# How Has Higher Education Influenced the Empowerment of Modern-Day South Korean Women?

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Abstract: South Korea faces a rising issue when it comes to its under-developed female labor force, but this is not due to a lack of supply of educated women. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reported in 2009 that 54.7 percent of students enrolled in post-secondary non-tertiary education were female; yet, only half of working-aged Korean women are participating in the workforce. Due to South Korea's low fertility rates and shrinking population, the country is on track to experience a severe shortage in its labor force, which will only be amplified if women continue to opt out of the workforce. For these timely and relevant socio-economic reasons, this paper will explore whether highly educated Korean women feel that they can make empowered choices when it comes to their life choices after obtaining university degrees, and will apply the empowerment framework—as interpreted by Alsop and Heinsohn, as an analytical lens used to guide the discourse.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

When it comes to gender parity and empowerment, the lines can be blurry and difficult to define (Kabeer, 1999; Narayan-Parker, 2002; Rowlands, 1995). For example, in drawing from the quote above, does Min-Ji's predicament reflect more a case of gender inequality in the workplace, or a lack of individual empowerment to overcome perceived sociocultural and workplace barriers (Lee, 2014)? This essay will attempt to explore such questions by examining South Korean women who have obtained higher education degrees. The reason for this specificity is that this particular group of women represents a very socially relevant and interesting backdrop for analysis. Among all of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, Korea has the 'lowest employment rate of highly educated women' (Lee, 2014, p. 796). Only about 50 percent of working-aged women in South Korea are participating in the workforce (KOSIS, 2017). Due to South Korea's low fertility rates and shrinking population, the country is on track to experience a severe shortage in its labor force, which will only be amplified if women continue to opt out of the workforce (Chang, 2003; Brender and Jeong, 2006). For these timely and relevant socio-economic reasons, I have chosen to take a closer look at the barriers, forces, and other influential factors that are causing this select group of women to make the choices that they do. As the government looks to identify root causes and possible solutions to address these potentially harmful trends, I would like to offer one analysis using a gendered lens—in particular, the empowerment framework—as interpreted by Alsop and Heinsohn (2005). Through their framework, the essay will explore whether highly educated Korean women feel that they can make empowered choices, or exercise 'freedom of choice and action', when it comes to their higher education attainment and life after graduation (Narayan-Parker, 2002, p. v).

## 2 KOREA: DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

To better understand how higher education, gender, and empowerment collide in South Korea, it is important to first gain a deeper grasp of its history,



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and the country's path of development over the last 50 years. In economic and political circles, South Korea is known for its incredible story of transformation. Within just a few decades, South Korea was able to recover from approximately 40 years of occupational rule and a civil war to being considered a powerhouse in many areas including technology, research, and education (Rodrik, 1995; Chung, 2007). For nearly four decades, Japan occupied Korea under colonial rule from 1910 to the end of World War II. Korea's emancipation was followed by the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953. After these two crushing sociopolitical events, the global opinion was that there would be a very long road ahead for Korea to recover economically and reach any substantive level of stability (Chung, 2007). To make matters worse, the country split into two distinctive parts (the South and the North) after the Korean War, with the North retaining control of critical natural resources and heavy industrial related assets (Chung, 2007). This contributed to the South's economic status being lower than many sub-Saharan African countries (Rodrik 1995), but as of 2002, South Korea was able to expand its economy by 14-fold (Chung, 2007). So how did South Korea rapidly rise from a war-torn developing nation to becoming the '11th largest economy' in the world (Brender et al, 2006, p. 1)? While the answer is multi-dimensional and complex, academics agree that education played a pivotal role in Korea's rise to economic empowerment (Chung, 2007; Lee and Brinton, 1996; Rodrik, 1995).

# 3 HOW HAS HIGHER EDUCATION CONTRIBUTED TO SOUTH KOREA' GROWTH?

While the country's economic success cannot be solely attributed to education, it has been touted as a major factor in turning around the nation's economy. During Japan's colonial rule, formal schooling was restricted, which led to the population being largely illiterate. Immediately following Korea's independence, national illiteracy rate levels reached 80 percent. The government's response was to focus on school enrolment, and by 1990 primary and secondary school enrolments were at 90 percent (Lee and Brinton, 1996). The government recognized early on that they would need to lean on their skilled and educated workforce to help transition the national economy from an agricultural-based society to an industrial one (Chung, 2007; Lee et al, 1996; Rodrik, 1995). Chung (2007, p. 69) points out the role higher education played in spurring economic growth:

> [South Korea] possessed a nucleus of well-trained, able, and disciplined young bureaucrats: a large pool of college-educated persons…with managerial and clerical skills; literate, schooled...

It proved to be an effective strategy. Manufacturing in South Korea increased by 200 percent from 1966 to 1985 (Chung, 2007), while agriculture, which represented nearly 60 percent of the workforce, declined to 21 percent by 1990 (Lee et al, 1996). As the economic needs changed, so did the balance of laborers versus skilled workers. By 1990, the professional occupational workforce rose from 10 to 25 percent, and the number of professionals with advanced degrees began to form Korea's middle class (Lee et al, 1996). Korea's move to an industrial based economy meant that the nation would need to increasingly maintain a steady pool of highly skilled workers (Chung, 2007), and that trend has continued. In 2003, South Korea achieved a 98.1 percent literacy rate, and in 2015, OECD (2015) reported that citizens from the ages 25-64 years old with tertiary education achieved a 77 percent employment rate (NationMaster, 2003). But what underlying gender and empowerment issues do these growth and workforce attainment figures mask? That is what this essay will seek to understand through an empowerment focused analysis.

# 4 GENDER AND EMPOWERMENT IN SOUTH KOREA

As highlighted in the introduction, South Korea does face a rising issue when it comes to its female labor force, but this is not due to a lack of supply of educated women. Although data has not been consistently collected, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2009) reported in 2009 that 54.7 percent of students enrolled in post-secondary non-tertiary education were female. Despite favorable enrolment numbers, only '52.7 percent of working-aged Korean women…[participated] in the workforce' and the rate for women seeking employment, among those who were unemployed, was only 3.2 percent in 2016 (Draudt, 2016). This is particularly interesting given the fact that in a 2003 OECD survey examining different gender inequalities in higher education, 80

percent of Korean girls were ‘expecting to exercise a highly qualified intellectual profession by the age of 30 years’ (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008, p. 10). Vincent-Lancrin (2008) is quick to point out that while expectations do not always equate to actions being realized, research does show a correlation between intention and career actualization. The reality is that in 2012, only 34 percent of women were in job roles that required high qualifications, and 25 percent of women were in roles that required low or no qualifications (OECD, 2012). It is clear that the aspirations of young Korean girls were not translating into careers in highly skilled professions.

Even though South Korea ranked 11th in the world for gross domestic product (GDP) in 2015, the country has very low Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) scores, which attempts to quantify inequalities in opportunities that exist between men and women (World Bank, 2015; Moser, 2007). In 2002’s GEM figures, South Korea ranked 60th out of 65 countries (NationMaster, 2002). Compared to the nation’s GDP figures, Korea’s gender empowerment has not kept pace with its rapid economic growth. In societies where women are not being overtly suppressed in terms of educational access, it can be difficult to understand whether issues with empowerment and inequality exist. In South Korea’s case, both enrolment and attainment numbers for women surpassed 50 percent in 2010 to 2014 (OECD, 2010-2014). Therefore, one may argue that contrary to low GEM rankings, the nation’s educational policies have been effective in promoting gender equality in education. But statistics can be misleading and do not always reveal deeper underlying issues.

# 5 EMPOWERMENT THEORIES

Therefore, to better understand the disparity between economic and empowerment development, I will apply Alsop and Heinsohn’s (2005) analytical framework to examine a variety of cultural, social, and political forces that may be impacting the empowerment of women in South Korea.

In their work for the World Bank, Alsop et al (2005, p. 5) defined empowerment as ‘enhancing an individual’s or group’s capacity to make choices and transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes’. Kabeer, another widely referenced theorist, has interpreted empowerment to be ‘the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability’ (Kabeer, 1999, p. 435). The main difference in the two conceptualizations of empowerment is that one focuses on the enhancement of choices made, while Kabeer more strongly relates lack of empowerment to individuals who were denied opportunities to make certain choices. I have chosen to use Alsop and Heinsohn’s adaptation because it seems to fit South Korea’s context more, given that Korea is no longer a developing country and does not outright deny women access to education or the labor market (OECD, et al).

Empowerment as a concept and theory gained traction in 2000, when the World Bank first highlighted it as one of their development goals (Ivasiuc, 2013). From a development perspective, empowerment is used as a tool in spaces where the ‘poor’ are seen to be repressed in terms of opportunities and choice due to their low economic standing. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have found empowerment strategies to be an effective tool in reducing gaps in access to opportunities for the economically disadvantaged (Narayan-Parker, 2002; Rowlands, 1995). The World Bank has deployed over 1,800 empowerment-related development projects since 2005 (Ivasiuc, 2013). The wide usage of the concept and framework may be attributed to its loose definition and the fact that it is open to interpretation and allows for flexibility. Users of the framework may have to adjust the scope and structure according to their context and needs, a liberty I will also take (Alsop et al, 2005; Medel-Anonuevo, 1995; Narayan-Parker, 2002). Although the lack of a standard definition can be seen as a weakness, Narayan highlights its diversity as a framework, in that it can address multiple values, has relevance at different levels, and can be applied to individuals or groups:

> *Empowerment is of intrinsic value…instrumental value. Empowerment is relevant at the individual and collective level, and can be economic, social, or political. The term can be used to characterize relations within households or between poor people and other actors at the global level (Narayan-Parker, 2002, p.10).*

Although Narayan (2002, p.10) and other academics working in education, gender, and development tend to focus on empowerment applications around the economically disadvantaged, I do not see claims of ‘voicelessness’ and ‘powerlessness to negotiate better terms for themselves’ as being exclusive to the poor. These issues of suppressed empowerment can also be applied to varying groups of different socioeconomic and educational levels.

# 6 DEFINING THE FRAMEWORK

The rest of the essay will be spent using the framework to examine the plight of educated women in South Korea. In looking at this specific segment of society, I will seek to understand whether these women are making empowered choices both when entering higher education and after graduation, or whether their choices are being restricted by lack of agency.

This essay will draw on a simplified version of Alsop and Heinsohn's (2005) framework, which encompasses three core components: (1) agency, (2) opportunity structure, (3) degrees of empowerment. Although Alsop et al (2005) designed the framework to also be used as a tool for measuring and monitoring empowerment projects, I will apply the framework for analytical purposes only, and therefore will only engage with such measurement concepts as 'domains (state, market, society)' and 'levels (local – community, intermediate – between community and national levels, macro - national)' indirectly. Domains and levels are used to categorize defined measurements in a linear, tabular format. As I will not be using their empowerment table templates, I will not directly categorize empowerment by domains and levels, but will instead include them discreetly throughout my analysis.

For empowerment to occur under Alsop and Heinsohn's (2005) framework, both agency and opportunity structures need to be examined. In analyzing how agency and opportunity structures engage, degrees of empowerment can be determined. While agency focuses on the person's capacity to make choices, opportunity structures are the 'institutional context in which choice is made' and are assessed through formal institutions ('laws, regulatory frameworks') or informational institutions ('norms governing behavior' and customs) (Alsop et al, 2005, p. 4-9). At a basic level, agency refers to whether individuals can imagine and conceptualize different options that they may want to pursue. Empowerment is achieved by either an individual or a group when they have the ability to transform their desired choices into desirable outcomes. To help identify if agency is occurring and to what extent, Alsop et al created 'asset endowments' or 'psychological, informational, organizational, material, social, financial, or human' related asset indicators (Alsop et al, 2005, p. 8). The intention is that these seven broad asset indicators/endowments can be used to identify and quantify areas that affect and limit agency. In an example that was given in their work, they described a woman of low socioeconomic background who was deliberating about whether to send her daughters to school. She was being discouraged by her husband and school staff because they saw educating women as a waste. This example highlighted that an informal institution – social influences – limited the mother's agency to make an empowered choice.

# 7 APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

For the purposes of this essay, I will apply Alsop et al's framework in the following way. I will utilize the below three degrees of empowerment (DoE) questions as a lens to identify ways in which agency may be limited in informal or formal institutions (within opportunity structures) (Alsop et al, 2005, p. 62):

*(1) whether a person has the option to make a choice*
*(2) whether the person decides to make use of the option to choose*
*(3) whether the person achieves the desired result after making a choice*

If the framework is applied in its most standard sense at local and intermediary (regional) levels within market and societal domains, a quick analysis of degrees of empowerment might look like: (1) Can South Korean girls go into higher education – yes (OECD, et al), (2) Do South Koreans go into higher education – yes (OECD, et al), (3) Are they able to make desired choices after graduation – arguably no (see evidence provided in section (1) DoE analysis). However, in order to get a richer and deeper analysis, I applied the DoE framework in a slightly different manner. I have chosen to use the lens to assess the empowerment of Korean women at different stages of their lives, that being before and after higher education attainment. Through this analysis, I will demonstrate that while the standard application of the framework may initially show a (3) or relatively high level of empowerment, this may not be the case if the context is examined through the three-part-lens that I have framed below.

## 7.1 DoE Analysis: Do South Korean Women Have the Option to Make Educational Choices?

The concept of personal choice is not something that is always easily discernable. How and why an

individual makes a choice can be linked to a number of factors. For instance, choices can be a result of familial, societal, and cultural influence, whether on a conscious or subconscious level. These are just a few of the many possible factors that lead an individual to believe that she/he can or cannot do something (Walker and Unterhalter, 2007).

And while tertiary attainment for women in Korea is high, it is important to understand the underlying influences at work as to why girls enter higher education and choose what they study. In the Korean context, agency appears to be affected by psychological and social asset endowments due to informal, cultural, and familial institutions. Even as early as elementary school, Korean mothers are seen as the academic caretakers/rulers of their children. They wield tremendous power over their child's schooling and have an almost unhealthy focus over their children's' educational journey and attainment (Chung, Lee, H., Lee, J. and Lee, K., 2015, p. 904). Although family structures are modernizing due to Western influences, Confucian based practices still dictate how families operate and make decisions (Chang, 2003; Kyung- Sup and Min- Young, 2010; Lee et al, 1996). Mothers are so concentrated on their children's academic performance that they often do not know what is happening in their children's lives outside of school. Research has linked issues with unhappiness and other behavioral problems in Korean children with parents' lack of compassion and inability to help their children deal with the stress of living in an ultra-competitive society (Chung et al, 2015). In this way, I see Korea's competitive culture as also being an inhibitor of agency, affecting girls at psychological levels, in informal institutional (family, societal) spaces. Overwhelming stress can lead individuals to believe that they have no other options and be less apt to seek out information (another asset indicator) regarding life choices.

Another component influencing educational choices can be linked to beliefs and norms around marriages in Korea. Traditionally, the decision to marry is one that is heavily influenced by both parents. And even though families are adopting Western ideologies, Korea has not departed from its Confucian beliefs and traditional values still remain prevalent in Korea's modern society (Choi, 2011; Kim 1996). Marriage rates for those considered of age are at 90 percent, and parents still exercise their voice when it comes to spousal choice. This includes having a preference for daughter-in-laws who take charge of household chores. And if they do enter the workforce, careers in teaching/education are seen as highly desirable (Choi, 2011). A successful marriage, which is the goal of Korean parents, is often tied to social status, high levels of education, and profession (Chang, 2003; Choi, 2011). In 2005, 71 percent of women graduated with education degrees, representing a 0.1 percent change since 1998 (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008). Therefore, it could be presumed from the aforementioned observations that parents are exercising an unhealthy amount of influence over their children's way of thinking (psychological and information asset indicators) and decision-making processes and are either using education as a vehicle for securing more attractive marriages for their daughters and/or are influencing their daughters to adopt these values into their own belief systems.

Agency entails individuals first contemplating different options and then making decisions about which choices they want to make. While it is true that there are no apparent formal institutions limiting agency, like laws or regulatory frameworks, this does not necessarily mean that empowered decisions are being made. I would argue that if Korea's female graduates were truly empowered, then it would appeal to common reasoning that the distribution of degree choice would be more diversely spread out across different types of fields, and not overly concentrated on education. Girls may be so indoctrinated by informal institutions like familial, societal, and cultural pressures from a young age that they may not be able to discern their own personal preferences from what they were 'informed' to believe. For full agency to occur, individuals should bear the responsibility of setting life-goals for themselves based on their preferences and should not be unduly influenced or indoctrinated to choose one path over another by other groups or norms (Walker et al, 2007).

## 7.2 DoE Analysis: Do South Korean Women Make Use of Their Option to Choose?

The next question I will examine is, once women receive their degrees, are they exercising higher degrees of empowerment and 'making use of their option to choose' (Alsop et al, 2005, p. 62)?

As stated in the introduction, among all OECD countries South Korea has the smallest number of educated females entering the labor force of all of the countries assessed (Lee, 2014). Data has shown that Korean women are not leveraging their degrees after graduation and instead choose to get married and stay at home (Chang, 2003). Being a stay at home wife or mom certainly does not preclude someone from being

empowered. If a woman desires to be a stay-at-home mom over other options, including a career, then that, too, can be an empowered choice. But when half of Korea's degree-holding female eligible labor force is opting out of the workforce, then one may draw the conclusion that empowered choices are not being made (Draudt, 2016; KOSIS, 2017).

So what factors might be limiting agency? The first informal institution limiting capacity of choice can again be traced back to 'patriarchal Confucian culture' which calls for the wife and/or mother to be the main caretaker of the family and household, even at the expense of her own career aspirations (Kim, 1996; Lee, 2014, p. 794). For decades, the patriarchal ideology and Confucian roots were commonplace not only in the home, but also permeated into the workplace. While the women stayed at home, over 92 percent of male university graduates entered the workforce. This created an unfair imbalance of suitable jobs that were left for women. Female graduates found themselves competing for secretary-type roles, non-leadership positions, or jobs outside of their degree of study (Lee, 2014). Between 2003 and 2008, the highest level of attainment of women reaching managerial roles was 5 percent and the highest level of attainment of women in professional job roles was 10 percent (OECD, 2003-2008). However, over time, this quandary of 'uninteresting' and 'unchallenging jobs', coupled with lack of upward mobility in the workforce, created new spaces of empowered thinking.

As women began to become more frustrated with their predicaments and lack of agency, new trends around marriage began manifesting. As modern influences challenged core traditional societal values more and more, women began to have new reactions to their prolonged suppression of freedom and agency. With gender discrimination in the workforce beginning to improve, more women began to choose to stay single, rebelling against informal opportunity structures such as religious, societal, and cultural norms. These shifts resulted in opening up more opportunities for women to leverage their education to become more financially self-sufficient (thus positively influencing financial, psychological, and social asset indicators). Women now wanted to wait for the 'right partner' rather than engaging in an unfulfilling marriage based on societal-prescribed notions. This trend became so prevalent that a new term 'bihonyeoseong (non-marrying women) [was] coined to describe the single women for whom marriage is just a matter of personal choice' (Chang, 2003, p. 603; Choi, 2011). And for those women who were already married, some began to go against Confucian ideals by separating or divorcing (Kyung-Sup et al, 2010; Lee, 2014). It can be argued that these new trends represented informational, psychological, social, and financial asset endowments. New Western and modern ideologies (informational) influenced how women valued themselves (psychological), and inspired them to challenge traditional beliefs (social). Gender-friendly changes in the workplace (informal structure) opened up new opportunities and affected women's choices around money and independence (financial and social) (Alsop et al, 2005; Kyung- Sup et al, 2010).

Up until now, evidence to support informal related opportunity structures has mainly been highlighted, but these next few paragraphs will discuss some formal institutions that can be seen as empowerment influencers.

South Korea has made a concerted effort to build a global reputation around their universities and research. To bolster such aims, the government made several major moves in the hopes of increasing their university ranks including: (1) the Brain Korea 21, a seven-year $2 billion program that was launched by the Ministry of Education to promote academic-industry relationships and capacity building, (2) Internationalization and globalization policies to promote the hiring of foreign professors and attract foreign students, (3) Additional policies to counter the fact that only 15.6 percent of Korea's academic positions were filled by women (Brender et al, 2006; Kim, 2005). Despite these well-intentioned initiatives, lack of enforcement around hiring-related policies resulted in only a handful of foreign hires out of the 400+ budgeted. The government had hoped that the above initiatives would push universities from their traditional ways of thinking to a more democratic system. However, in reality, the policies proved to be ineffective.

Although formal institutions intended to create opportunity structures for women to make more empowered decisions about their educational and career choices, the new regulations and proposed projects failed to overcome stronger informal social and cultural related institutions. Korea's traditional cultural influences and Confucian ideology were too deep-rooted and pervasive to allow for drastic change within academic institutions (Brender et al, 2006; Kim, 2005). With such a shortage of academic female role models, it makes sense why female students were not empowered to pursue higher education leadership positions and overcome organizational (in universities) and social (Confucian ideology) barriers to full agency. Female academics were often relegated to the periphery and held too little power to

instigate any real progress or change (Kim 2005). Even the male professors who studied and lived abroad did little to influence culture as they often became more nationalistic upon return (Brender et al, 2006; Kim, 2005). Korea has been long known as a homogeneous nation in terms of population and social and cultural practices (Kyung-Koo, 2007). I believe that this is an area of focus that the government must continue to pursue if they want to see lasting and substantial changes in empowerment of the female population. As long as the males rooted in traditional ideals continue to dominate teaching, academic, and leadership positions, it is unlikely that homogeneous molds in thinking, pedagogy, and content within academic institutions will change (Kyung-Koo, 2007; Moser, 2007). As pointed out by Jones, Presler-Marshall, and Van Anh (2016, p. 552) empowerment needs to be about changing belief-systems, not just behaviors. For women to be able to exercise and leverage their human asset endowment of education, changes need to be made in informal related opportunity structures in universities to match formal institutional changes (Alsop et al, 2005). Instead of training girls how to not make empowered decisions, educational institutions with the right leadership and content can just as easily teach girls what empowered thinking means and how to go about making newly empowered decisions moving forward.

### 7.3 DoE Analysis: Do South Korean Women Achieve their Desired Result After Making their Choice?

This question brings to the forefront a new trend that is gaining momentum among the intellectually elite. Dissatisfied with their situation after making certain life choices, frustrated housewives who feel under-utilized and who were begrudgingly forced into roles of motherhood and marriage are looking for new ways to fulfill themselves (Chang, 2013; Choi, 2011; Lee, 2014). A group of women known as 'mature students' (students older than 25) are now seeking to exercise their agency to 'correct' or 'make-up for' unempowered choices they made earlier in life (Lee, 2014, p.794). Discontent housewives are now choosing to exercise their agency by complementing their higher degrees with further learning. Some are returning to school to make up for missed opportunities to attend university, due to marrying at a young age, while other women are motivated by the fact that less gender discrimination happens in classrooms than it does in the workplace, and lastly some women are hoping that further education will lead to better careers and higher salaries (Lee, 2014).

Going back to Kabeer's (1999) focus of denied opportunities, it can be argued that when these women looked back at their younger selves, they saw themselves as having been deprived of agency. Rather than let opportunity structures continue to inhibit their agency, these intellectually elite women found empowerment within themselves to make new decisions and finally explore other alternative lifestyles and career choices that they may initially have thought were closed to them due to familial responsibilities and social and cultural norms (Alsop et al, 2005). In these cases, lack of agency and freedom has actually triggered a level of discontentment that has motivated women to change their situation and trajectory and make empowered decisions that are more closely representative of their capabilities and desires (Lee 2014). This nicely reinforces Heise's supposition (in Jones, et al, 2016, p. 541) that 'it is easier to build new norms than it is to eliminate old ones'.

## 8 CONCLUSIONS

The intent of this essay was to question to what extent South Korean women were able to make empowered choices concerning their higher education attainment and life after schooling through an adapted version of Alsop and Heinsohn's (2015) empowerment framework. Through this analysis, the essay discovered that, generally speaking, young girls experienced limited agency and therefore lacked empowerment when it came to their educational choices and paths. Girls were so influenced by familial pressures and social and indoctrinated cultural ideologies that they opted out of the workforce due to marriage or motherly duties after graduation, without much regard to alternative possibilities.

At a national level, the Korean government tried to rectify poor gender parity trends, specifically in universities, by implementing measures and programming that promoted culture and gender diversity. Unfortunately, due to weak enforcement, not much improvement resulted.

One of the surprising points the analysis uncovered was that years of suppressed empowerment actually instigated women to make empowered decisions later in life. Wives and mothers frustrated with their previous lack of empowered decisions sought out other alternatives, like divorce, new career aspirations, and even going back to school to receive more education. This trend also resulted in empowering younger generations by spurring a

movement where women could choose to rebel against cultural and social stigmas and remain single, giving them the freedom to choose opportunities more in line with their desires. It is important to note that due to the brevity of this essay, not all influencers of agency were examined. The examples highlighted here were chosen to shed light on how multi-dimensional empowerment issues are, and how they are not necessarily static in nature.

With the economic development of Korea being so rapid, it may not be fair to expect that all social areas like gender empowerment would keep pace, especially when empowerment may not translate organically both linguistically or culturally into all societies (Narayan-Parker, 2002). Therefore, while drastic improvements in empowerment have not been made in Korea, it is encouraging that women, especially later on in life, are demonstrating more empowered decision making and creating new norms for empowerment.

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