

## KOREAN IMMIGRANT WIVES' OVERWORK\*

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*The primary objective of this paper is to demonstrate, based on interviews with 298 Korean married women in New York City, the extent to which Korean immigrant wives overwork. Its secondary objective is to analyze the factors that contribute to the differentials in Korean immigrant wives' share of housework. A large majority of Korean immigrant wives in New York City are found to take the economic role. An overwhelming majority of Korean working wives are involved in excessively long hours of work, comparable to their husbands. Moreover, Korean immigrant working wives are responsible for most of housework. As a result, they spend some twelve more hours per week than their working husbands. As expected, the amount of time Korean immigrant wives spend for paid work and the number of their cohabiting extra adult members significantly reduce their share of housework. Years of education Korean immigrant wives received have a moderate, but statistically significant negative effect on their proportion of housework. However, neither their length of residence in the U.S. nor gender role attitudes have a significant effect on their share of housework.*

One of the major changes made in American family life in the twentieth century is a great increase in the labor force participation rate of married women. In the year 1900 only 6% of American married women worked outside of the home. However, the labor force participation rate of married women increased to 32% in 1960, 50% in 1980, and then 57% in 1988 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1980, p. 385). Only one out of every eight married women with a pre-school child participated in paid employment in 1950. This figure skyrocketed to more than one out of every two women by 1985 (O'Connell and Bloom 1987, p. 2).

An important research issue with regard to the increased economic role of the wife is the relationship between work and family roles. To what extent has the increase in the wife's economic role led to the decrease in women's housework and child care tasks and the increase in their husbands' housework

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roles? Many social scientists have conducted survey studies to answer this question (Coverman and Sheley 1986; Hardesty and Bokermeier 1989; Huber and Spitze 1981; Kamo 1988; Pleck 1977, 1983; Ross 1987). A major conclusion consistently supported by these studies is that women still bear the main responsibility for housework and child care regardless of their employment status. Of course, there has been a steady increase in the amount of time men spend with their families in the United States over the last thirty years. However, most U.S. couples tend to maintain the sexual division of labor even in the realm of housework. Thus, men tend to focus on repair and maintenance services, whereas women take care of traditional household tasks such as cooking, dishwashing, and cleaning.

A radical increase in the labor force participation rate of married women and no significant decrease in their housework and child care responsibilities mean overwork and role conflicts on the part of working women. A number of studies have shown that working women suffer from stress, role strain, and other forms of depression due to their divided attention to paid and house work (Fox and Nichols 1983; Hall and Hall 1980; Harrison and Minor 1978; Katz and Piotrkowski 1983). Men with spouses working full-time outside the home spend more time for housework and child care than those with full-time housewives. Thus, not only working women, but also their husbands experience stress and role strain as a result of job and family demands. However, working wives express a greater amount of stress and strain in discharging work and family obligations than husbands because the former are mainly responsible for undertaking household chores and taking care of children (Googins and Burden 1987; Radloff 1977).

Almost all studies on work-family relations are based on white middle-class samples. Thus, as Piotrkowski and his colleagues rightly indicated, "descriptive research needs to be conducted on minority families" (Piotrkowski *et al.* 1987). This paper will bridge this research gap by examining work-family relations using a sample of Korean immigrant couples in New York City.

Under the impact of the Confucian ideology, people in South Korea have maintained a strict gender division of labor. Although urbanization, industrialization, and Westernization have led to great changes in the traditional family system in South Korea during recent years, they have not much revised the traditional ideology of marital role differentiation. Even at present a small proportion of married women in South Korea participate in the labor force and the husband's involvement in child care and housework is almost negligible (Choe 1985; Min 1988). However, the immigration of Korean women to the United States has led to a radical change in their economic activities. The majority of Korean immigrant married women participate in the labor market and most of them work exceptionally long hours (Kim and

Hurh 1988; Min 1990). Although Korean immigrant women are active in their economic roles, they and their husbands are not likely to have changed their traditional gender role attitudes substantially. Thus, Korean immigrant married women assume most of housework, although most of them work long hours outside the home (Kim and Hurh 1988). The primary objective of this paper is to demonstrate the extent to which Korean immigrant women overwork. The degree to which Korean immigrant women overwork can be better understood by comparing them with Korean women in Korea and the U.S. general population. Thus, this paper will very often compare Korean immigrant women with the other two groups in the number of hours for paid and family work.

The secondary objective of this paper is to analyze the factors that contribute to the differentials in Korean immigrant women's share of housework. The relative time availability theory proposes that differences in spouses' participation in family work depend upon time and skills available to either partner (Blood and Wolf 1960). Blood and Wolfe (1960) found that husbands of working wives contributed more to housework than those whose wives did not work, which was supported by later studies (Berk 1985; Condran and Bode 1982; Ericksen *et al.* 1979; Maret and Finlay 1984). Other studies found that the husband's paid work hours were negatively associated with his share of housework (Hartman 1981; Nichols and Metzen 1978; Pleck 1985). Thus, this theory leads us to expect that the increase in the amount of time for a Korean immigrant wife's paid work leads to the decrease in the amount of time for her housework and the increase in that for her husband's housework.

Another major determinant of the division of family work is gender role orientations of both spouses, particularly those of the wife, which are largely shaped by socialization. When the wife or both partners hold more liberal gender role attitudes, the husband's share of the household tasks is greater than when they hold more traditional gender role orientations (Hardesty and Bokemeier 1989; Kamo 1988; Ross 1987). Therefore, Korean immigrant women who hold more liberal gender role attitudes are likely to bear less heavy burdens of housework than those who hold more traditional gender role attitudes.

Gender role attitudes are associated with social class and education. Partners with higher education and higher social class generally hold more liberal gender role attitudes than those with lower education. Thus, husbands with higher education and higher occupational status were found to help more with family work than others (Blood and Wolfe 1960; Berk and Berk 1978; Farkas 1976). It is therefore hypothesized that Korean immigrant women's share of housework is negatively related to their and husbands' educational levels.

Korean immigrants achieve assimilation in proportion to length of residence in the U.S., although overall they achieve a low level of assimilation (Hurh and Kim 1984; Min 1989). As Korean immigrants achieve more assimilation, they are likely to change their more traditional gender division of family work. Therefore, Korean immigrant women's share of housework is likely to decrease as they live in the U.S. longer and longer.

The vast majority of Korean immigrants came to the United States invited by their kin members already settled here. This suggests that a significant proportion of Korean immigrant families have one or more non-nuclear members living together (Min 1984). The cohabiting extended family members are in most of cases elderly parents, who help their adult children with baby sitting, cooking and other kinds of housework (Min 1984). It is also very common in Korea that an adolescent child, particularly a girl, helps the mother with housework (Choe 1985). Given these, Korean immigrant working women are likely to reduce their share of family work in proportion to the number of elderly parents and adult children living together.

## DATA SOURCES

The major data source for this paper is telephone interviews with 298 Korean married immigrant women in New York City. Approximately 22% of Koreans have the surname Kim (Korean National Bureau of Statistics 1977), and the telephone subscription rate of Korean immigrants is very high (Shin and Yu 1984). Kim is uniquely a Korean surname (Min 1989) and Kims represent the Korean general population (Shin and Yu 1984). Thus, an unbiased sample of Korean households could be obtained by simply sampling Kims from public telephone directories. Using the Kim sample technique has advantages over using ethnic directories. An ethnic directory underrepresents those Koreans well assimilated and thus provides a more biased sample than a public telephone directory. Moreover, an ethnic directory includes many Korean households who already moved to another city or another part of the same city.

The Kim sample technique was used for sampling Korean households in New York City for this study. Five 1988 New York City borough public telephone directories listed a total of 3,313 Kim households. Six hundred and fifty of these Kim households were randomly selected. Only married Korean immigrant women were approached for the interview. One hundred and twenty-five selected households were not married families and thus not applicable for the interview. Only one married woman from each household was interviewed. In case there were two or more married couples in one household, the wife of the household head was interviewed. Two hundred and

ninety-eight Korean women from the 525 households eligible for the interview were successfully interviewed by telephone. Thus, the response rate was 56.8%. Of those 227 households not interviewed, only 42 households (8%) rejected the interview and the others were not interviewed because they were unreachable. Some prospective respondents were unreachable because they had moved to new locations since publication of the 1988 telephone directory. Others could not be reached probably because they worked until late at night. Since a significant proportion of those unreachable households must have been unmarried households and thus ineligible for the interview, nearly 70% of those households eligible for the interview can be said to have been interviewed.

The interview schedule included 54 items relating to the respondents' and their husbands' socioeconomic backgrounds, and gender role attitudes and behavior. It took twenty minutes on the average to complete one telephone interview. The interview was conducted by two Korean bilingual students between August and November 1988. To measure the share of housework, each respondent was asked to indicate for what proportion (%) of each of the following six household tasks she, her husband, and other family member(s), including housemaid, bear responsibility: (1) cooking, (2) dishwashing, (3) laundry, (4) house cleaning, (5) grocery shopping, and (6) garbage disposal.

The following three items were provided to measure the gender role orientation:

- (1) In a normal family the husband works outside the home and the wife works inside.
- (2) The husband should make decisions on important family affairs.
- (3) The husband should be able to have dinner outside the home with his friends without asking his wife, if the situation dictates.

The last item was provided, since the practice of the husband eating dinner outside without asking his wife is considered to be a good indication of male supremacy in South Korea. The respondents were asked to respond to each item by choosing one of five categories: (1) strongly agree, (2) moderately agree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) moderately disagree, and (5) strongly disagree. Each category was given a value from one to five in an ascending order, and a scale was created by adding all three values. Thus, a lower score indicates a more traditional gender role orientation.

## FINDINGS

### *Characteristics of the Respondents*

The median age of the respondents was 35. Forty-eight percent of the

respondents and 74% of their husbands were found to have completed four years of college education. All the respondents were found to be Korean-born immigrants. They had been in the U.S. for an average of 7.4 years, which indicates that the vast majority of them immigrated to this country after the change in immigration law in 1965. They had on the average 3.79 members per household. Eighty-five percent of the respondents were found to have at least one child, and 44% of them had one or more preschool children.

### *Concentration in Small Business and the Wife's Increased Economic Role*

Seventy percent of the respondents were found to have participated in the labor force and the majority of them (56.4%) worked full-time. The labor force participation rate of Korean married women in New York City is much higher than that of married women in Korea and even higher than that of the U.S. counterpart. Only 18.8% of non-farm married women in Korea were in the labor force in 1980 (Korean National Bureau of Statistics 1983, p. 441) and 55.8% of American married women participated in the labor force in 1987 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1988, p. 364). Although 42% of the respondents were engaged in paid work in Korea, many of them worked before they got married. This indicates that the immigration of Koreans to the U.S. has led to a radical change in the Korean women's economic role.

What is noteworthy about New York Korean immigrant women's economic activities is not only their high labor force participation rate, but also their high self-employment rate and economic segregation. As Table 1 shows, nearly 50% of the working women are engaged in a business and another 36% are employed in Korean firms. Thus, 85% of the Korean female work force in New York City is segregated, with only 15% employed in non-Korean firms. Husbands of the respondents show even a higher self-employment rate (61.4%), with only 13% employed in non-Korean firms. The vast majority of the self-employed Korean wives coordinate with their husbands for the family business.

TABLE 1. WIVES' AND HUSBANDS' LABOR MARKET DISTRIBUTION

Labor Market	Wives	Husbands	Total
Self-Employed	102 (48.8%)	172 (61.4%)	274 (56.0%)
Employed in Korean Firms	76 (36.4%)	69 (24.6%)	145 (29.7%)
Employed in Non-Korean Firms	31 (14.8%)	39 (13.9%)	70 (14.3%)
Total	209(100.0%)	280(100.0%)	489(100.0%)

*Long Hours of Work*

Korean immigrants concentrate in labor-intensive small businesses such as the green grocery business, dry-cleaning service, and garment manufacturing. Thus they, both husbands and wives, work long hours. Table 2 shows that more than 50% of husbands and 40% of wives work 60 hours or more per week. Korean married women in New York City work on the average 50.7 hours per week in comparison to 56.8 hours for their husbands. The mean difference in the number of weekly work hours between husbands and wives is largely due to several wives working part time. Excluding those who work below 40 hours per week, we find there is no substantial difference between husbands and wives in the number of weekly work hours (58.2 hours vs. 57.6 hours). A study conducted in 1980 (Fox and Nichols 1983) shows that American married women worked 32.2 hours per week and 43% of those employed worked part-time. These statistics suggest that Korean immigrant men work excessively long hours and that their wives' overwork is even more excessive compared to U.S. wives in general.

*No Significant Changes in the Wife's Domestic Role*

We have noted above that the vast majority of Korean immigrant wives undertake the economic role and work excessively long hours outside the home relative to U.S. wives in general. Has the increase in the Korean wives' economic role led to the decrease in their domestic role? Table 3 provides data that help to answer this question. Korean immigrant housewives bear almost all the responsibility for traditional domestic tasks and their husbands' help is almost negligible, Housewives do 95% of cooking and more than 90% of

TABLE 2. HUSBANDS' AND WIVES' WEEKLY WORK HOURS

Work Hours	Husbands	Wives	Total
Below 40	13 (4.8%)	46 (22.3%)	59 (12.3%)
40-49	78 (28.6%)	42 (20.4%)	120 (25.1%)
50-59	44 (16.1%)	36 (17.5%)	80 (16.7%)
60-69	72 (26.4%)	47 (22.8%)	119 (24.8%)
70 or more	66 (24.2%)	35 (17.0%)	101 (21.1%)
Total	273(100.0%)	206(100.0%)	497(100.0%)
Mean Hours for Total	56.8	50.7	54.2
Mean Hours for Those Working 40 or More Hours	58.2	57.6	57.9

dishwashing, laundry, and house cleaning respectively. This finding comes as no surprise, considering the fact that there are few husbands in South Korea who bear responsibility for a significant proportion of family work.

Korean working wives' share of responsibility in the four major traditional domestic tasks is substantially lower than that of Korean housewives. However, Korean working wives still shoulder most household work except garbage disposal. Moreover, the decrease in the proportion of household work for Korean working wives does not result from a significant increase in their husbands' domestic role. Korean immigrant husbands do a very small proportion of domestic tasks, even when their wives undertake the economic role full-time. Korean working wives can reduce their share of housework mainly because other family members help them at home. As can be noted in Table 3, the proportion of household work that other family members bear has significantly increased from single-earner to dual-earner families. Other family members are largely the respondents' mothers, mothers-in-law, and children. When Korean immigrant women work outside of the home, many of their daughters are found to do a significant proportion of housework.

#### *Factors Related to Wive's Share of Housework*

To test a set of hypotheses derived from theoretical discussions, the following background variables were regressed on the wife's share of housework (%): (1) wife's weekly hours for paid work, (2) number of extra adult members in addition to husband and wife, (3) wife's years of education, (4) wife's length of residence in the U.S., (5) wife's gender role orientation, and (6) wife's age. The results are presented in Table 4.

As expected, the number of wife's weekly hours for paid work negatively affects her share of housework and the relationship is statistically significant. This means that Korean immigrant women can reduce their share of housework in proportion to number of work hours. The beta value indicates that

**TABLE 3. SHARE OF DOMESTIC TASKS BY WIFE'S WORK STATUS** (Unit: %)

Domestic Tasks	Families With Wife Not Working			Families With Wife Working		
	Wife	Husband	Others	Wife	Husband	Others
Cooking	94.7	2.8	2.5	78.9	8.4	12.7
Diswashing	92.8	3.3	3.9	72.7	9.6	17.7
Laundry	93.7	3.7	2.6	63.1	13.3	23.6
House Cleaning	91.4	7.2	1.4	58.9	19.5	21.6
Grocery Shopping	71.9	25.6	2.5	65.2	28.6	6.2
Garbage Disposal	68.1	27.2	4.7	41.8	37.8	20.4

TABLE 4. REGRESSION OF BACKGROUND VARIABLES ON WIFE'S SHARE OF HOUSEWORK (N= 287)

Independent Variables	b	Beta	Independent Variables	b	Beta
Wife's Work Hours	-0.438	-0.491***	Length of Residence	-0.028	-0.006
Number of Extra Adult Members	-3.394	-0.170**	Age	-0.005	0.002
Years of Education	-0.962	-0.132*	Intercept	108.640	
Gender Role	-0.381	-0.045	R <sup>2</sup>	0.284	

\*Significant at the 0.05 level.

\*\*Significant at the 0.005 level.

\*\*\*Significant at the 0.0001 level.

the wife's weekly work hours have the most significant effect on her share of housework. The number of cohabiting extra adult members also significantly reduces the Korean immigrant wife's share of housework. As previously indicated, extra adult family members are elderly parents, parents-in-law, and/or adult children. Elderly mothers or mothers-in-law in particular bear much responsibility for housework and childcare when Korean immigrant wives work long hours outside the home (Min 1984).

The respondents' years of education reduce their share of housework, and the relationship is statistically significant. But neither the respondents' length of residence in the U.S. nor their gender role attitudes have a statistically significant effect on their portion of housework. It was hypothesized that Korean immigrant women's length of residence in the U.S. would reduce their housework responsibility mainly by facilitating their assimilation into American society. That is, Korean immigrant women are likely to achieve assimilation in proportion to their length of residence and thus they may adopt a less rigid gender role division accepted by most American couples as they live in this country longer and longer. However, research has shown that Korean adult immigrants, male or female, have achieved a very low level of assimilation, particularly because they are economically segregated (Hurh and Kim 1984; Min 1989, 1991). As our data on the New York Korean community show, the vast majority of Korean adult workers are in the ethnic subeconomy. Considering the fact that Korean immigrant adults have little contact with Americans, either at the work place or through personal networks, Korean wives holding the main responsibility for domestic work regardless of their length of residence comes as no surprise.

*Korean Immigrant Wives' Overwork*

The majority of middle-class working women in Seoul and other large cities in Korea depend upon housemaids for cooking and other household work. Even a significant proportion of full-time housewives in Korea hire housemaids so that they can focus on childrearing. According to one study conducted in Seoul (Choe 1985, p. 143), 51% of working wives always or mainly depend upon housemaids and another 10% partly depend upon them for cooking. In the same study, 31% of housewife respondents reported housemaids to be mainly or partly responsible for cooking. By contrast, few Korean immigrant wives depend upon maid service, although most of them spend long hours for paid work. Only 4.3% of the homes represented by the respondents were found to have a housemaid working part-time or full-time. This suggests that Korean immigrant wives spend much more hours for house and paid work than wives in Korea.

To measure more effectively the extent to which Korean immigrant wives overwork, compared to their husbands, we asked the respondents how many hours per week they and their husbands spend on their job and household work separately. Their responses are analyzed by the wife's work status and presented in Table 5. Full-time housewives spend 46.3 hours per week on housework in comparison to 5.2 hours for their husbands. For dual earner couples, the wife's time on housework is reduced to 24.8 hours per week whereas the husband's time on housework has increased from 5.2 hours to 6.7 hours. For both single-earner and dual-earner families, Korean immigrant wives spend more on housework than American wives, and Korean immigrant husbands spend less than their American counterparts. The 1985 study (Robinson 1988), for example, shows that American wives spend on the average 22.4 hours per week on housework in comparison to 11.1 hours for their husbands.

Husbands of Korean immigrant wives who do not work spend 62.1 hours

**TABLE 5. HUSBANDS' AND WIVES' WEEKLY WORK HOURS BY WIFE'S WORK STATUS**  
(Unit: Hours)

Roles	Families With Wife Not Working		Families With Wife Working	
	Husband	Wife	Husband	wife
Paid Work	56.9	0	56.8	50.7
Domestic Work	5.2	46.3	6.7	24.8
Total	62.1	46.3	63.5	75.5

per week on their job and household tasks and work approximately 15 hours more than their wives. Working wives spend 75.5 hours weekly on their job and housework, which is 12 hours more than what their husbands spend. Since the vast majority of Korean immigrant wives assume the economic role, most Korean wives seem to work longer hours than their working husbands. Korean immigrant wives' overwork inside and outside of the home becomes clearer when they are compared with U.S. wives. One survey shows that American employed wives spend an average of 45.8 hours for both paid work (25.3 hours) and housework (20.5 hours), whereas their husbands spent 46.9 hours on work in both domains (Nichols and Metzen 1982). Korean immigrant wives spend more hours than U.S. wives for paid and house work by approximately one and a half time.

## DISCUSSION

Changes in our attitudes are always slower than societal changes. The majority of American married women undertake the economic role, and a large proportion of them do so not because of their career interest but out of economic needs. Since most American adults, both male and female, have not significantly changed the traditional gender role orientation, working wives are still mainly responsible for housework, which, as cited in the beginning of this paper, causes them stress and role strain.

This conflict between gender role attitudes and women's economic behavior is more serious in immigrant families than American native families, since immigrant women usually change their economic role within a very short period of time. Our data show that 70% of Korean married women in New York City undertake the economic role in comparison to approximately 20% of married women in South Korea. What is noteworthy is not merely the fact that the vast majority of Korean immigrant married women participate in the labor market, but also the fact that most of them work exceptionally long hours, much longer hours than their American counterparts. Although most Korean immigrant women have made a radical increase in their economic role in their adjustment to a new society, their husbands maintain the traditional gender division of labor at home. Thus, Korean immigrant working wives undertake a greater share of housework than American working wives. Our data show that Korean working women spend longer hours than their working husbands for paid and domestic work. Overwork seems to be very stressful to Korean immigrant wives particularly because they experience stress relating to their language barrier and other adjustment problems (Kim and Berry 1985, 1986; Shin 1992). Wives' overwork and stress may not be unique to the Korean immigrant community. Many immigrant wives from

other non-European countries seem to suffer from overwork and stress (Foner 1979; Perez 1986; Pressar 1987).

Regression analysis shows that the number of Korean immigrant wives' working hours, number of extra adult family members, and years of education have significant effects on reduction of their share of housework, but that their length of residence in the U.S. and gender role attitudes do not have significant effects. The vast majority of Korean adult immigrants work in the ethnic subeconomy. As a result, Korean immigrants seem to be slower than other immigrant groups in discarding the rigid gender role division transplanted from their native country and adopting a more flexible gender role division associated with U.S. middle-class couples. Thus, how long Korean immigrants have lived in the U.S. may not make much difference in changing the traditional norm that housework is mainly the wife's obligation. Korean immigrant women who accept a more modern gender role orientation would expect their husbands to help more at home. However, their husbands, not exposed to the environment conducive to revision of the traditional gender role orientation, are not ready to favorably respond to their expectations. Thus, Korean immigrant wives' gender role orientation does not significantly affect their share of housework.

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