptial coresidence with in-laws. As was the case in Table 7, urban childhood residence, level of education, premarital work, and age at marriage all have positive relationships with supporting women's employment (the coefficients are greater than 1.00), while coresidence with in-laws has a negative relationship (the coefficient is less than 1.00). Because age at marriage and coresidence with in-laws are likely to have themselves been determined in part by childhood residence, educational level, and premarital employment experience, however, their individual relationships with women's attitudes may be spurious.

In order to see whether this is the case, we turn to the second column in Table 8, which presents a single, multivariate equation in which all of the correlates shown in the table are included. The results for this "net" model indeed suggest that the two marriage variables have a spurious relationship with women's attitudes.

TABLE 8
 Estimated Gross and Net Effects of Independent Variables
 (in Odds Ratios) on Whether a Woman Thinks Married Women Should
 Work Anytime They Wish

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Gross effect</i>	<i>Net effect</i>
Age in years	1.0011	1.0068
Age squared	0.9999	1.0000
Place of growth: urban	1.3702*	1.2367*
Wife's years of education	1.0366*	1.0313*
Residence: (Rural is reference category)		
Seoul	1.0441	0.8428
Other urban	1.1390	0.9646
Worked before marriage (No is reference category)		
Yes, for family reasons	1.3134*	1.1892
Yes, for other reasons	1.3383*	1.3233*
Wife's age at marriage	1.0129*	1.0159
Parents decided husband first	0.8862	1.0437
Postnuptial coresidence with in-laws	0.8398*	0.8801
Husband's age minus wife's age	0.9883	0.9968
Husband's education minus wife's education	1.0038	1.0146

NOTE. Women who responded "not sure" are excluded, asterisks indicate $p < 0.10$.

Once the other variables are held constant, the relationships for age at marriage and coresidence with in-laws become statistically insignificant. The multivariate model shown in Table 8 thus suggests that urban childhood, educational level, and premarital employment are the only important, direct influences on married women's employment attitudes. Moreover, the results for premarital employment, unlikely the zero-order results, suggest that only the fact of having worked for other than family reasons predicts a significantly more supportive attitude toward women's employment. Women who grew up in cities, attended school for more than the minimal time, and who worked for nonfamily reasons before marriage are today more likely than other married women to say that women should work regardless of their marital or parental status.

Conclusions

Married women in Korea hold quite liberal views on women's work, with a majority of them espousing a woman's right to choose whether she works, regardless of her marital or parental

status. Fully 57 percent of all married women endorse the idea of a woman's freedom to choose to work; among those who grew up in urban areas, attended twelve years of school, and worked before marriage for nonfamily reasons, the percentage rises to 68. This high level of support for wives' employment is surprising, given the strong family tradition that made a woman's duties as a wife and mother her primary obligation in life, and the relatively recent entry of married women into the mass labor force.

Although women born at different periods in the past did not differ significantly in their attitudes toward wives' employment, three other variables significantly predicted support for women's employment. These were having grown up in an urban rather than a rural area, having attained a relatively high level of schooling, and having worked before marriage, especially for nonfamilial reasons. Marked shifts in the South Korean population during the past three to four decades, from rural to urban residence, toward secondary school completion, and, for women, toward premarital employment in the formal sector of the economy, all suggest that women's attitudes about the employment of wives are likely to have liberalized considerably during this period. The correlations between urban residence, educational level, and premarital employment, on the one hand, and women's attitudes, on the other, also suggest the strong possibility that attitudes will further liberalize in the future.

Do women's attitudes affect their actual participation in the labor force? An earlier analysis of the same data that were used in this analysis concluded that women's attitudes do not necessarily predict their employment (Kong & Choe 1989). Women's actual labor force participation was found to be affected more by the perceived attitudes of family members such as husbands and parents-in-law than by their own attitudes. In addition, the same study reported that, in urban areas, when factors such as the presence of young children, the presence of older members in the household, and the economic conditions of the household are controlled, a woman's level of education was *inversely* related to her participation in the labor force, rather than directly related, as one would expect on the basis of the educational differentials in women's attitudes found in the current analysis. These results suggest that recent increases in female labor force participation in Korea probably have not been driven by attitudinal changes. The high level of support for women's employment expressed by Korea wives, how-

ever, suggests that the lag between behavioral and attitudinal changes noted in earlier studies of the United States may be much shorter or nonexistent in Korea.

Further research is needed to identify factors that would facilitate women's labor force participation, especially among the more educated urban women. Support from family members, improved conditions of employment, the availability of adequate childcare, and the sharing of housework by family members are some of the changes that would be likely to facilitate married women's participation in the labor force. Obviously, Korean women strongly support the idea that a married woman has the right to work if she chooses to. It would appear that, for many of these women, especially many of the best educated women in urban areas, significant barriers to their participation and realization of their full human potential still exist.

NOTES

1. The total fertility rate is the estimated average number of children a woman would have in her lifetime if she were to bear children at the rate that women are currently bearing children at each different age.
2. The women responding "not sure" (1 percent of the total sample) are omitted from the multivariate analysis.
3. For a user-oriented treatment of the logit regression model, see Retherford & Choe (1993: chap. 5).

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