

# Who Cares? Political Motherhood and Its Gendered Implications in Korea

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**Abstract:** The active involvement of married women in the labor market has brought qualitatively new issues of state policy for child care that is, political motherhood. Given that political motherhood directly affects maternal employment, it is an essential issue of state policy toward working women. This study asks about the ways in which Korean political motherhood influences the reconciliation of work and family for working mothers through a gender perspective. In so doing, Korean political motherhood is critically examined in terms of three intertwined dimensions: accessibility, affordability, and quality. Then, based on the critical review, the nature of Korean political motherhood will be identified in the context of gender implications. Finally, some policy alternatives to overcoming the gendered nature of political motherhood will be considered.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been discussion in social policy spheres of the influence of state policy on gender relations. One of the main issues in this discussion is the impact of state policy on the construction of motherhood, particularly for working women. Here, a new concept has been drawing our attention: political motherhood. Political motherhood can be defined as "the package of measures deployed by the state to mould mothering" (Borchorst, 1990, p. 160). Indeed, the emergence of political motherhood is directly associated with the decline of the male-breadwinner model of the family: "men having the primary responsibility to earn and women to care for the young and the old" (Lewis, 1992, p. 153).

Along with the rapid integration of married women into paid employment, householders' traditional caring capacities are eroding, which brings anxieties about how to reconcile work and family responsibility. In this context, political motherhood, showing the relative share of care responsibility in the state and family market, is of critical importance in two ways. The first is ideological in the sense that the degree of state involvement in child care provision influences motherhood ideology such as maternal deprivation (Pascall, 1997) or traditional duties of motherhood (Windebank, 1999). Then, more practically, political motherhood is closely related to the expectation of (married) women's participation in the labor market and their employment patterns. As such, political motherhood has been emerging as an essential concern of social policy toward working women (Crompton, 1999; Lewis, 1992; Pascall, 1997; Windebank, 1999).

Like Western countries, the Korean government also has initiated proliferating numbers of child care policy that is, political motherhood since the early 1990s

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(MOGE, 2001; MOHW, 2002, various years). Korean women's active integration into paid work and international pressures of gender equality have functioned as a significant context for Korean political motherhood. Given the sheer quantity of state policies or their policy rhetoric, they give an appearance that the Korean government has been moving toward positive political motherhood represented by active support for workfamily reconciliation (see the Gender Equal Employment Act and the Infant Care Act). However, this study asks whether the policy rhetoric is being fulfilled in reality. In other words, this study aims to assess the real nature of political motherhood and its impact on women's reconciliation of work and family and, ultimately, gender equality in Korea.

Can Korean working mothers really meet their needs with Korean political motherhood? In other words, to what extent has the Korean government taken over child care responsibility from the family (working mothers)? What is the real meaning of Korean political motherhood for working mothers, especially in terms of gender equality? To find the answers, first political motherhood will be critically examined in terms of three intertwined dimensions: accessibility, affordability, and quality. Then, based on the critical review, the nature of Korean political motherhood will be discussed in the context of gender implications. Finally, some policy alternatives for overcoming its gendered nature will be considered.

## **A CRITICAL REVIEW OF POLITICAL MOTHERHOOD IN KOREA**

Political motherhood can be evaluated on interrelated dimensions: accessibility, affordability, and the quality of service provided (e.g., Wheelock and Jones, 2002; Windebank, 1999).

### **Accessibility: A Residual Approach**

As far as the accessibility of child care services is concerned, the Korean government has maintained a residual welfare approach. Unlike the institutional approach, which is characterized by universally available services, the "residual welfare approach favours selectively oriented measures directed towards specially defined target groups and eligibility is established by needs and/or mean-testing" (Leira, 1992, p. 1718). Therefore, services provided are generally of a limited range. This state's marginal role in child care in terms of accessibility has two dimensions: the share of public child care provision in terms of quantity and the criteria for service provision.

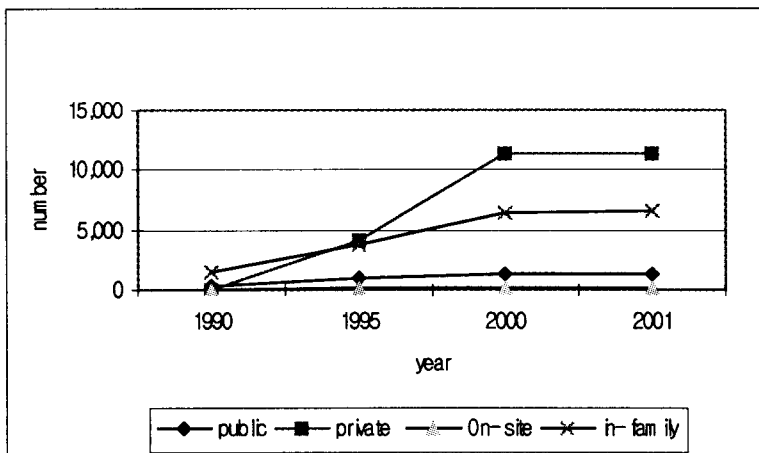
With respect to the quantity aspect of formal child care arrangements, the extent of fulfillment of demands for formal care service for children under age 6 is relatively low, 47.2% in total, which means that more than half the children needing care are excluded from formal child care service in Korea (Lee, E. H.,

2001; MOHW, 2002; Seo, M. H., 2002). In addition to the general gap between demand and supply, the proportion of public child care facilities has been extremely small compared to private facilities (see Figure 1). Public child care facilities in Korea make up only 16% of total child care facilities, which contrasts remarkably with 40% on average in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. Interestingly, the proportion of public child care facilities has decreased over the past 10 years from 25.4% in 1992 to 16% in 2002 even though the need for them has increased, coupled with a move toward a dual-earner reality (Lee, K, A, 2001; MOHW, 2002; MOGE, 2004).

Moreover, when we look closely at the priorities for service provision, a more pessimistic picture for "ordinary" working mothers emerges. According to the Infant Care Act (ICA; Chapter 3, Article 1617), priority for placement in public child care facilities is supposed to be given in the following order (MOHW, 2002).

1. The poorest families, who are qualified under the National Basic Livelihood Security Act (NBLSA)
2. Single-mother families, who are qualified under Article 5 of the Mother and Fatherless Child Welfare Act (MFCWA) and single-father families supported by the guidelines of the MOHW,
3. Low-income families excepting those covered under points 1 and 2
4. Broken families or double-earner families
5. Normal families.

**Figure 1.** Number of Child Care Facilities by Type



Note: "On-site facilities" refers to child care facilities in the workplace.  
 Source: MOHW, *Yearbook of Health and Social Affairs*, various years;  
 MOGE, *The Yearbook of Women* (2001)

As this priority clearly shows, public child care services are targeted at chil-

dren who are deemed social victims because of their family circumstances, thus providing a safety net. Accordingly, because poverty is a constant variable in determining eligibility, there is extremely little room for taking "ordinary" working mothers and their children into consideration in the provision of public child care services.

Regarding accessibility, we need to pay particular attention to working mothers with infants under 2 years. In effect, infant care implies a dilemma: While it is a very pressing need for working mothers, it is also fairly expensive. For instance, legally, the ratio of caregivers to infants is 1:5, which contrasts remarkably with 1:20 for children age 3 and increases the cost of operating (MOHW, 2002). Hence, even if there is some regulation of financial support for private facilities for infants, private facilities are very reluctant to get involved (Lee, K. A., 2001). The problematic situations surrounding infant care require more active state intervention. Despite that, even in public child care facilities, infant care has been seriously neglected (Lee, K. A., 2001; MOGE, 2004; MOHW, 2000; Seo, M. H., 2002). Unsurprisingly, the proportion of infants in formal child care arrangements in Korea is only 7% of those under 3, which contrasts markedly with many OECD countries, where the proportion is 40% or more (MOHW, 2002; OECD, 2001).

The underlying principle of political motherhood in terms of accessibility is that the proper sphere of state intervention in child care does not go beyond the minimum poverty-related welfare concern. To a large extent, it precludes ordinary working mothers and their children, especially infants, from using public child care services. Needless to say, this residual welfare approach to child care is problematic not only in terms of minimum state responsibility, but also in terms of its heavy dependence on the family. Its implications for gender equality will be discussed later.

### **Affordability: Heavy Reliance on Market Provision**

The Korean government has activated the private sector for child care provision (Lee, E. H., 2001; Lee, K. A., 2001; MOGE, 2001; MOHW, 2002; Seo, M., H., 2002; Yoo, H. J., 2000). To facilitate the private market for child care, the Korean government has deregulated and simplified the process for establishing and operating private child care facilities. Furthermore, the Korean government has provided cheap, long-term loans since 1997 to support them. As a result, there was a remarkable rise in the number of private child care facilities between 1995 and 2000, from 4,125 to 11,304, an almost threefold increase (see Figure 1). It is not surprising that this period corresponded with married women's active participation in the labor market. Although a considerable increase in private child care facilities makes them more accessible in comparison with their public counterparts, such market-oriented child care provision engenders some problems of affordability because it passes on the financial burden for child care solely to working parents.

According to the ICA (Chapter 4, Article 21), the Korean government

assumes that parents bear the sole responsibility for the costs of child care, articulating this as follows:

Principally, parents (or guardians) have to take a responsibility for the costs of childcare for their children, provided that central or local governments shall take a responsibility for children in low-income families, either fully or partially, in accordance with the NBSA, and so on.

Along with this policy direction, for children in low-income or broken families, the Korean government has introduced indirect subsidies in the form of a cost deduction: Children in the poorest families under the NBSA are entitled to free public child care service, and low-income families are permitted a 40% cost deduction (MOHW, 2001, 2002). However, an interesting point is that even state supports for children in dysfunctional families have been decreasing: The share of children with financial support from the state has decreased from 30.4% in 1995 to 20.8% in 2001 (MOHW, 2002). Given the lack of budget available for women's issues, including child care, it is not surprising that the Korean government shares only 27% of total child care expenses, which contrasts sharply with the countries reported in Table 1. Compared to European countries, where public funds cover more than 80% of the cost, Korea is almost last among the OECD countries (MOHW, 2002). These figures provide evidence to confirm the location of the Korean political motherhood within the category of maximum private responsibility for spending. As a result, the proportion of child care costs in households with monthly incomes under 1,000,000 won is more than 22% of total household income. That means the financial burden of child care for individual households (especially low-income families) is quite high (Seo, M. H, 2002).

**Table 1.** Share of Child Care Expenses in Selected Countries

| Country | Year | State's Share(percent) | Parents' Share(percent) |
|---------|------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Sweden  | 1998 | 83.0                   | 17.0                    |
| Japan   | 1998 | 53.4                   | 46.6                    |
| U.S.    | 1999 | 41.0                   | 59.0                    |
| Korea   | 2001 | 27.6                   | 72.4                    |

Source: MOHW, *The Mid- and Long-Term Development Planning for Childcare* (2001).

What is at issue here is that the market-based provision of child care has class connotations as well as gender implications. This is especially true because the capacity to purchase child care services from the market largely depends on parental resources and is, therefore, class based (O'Connor et al., 1999). Correspondingly, the differences between working mothers who are able to pay and those who are not will continue to widen. Because of the financial burden of child care, poorer mothers are highly likely to have broken careers and ac-

cept poor-quality work characterized by low wages, low skills, high turnover rates, and limited legal protection in order to combine paid employment with child care. Poor public support and market-based service provision, underpinned by the pay-as-you-go scheme, is one of crucial mechanisms that contributes to inequality among working mothers.

### **Quality: Is Deregulation the Best Way?**

The service quality provided is an integral part of child care. The quality dimension usually consists of the following aspects: the staff-to-child ratio, the qualifications of the child care workers, the care program, and the physical environment, such as the space-to-child ratio and hygiene. Regulation of reasonable standards is significant in ensuring minimum quality (ICA; MOHW, 2001, 2002a, 2002b). Particularly, given that regulations are usually, if not always, equated with quality, a license is seen as a sign of quality. In a similar vein, certificates given to private child care facilities that adhere to regulations could be considered a viable alternative to licensing. According to Mohamed et al., credentials "would perform the same legitimacy signalling function of licensing without production the negative effects on availability and affordability"(1999, p. 111). Despite that, the Korean government has maintained the deregulation of child care service provision since the mid-1990s. Based on that position, the licensing system for opening and operating private child care facilities was transformed into a simple registration in 1997. As a matter of fact, this deregulation has contributed to the availability of private child care services because private sectors for child care service have proliferated since then (see Figure1). Nevertheless, the quality aspect still remains in question.

In terms of the number of personnel in charge of child care policy in the Korean government irrespective of central or local government poor service quality is not surprising. According to some reports, because of the shortage of personnel, a civil servant covers more than 50 facilities on average. Moreover, in some urban areas such as Bucheon City, officials have to cover around 350 facilities (MOHW, 2002; Korean Institution of Women, 2003). In this situation, quality control is virtually impossible or remains a formality. Consequently, ensuring the quality of child care provision is also the sole responsibility of parents.

What draws our attention is that private responsibility for quality control has class implications, like the affordability dimension. There are wide gaps between working mothers who can pay for high-quality service and those who cannot. At the upper end of the market there is considerable choice of high-quality service, which results in "multi-tiered systems along class lines" (Lee, K. A., 2001; Sung, S. R., 2002; see also O'Connor et al., 1999). Consequently, these situations force working mothers especially those in lower socioeconomic strata to quit their jobs or leave their children under unregulated quality service.

## **In Conclusion: Familistic Political Motherhood**

Although, in principle, the Korean government advocates active support for workfamily reconciliation, in practice, it tends to keep its distance from genuine commitment to the principle. Korean political motherhood shows that although reliable, high-quality, and inexpensive child care have been placed high on the list for gender equality in the labor market, the Korean government (1) provides a safety net of child care service only for the poorest families and for children at risk of physical abuse or neglect, (2) encourages the use of expensive private services, and (3) abandons a minimum level of quality control. Given the accessibility, affordability, and service-quality dimensions, Korean political motherhood is reluctant to take over child care service from the family. In other words, the Korean government presumes that the family is still a viable alternative for child care, and thus the "proper" sphere of state intervention is circumscribed by the functioning of the family (Korean Institution of Women, 2003; Lee K. A., 2001; Seo, M. H., 2002; Shin, K. A., 2001; Yoo, H. J., 2000). Putting the findings together, Korean political motherhood is best characterized as state-responsibility minimization and family-responsibility maximization that is, familistic political motherhood.

## **GENDERED IMPLICATIONS OF FAMILISTIC POLITICAL MOTHERHOOD**

What is the real meaning of familistic political motherhood for working mothers? Is the family still a feasible alternative for child care, as the Korean government implicitly presumes? These questions will be answered through a gender perspective.

### **Familistic Political Motherhood = Maximization of (Working) Mothers' Responsibility**

Familistic political motherhood is itself problematic for working mothers and, ultimately, for gender equality in the labor market. This is largely because, unlike Western countries, where notable changes in the domestic division of labor have been observed along with the dual-earner reality (Pascall, 2002; Sullivan, 2000; Pascall, 2002), fundamental changes in the gendered nature of the family have not been witnessed even in dual-earner families in Korea. In Table 2, which reports the division of domestic work, including child care, between men and women, an extremely gendered feature appears. Although women in single-earner households perform slightly more domestic work (91.3%) than women in dual-earner households (88%), women's involvement in the labor market does not make much difference in the division of labor in the family. Moreover, even when social variables such as income and educational attainment are taken

into account, notable differences in the gendered division of labor in the family are hardly observed: less than middle school education, 86.3%, high school education, 84.4%; university education, 82.8%; income under 1,000,000 won, 86.5%; income under 2,000,000 won, 85.6%; income under 3,000,000 won, 83.0% (MOGE, 2002b). According to a survey of daily time usage for domestic work by gender and by household (National Statistical Office, 1999), although for wives, there is some difference in time used between single-earner (6 hrs, 43 min) and double-earner households (3 hrs, 45 min), husbands regardless of whether they reside in single-earner (1 hr, 06 min) or double-earner (1 hr, 0 min) households spend only 1 hour on unpaid work in a day. Rather, men in double-earner families spend less time on domestic work than men in single-earner households. Under these situations, Korean political motherhood—the state gives way to the family for child care responsibility—means the maximization of working mothers' responsibility.

**Table 2.** Division of Domestic Work by Household, 1999 (percent)

|                          | Only wife | Mostly wife | Fairly shared | Mostly husband | Only husband |
|--------------------------|-----------|-------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|
| Dual-earner households   | 37.6      | 50.0        | 7.9           | 2.6            | 0.2          |
| Single-earner households | 49.9      | 41.4        | 5.9           | 1.8            | 0.0          |

Note: Based on answers from wives.

Source: NSO, *Report on Social Statistics Survey* (1999).

The lack of state support for child care and the extremely asymmetric responsibility of mothers for child care have forced women (mothers) to remain in the family or, at best, in an extremely discontinuous employment pattern expressed by an M-shaped curve, characterized by high participation before marriage and a dramatic decrease in after marriage and child rearing (Kang & Shin, 2001; McKinsey & Co., 2001). In other words, Korean women's participation in the labor market is intermittent, frequently with career interruption through marriage, child bearing, and child rearing and without genuine support both from either the state or the family. The fact that 32.3% of working mothers who leave their jobs quit their work because of marriage and child rearing echoes the gendered impact of familistic political motherhood on women's employment (MOLAB, 1999).

Needless to say, discontinuity in women's employment follows with low wages, restricted promotion, and a lack of opportunities for education and training because married women often return to the labor market after having and rearing their children to work shorter hours with lower status (Kang & Shin, 2001; see also Pascall, 1997). After all, the Korean political motherhood contributes to women's subordination in the labor market, along with extremely gendered division of labor in the Korean family (KWDI, 2000; Shin, K. A., 2001).



**Are Grandmothers the Second-Best Thing? Decreasing Availability of Extended Family Solution and Mothers' Sole Responsibility**

Under familistic political motherhood in Korea, the extended family has been implicitly assumed as an alternative to child care provision for working mothers. In Particular, grandmothers have been regarded as an important and feasible alternative to child care in dual-earner households (Kang & Shin, 2001; Sung, S. R., 2001). The contributions of the extended family to child care are supported by child care patterns in dual-earner families in Korea. According to Table 3, the share of informal child care provided by extended family members is much higher than the share of formal child care. The extended family, especially grandmothers, is undertaking a very large volume of child care, especially for infants.

**Table 3.** Share of Child Care Provision in Dual-Earner Households (percent)

|          |                              | 0yr  | 1yr  | 2yrs | 3yrs | 4yrs |
|----------|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Informal | Parents                      | 38.2 | 31.0 | 23.3 | 27.7 | 17.3 |
|          | Extended family <sup>1</sup> | 52.7 | 42.0 | 35.6 | 10.5 | 13.0 |
|          | Nanny or maid                | 6.3  | 8.0  | 4.1  | 1.5  | 0.5  |
| Formal   | Noribang <sup>2</sup>        | 2.7  | 11.0 | 12.3 | 6.3  | 4.3  |
|          | Nursery                      | —    | 3.0  | 15.8 | 23.6 | 27.6 |
|          | Kindergarten                 | —    | —    | 5.5  | 12.6 | 23.8 |

1. Relatives and grandparents.

2. Refers to family-based child care facilities.

Source: Seo, M. H. (2002) .

The reason Korean working mothers rely heavily on extended family is directly associated with inappropriate formal care service. First of all, the most basic reason for depending on informal care is the lack of availability of formal child care provision. As discussed earlier, public child care is extremely limited for ordinary working mothers because of the basic assumption of a residual welfare approach for children in dysfunctional families (MOHW, 2002; Seo, M. H., 2002; Sung, S. R., 2002). Furthermore, the problem with short or rigid service hours in child care facilities is under question. The Korean government recommends that child care facilities provide services for 12 hours, from 7:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. (MOHW, 2002). However, the practical operation of private child care provision may be based on the assumption that the children's mothers stay at home or work from 9:00 to 5:00; the majority of private child care facilities provide services between those hours (Seo, M. H., 2002). In addition, inflexible patterns of child care are also problematic. For working mothers who need to work longer hours or night and holiday shifts, flexibility in times of service provision is absolutely crucial. Nonetheless, child care provision, whether public or private, has been provided in inflexible ways. Under these circumstances,

working mothers have to rely on informal care services provided by extended family members.

However, the availability of extended-family alternatives to child care for working mothers has declined. As Table 4 shows, along with radical changes in the family structure in Korea (Byun, H. S. et al., 2002; KWDI, 2001), the nuclear family has become predominant. Moreover, the share of three-generation households, which have been assumed to be primary child care providers for working mothers, has been decreasing.

**Table 4.** Share of Households by Type, 1980-2000 (percent)

|      | One generation | Two generations | Three generations | Others <sup>1</sup> |
|------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1980 | 8.3            | 68.5            | 16.5              | 5.8                 |
| 1985 | 9.6            | 67.0            | 14.4              | 9.0                 |
| 1990 | 10.7           | 66.3            | 12.2              | 13.2                |
| 1995 | 12.7           | 63.3            | 9.8               | 14.2                |
| 2000 | 14.2           | 60.8            | 8.2               | 16.8                |

1. Households with more than four generations, with only one person, and with unrelated persons.

Source: NSO, *Population and Housing Census Report*, various years.

Additionally, grandmothers' attitudes toward taking over child care responsibility from their daughters or daughters-in-law may be a more fundamental problem. Coupled with changing family structure and family values, a growing number of grandmothers are aware of the rest of their lives and hope to be free of family responsibilities. In fact, for many middle-aged women, the postparental period is not a time of identity crisis, but rather "a welcome opportunity for freedom and self-expression" (Cotterill, 1992, p. 614; see also Byun, H. S. et al., 2002; Sung S. R., 2002). Hence, they think that their childrearing work is over, and they express no desire to repeat it by undertaking the burden of caring for their grandchildren (Sung, S. R., 2002). Along with this trend, the availability of extended-family solutions (mainly grandmothers) for child care in dual-earner family has been diminishing.

In conclusion, all of these situations fundamentally question the basic assumption behind the Korean political motherhood: that the family is a readily available resource for child care. After all, given the extremely gendered division of child care in the Korean family and the decreasing feasibility of extended-family solutions, limited state involvement in child care service provision makes child care an extremely gendered (mother only) jigsaw puzzle that is difficult for working mothers to fit together. This forces them to quit their jobs, creating a vicious circle between career interruption and subordination of women in the labor market.

## CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Rising levels of paid employment among married women have eroded the traditional capacity of the family to provide child care and encouraged the necessity of state involvement to fill the child care gap that is, political motherhood. In this context, this study has explored the nature of Korean political motherhood through a gender lens. As we have seen so far, apart from the basic policy rhetoric of active support for reconciliation between work and family for working mothers, practically speaking, the Korean government has taken over the child care burden only to the extent that it minimizes the state's responsibility and maximizes the family's responsibility. In other words, Korean political motherhood depends on family solidarity rather than state intervention as a solution to the child care crisis in dual-earner households that is, familistic political motherhood. However, given the extremely asymmetric gender division of labor even in dual-earner families and the decreasing viability of extended-family solutions for child care, familistic political motherhood is itself extremely gendered. That is, even for working mothers, child care is identified as a mother-only responsibility. Moreover, the unregulated child care market tends to be more workable for women with higher educational attainment and higher pay than for poorer working mothers. As a result, it engenders class stratification among working mothers as well as gender stratification, whether intended or not.

To overcome the gendered nature of Korean political motherhood and to encourage gender equality in the labor market, it is necessary for the Korean government to initiate defamilialization through state initiatives. Especially in terms of the three dimensions discussed previously, policy priority needs to be placed on increasing the share of formal child care provision for infants (Lee, E. H., 2001; McKinsey & Co., 2001; Seo, M. H., 2002). As we have seen, despite pressing demands for formal care for infants and its negative implications for gender equality, the share of formal service for infants has been negligible (only 7%). Here, the expansion of public child care facilities for infants must be given policy priority (MOGE, 2004). In a similar vein, but a somewhat different approach to infant care provision, we need to look at the "childminder" system in European countries. Childminders are "private individuals who care for other people's children in their own home" (Ruggie, 1984, p. 197). In Europe, childminding as a formal child care arrangement is regulated by the government in terms of preregistration training, as well as minimum health and safety standards. Also, countries such as Sweden and France provide financial assistance to parents using registered childminders through a cash subsidy and payment of the employers' social security contribution (Windebank, 1995). In Denmark, childminders are employed by the municipality or local government (Dillon et al., 2001). Because the childminder system utilizes childminders' own houses, it does not require extra infrastructure investment, and it is quicker and cheaper in responding to infant care needs. In addition, the service hours of childminders are relatively flexible and in accordance with parents' needs. In this

sense, a publicly registered and subsidized childminding system needs to be taken into consideration as a good alternative for defamilialization of child care, especially for infants (Seo, M. H., 2002). In particular, it may lead full-time housewives into paid work even if it is done in their own houses.

Regarding the quality dimension, it is crucial to provide care services that can be trusted under strong state regulation of quality. Here, licenses or credentials need to be seriously considered (McKinsey & Co., 2001). Given that regulations are usually equated with quality, a license or credential is seen as a sign of quality, and it forces private child care facilities to meet a specific level of standards. Hence, the Korean government needs to keep in mind that "credentials or certifications would perform the same legitimacy signalling function of licensing without producing the negative effects on availability and affordability" (Mohamed et al., 1999, p. 111; see also McKinsey & Co., 2001).

To succeed in defamilialization through the policy alternatives mentioned previously, it is crucial for the Korean government to be aware of the importance of child care for gender equality and the necessity of collective provision of child care and socialization of child care cost.

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