



# Married Korean Professional Women with Children in the U.S. and in Korea: A Mix of Occupational & Immigrant Status

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## Abstract

*This qualitative research examined Korean professional women's work and family experience in Korea and in the U.S. Fourteen in-depth interviews were conducted; seven Korean immigrant women with children in the U.S. and seven Korean women with children in Korea. Immigrant status and occupational status are anchored to examine (a) how Korean women with children in a profession perceive their accumulated roles (i.e., conflict or enrichment); (b) how professional women's work influences families and vice versa; and (c) how work-family experiences are different in the U.S. and in Korea. The effort to keep work-family balance and challenges, work environment differences between U.S. and Korea, language barriers, women's self-confidence, and feeling of wholeness emerged as central themes. Work-family policies will be discussed.*

**Keywords:** Korean professional women, work and family, immigration, family policy, qualitative research

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## Introduction

More than 14.7 million Asians and Pacific Islanders live in the U.S., representing about 5 percent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), and Korean immigrants make up 10.5 percent of the Asian population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003) and 2.4 percent of the immigrants in the U.S. (O'Connor & Batalova, 2019). They are a small Asian immigrant group, but they have become a visible and significant minority through their hardworking, highly educated, and actively organized ethnic community. Korean immigrants and their experiences deserve academic attention in various ways.

Most Korean immigrants' studies have focused on small family businesses because naturalized U.S. residents from Korea show an unusually high percentage of self-employment, around 26.5 % (Oussenbec, 2004). However, there is a relatively high rate of professionals among Korean Americans, 32.9% compared to 19.9 % for Whites (Kim, Waters, & Gold, 2006).

Work and family issues are currently getting academic attention, and many theories have been developed to understand the nature of power related to resources, work-family interfaces, work-family policies, and family relation changes due to mother's employment. However, little attention has been given to the group of intersectional status; immigrant working women with children in the U.S. as well as working women with children in Korea. This study extends the research on Korean women's immigrant status and occupational status and added to the discussion of how occupation and immigration influence their experience in their marriage/family and work. I address these issues in the lives of married Korean professional women with children, focusing on how their work and family experiences are different in the U.S. and Korea.

This research focused on two main dimensions of married Korean women: immigrant status and occupational status. First, the participants in this study are (a) Korean women who completed at least their bachelor's degree in Korea and migrated to the U.S. to pursue higher degrees and now join a professional occupation in the U.S. and (b) Korean women who completed their higher degrees either in Korea or in the U.S. and now have a professional occupation in Korea. By comparing these two participant groups, I examine how immigrant factors play a role in married professional women's work and family. Second, women's employment power in professional occupations with masters or doctoral degrees is different from that in family businesses, which have focused most studies on immigrant populations. Accordingly, I examine how professional women's economic power influences their marital relationships in the U.S. compared to in Korea, where traditional Confucian values about gender and family roles are still prevalent. Finally, given women's occupational status, marital status, parental status, and immigrant status, it is expected that they perceive their multiple roles as

complicated. I also examine how married women with children in professional occupations perceive their accumulated roles in terms of conflict or enrichment work-family spillover.

## Background

### Work-Family Spillover: Conflict or Enrichment?

While many researchers have dwelt on the negative spillover of work-family tension based on the scarcity hypothesis, others have found positive aspects of work and family spillover such as enhancement, engagement, buffering, and facilitation (Poelmans, Stepanova, & Masuda, 2008). The scarcity hypothesis is that individuals have a finite amount of time and energy, so that fulfilling multiple roles in work and family leads to role overload and role conflict and results in a deteriorated quality of life (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999). From this perspective, commitment to one role detracts from the resources available to another. The conflict between family and work predicts poor job performance, poor family relationships, and lower well-being (Gareis, Barnett, Ertel & Berkman, 2009).

In contrast to the scarcity hypothesis, role accumulation, similar to the expansion hypothesis, is that multiple roles are beneficial for individuals and society and that human energy is not finite but rather recreates itself within limits (Sieber, 1974; Mark, 1977). Active engagement in one domain provides access to resources and experiences that contribute to individual fulfillment. Positive experiences obtained in one role can buffer the strain experienced in another (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). There are several antecedents of role accumulation, which leads to positive spillover. Self-esteem and self-concept/value of occupation (Carlson, Kacmar, Wayne, & Grazywacz, 2006), family support (Allen, 2001), and company culture and attitude (Andressi & Thompson, 2008) are highly associated with positive spillover. Due to the nature of professional women's occupational status and educational attainment, being involved in professional fields helps to boost their self-concept, self-esteem, and perceived job autonomy (Thompson & Werner, 1997), so, it is assumed that professional married women's accumulated roles between work and family enhance their overall satisfaction and enrich their marital relationships.

### Professional Women with Children

Studies about professional women (in medical settings, information technology, education, and managerial positions) with children have mixed findings of these two hypotheses.

A survey exploring the professional and family lives of young physicians (Sobecks et al., 1999) showed that married female physicians with children, compared to married male physicians or single physicians, perceived themselves as primary or equal caregivers for children and had primary responsibility for arranging their work schedules to accommodate childcare. They worked fewer hours and earned less. They also reported substantial limitations in their professional life because of family and were less likely than male physicians to report success in achieving their career goals. Carr et al. (1998) studied the medical faculty's career satisfaction and the relationships between family responsibility, productivity. They found that female medical faculty with children had fewer publications, slower self-perceived career progress, and lower career satisfaction than male medical faculty with children. Legault and Chasserio (2003) found that because time spent at work (presence at work) in the field of information technology (IT) is considered a career advancement factor, being at work as a team and staying longer are very critical. Professional women with children in IT have considered reducing or compressing working hours and felt that they made career sacrifices by putting less energy into work, turning down projects or promotions, working fewer hours, and so forth. However, mothers were content with these career sacrifices because they considered them unforced choices and were aware of the consequences and accepted them.

Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, and King (2002) conducted two studies (study 1: qualitative and study 2: quantitative) to examine the benefits of multiple roles for women in managerial positions. In both studies, about 80% of participants were married, and about 50% had children under 18. Women managers believed that their professional work benefited from the psychological rewards (sense of self-worth, successful coping experience in work-related issues, feeling good about their achievement), emotional and social support, and skills acquired through personal roles (handling multiple roles and self-awareness increased through motherhood implementing managerial effectiveness). This result supported the expansion hypothesis (role accumulate perspective). Their commitment to multiple roles was positively associated with general life satisfaction as well as a positive sense of self-work and self-esteem. According to Harenstam and Bejerot's (2001) study findings of professional women's work and family responsibilities in Sweden, the division of work in the family was the essential factor in evaluating whether professional women felt depleted or enriched. In the modern family model in which men and women shared domestic work and financial responsibilities equally as well as demanding jobs, married professional women were less likely to report fatigue and psychological distress. They experienced more life satisfaction than women in imbalanced family models (the woman does most of the domestic work and holds a job with the man as the primary provider / the woman does most of the domestic work and holds a job with shared financial responsibility). In the

imbalanced family models, professional women had less time for recreation on ordinary workdays and more significant work strain.

### **Korean immigrant professional women with children in the U.S.**

A growing number of Korean immigrants are working in professional areas. More than half of Korean immigrants (51%) are employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations, which is significantly higher than the overall foreign- and native-born populations (Zong & Batalova, 2017). However, most studies about Korean immigrants' occupations mainly address family businesses in Korean ethnic communities, associated with immigrant factors such as language barriers, unfamiliarity with U.S. systems, acculturation problems, and social isolation. Although wives' employment theoretically increases marital power, this power depends on the cultural context of marital relations (Min, 1998b).

Here, I need to take account of Korean professional women's cultural background, separate from their occupational status. Despite the change in Korean immigrant wives' economic roles, husbands are unlikely to change their traditional gender role attitudes. Wives' employment and husbands' traditional gender role expectations result in tremendous overwork for Korean immigrant women. The majority of Korean immigrant wives who work for pay or in the family business continue to do most of the housework and provide care for spouses, children, and extended family (Kim & Kim, 1995; Min, 1998a). Wives' employment in family businesses and husbands' traditional gender role expectations result in tremendous overwork for these Korean immigrant wives (Kim & Kim, 1995; Min, 1998a; Min, 2008; Lee, 2006). Korean immigrant wives' physical burnout due to overwork and adjustment problems in the labor force and the new Western culture that the women quickly adopt in the U.S. put tremendous strain on their marital relations.

Because of their immigrant status, it is expected that married Korean immigrant professional women would experience similar challenges just as Korean immigrant women in the family business, such as language barrier, unfamiliarity with U.S. systems, acculturation problems, and discrimination. Accordingly, it is assumed that Korean professional immigrant wives who must face both immigration barriers and traditional gender roles encounter work-family negative spillover. Therefore, in this study, I explore how Korean immigrant wives in professional occupations interpret their accumulated multiple roles between family and work under immigrant circumstances.

At the same time, however, because of their professional occupational status with higher education (doctoral or master's degree), it is also expected that Korean immigrant professional women would have different power in their family than Korean immigrant women in family businesses. Keeping in mind the combination of immigrant context and occupational context married Korean professional women are embedded in, I examine how Korean women's earning power influences their marital relationship in light of two theoretical perspectives. These two theoretical perspectives will be discussed in the next section.

To explore the immigrant factors in women's experience, I also extend this study to examine Korean professional women's experience at work in their home country of Korea. The recent family trends in Korea are very surprising. Korea has been going through radical changes as its society evolves from traditional Confucianism to Westernized culture with its influence of a high level of education and the feminist movement. Accordingly, women's employment is drastically increasing (Kim, 2005). Since there are no immigrant factors for Korean employed wives, their meaning of earning power would be different from that of Korean immigrant wives in the U.S. Thus, I aim to find the role of immigrant factors in Korean immigrants' work in the U.S. and marriage by comparing Korean professional women in Korea.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

### **Social exchange framework**

As women's participation in the labor force has increased since 1960, work and family have been core issues in understanding women's status and marital stability in contemporary society. Several theories have converged in explaining the positive association between women's employment and marital instability. Social exchange theory explains the relationships among women's resources (education and employment), independence, and marital stability. According to social exchange theory, women's higher education along with secure earning provides more power and independence, which gives women less advantage from their marriage and more alternatives when the marriage is unhappy (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2010; Kreager, Felson, Warner, & Wegner, 2013). Much research grounded in the *economic independence effect* indicates that wives' employment is not directly related to disruption in a happy marriage but is positively associated with ending a conflicted marriage (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Schoen et al., 2002). On the other hand, according to social exchange theory, women's feeling of appropriate power and independence they perceive through their higher education and secure earning bound marital relationship stronger in a happy marriage. In particular, when husbands and wives are similar in their occupation, education, and earnings, marital stability and quality are increased (Schwartz & Mare, 2005). In this study, I will focus more on

examining professional women's feeling of independence due to their occupation and earning power and how it contributes to their subjective feeling of fairness in their marriage and marital quality.

### **Symbolic interaction framework**

Korean women's earning power in the family can be understood based on symbolic interaction theory. This theory suggests that the self is constructed through a process called socialization by which individuals meet expectations about themselves as well as expectations held by society. Throughout this process, individuals gradually internalize the roles expected of themselves as well as by others and build their own identities. When individuals view their actual self as different from the ideal self (expected by themselves) or the ought-to-be self (expected by others), such difference is associated with more role strain and lower quality of role enactment (White, Klein, & Marin, 2015).

Tichenor (2005) conducted in-depth interviews with 30 couples examining the power dynamics in unconventional marriages where wives earn substantially more than husbands and thus hold substantially higher job status. In contrast to the social exchange concept (more resources give more power in the dyad dynamic), women in this study carried more traditional (ideology) gender roles and diminished their power as their income exceeded their husband's. For example, women in this study had their husbands make economic decisions and did more gendered domestic work to meet conventional role expectations. Polasky and Holahan (1998) studied 103 professional married women with young children and identified the psychological and psychosocial factors that underlie the process of coping with the inter-role conflict between women's parental and professional roles. Professional women with young children sensed societal expectations about their dual roles as mothers and professionals and believed that others hold them responsible for fulfilling their traditional responsibilities in the maternal role. Thus, professional women in this study used superwoman coping strategies to meet ought-to-be roles instead of using a structural role redefinition coping strategy (active attempts to renegotiate role demands and involve others in fulfilling role demands). The use of the superwomen coping strategy was positively associated with depression, but the use of structural role redefinition coping strategy was positively associated with greater perceived control and well-being for professional women with children. Maume (2006) found similar results that women's decision (among dual-earner couples with children) to prioritize work and family obligations was made based on gender traditionalism rather than egalitarianism.

These findings are in line with studies on minority women in Korean immigrant women who recently migrated to the U.S. Given that there is a tendency for Korean immigrants to concentrate in small family businesses, Korean immigrant women who work in these businesses are disadvantaged in power and status as their labor contribution goes directly to the family income, not to their income (Lee, 2006; Pak, 2006). This tendency is supported by an income effect of women's employment among low-income couples. That is, women's employment helps to maintain marital stability by providing economic security (Sayer & Bianchi, 2000). In most studies about Korean immigrant women and work in the U.S., the income effect was more evident.

In this study, the target participants, married Korean professional women with children, are a mixture of two aspects: immigrant status and occupational status. Their immigrant status is associated with traditional Eastern gender roles constructed by their native society, while their occupational status is associated with their resource and power leading to economic independence. In this study, I examine how professional occupations affect Korean immigrant women's interpretation of earning power and marital relations under immigrant circumstances and how professional occupations affect Korean women's experience in Korea without immigrant factors.

### **Policies for Professional Women with Children**

Teasdale (2012) conducted interviews with 16 professional women with/without children in the U.K. and asserted that family policy, especially flexible working policies and practices (part-time working, job-sharing, compressed hours, home working, term-time working and reduced hours), should be understood in the context of the organization. In a gendered work organization (that is the term that can be easily alternately used as the ideal male worker model), if professional women with children want to advance, they adopt traditional strategies, such as acting like a work-centered or unencumbered worker by purchasing childcare and domestic services (Wajcman, as cited in Teasdale, 2012). If professional women with children choose to combine work and family life, they choose to work below their professional capabilities in less demanding jobs (Hakim, as cited in Teasdale, 2012). In addition, the relationship with co-workers is an important factor in understanding flexible working policy, especially in organizations requiring team-work and shift work. While flexible working policy benefits working mothers, it is at the cost of their childless colleagues and colleagues with older children because they have to work longer hours to cover workloads of colleagues with children (Lewis, 1997; Teasdale, 2012). Thus, how a flexible working policy is fairly implemented could be a concern among co-workers, so this policy practice should be studied in the organizational context (Teasdale, 2012).

Dengate (2016) reviewed the literature about family policies in the low-wage and high-wage work contexts to see how flexible working policy and maternity leave policy work for low-wage income mothers and high-wage income mothers. Higher-wage jobs include professional/managerial positions (e.g., doctor, lawyer, academic, and business and finance professional). Flexibility is defined as “the ability of workers to make choices influencing when, where, and for how long they engage in work-related tasks” (Hill et al., 2008, p. 152), including the ability to work fewer hours, compressed work, flex-time, job share arrangements and working from home. Compared to low-wage mothers, high-wage mothers have more flexible options, but they do not utilize these options without constraints. Beyond their work hours, professional women with children are less likely to be able to socialize and respond to sudden workplace demands (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014).

Professionals work in the context of masculine ideal worker norms, such as long work hours, being on-site, and providing face-time (Dengate, 2016). In male-dominated jobs (law or medicine), women were more likely to be forced out because the nature of their work requiring an increased number of weekly work hours and pressure and ambiguous boundaries between work and non-work (Stone, 2013). Stone (2013) emphasized that these women opted out for the family by quitting a male model work and ignorance about reality. Even when flexible policy options were available, professional women with children believed that these options were not for them because they were related to career penalties, such as lower performance evaluations or a reduced chance of promotion (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). In both the U.S. and Canada, professional women had more chances to access leave benefits than lower-wage counterparts because of their criteria, such as highly educated and skilled, high income, working full-time, working for large employers, and working in the public sector (Dengate, 2016). However, Dengate also stated that professional women’s accessibility to leave policy is dependent on being employed in more permanent positions.

In Korea, work-family policies have advanced noticeably in less than ten years and are quite advanced compared to those in the U.S. Ninety-day maternity leave with full wages for the first sixty days and partial or full wages for the remaining thirty days as well as childcare leave for up to one year until the child’s sixth birthday is mandated (Chin et al., 2012). However, due to the Korean cultural and working environment, these policies are not available for all working mothers in practice. In Korea, authority hierarchies governed by traditional gender role ideology are strong in the workplace, and the traditional notion that women’s earnings are supplementary, and that women’s primary responsibilities are childcare and child education is still prevalent. In a study of full-time mothers in Korea (Jung & Heppner, 2015), one woman had to quit her job after marriage because the organization assigned her tasks that were too easy or too hard and were not related to her skills. She knew that those assignments were silent signs forcing her to quit the job.

In reviewing the policies for professional women with children, job context is critical. Gordon and Whelan (1998) studied 36 professional women in midlife to see how organizations effectively understand and respond to their challenges. They found 17 percent of the women left their organizations because they perceived extreme inflexibility or discrimination in their organization or by their boss. After leaving the organizations, not only did women need extra work to adjust to new professional identities and exploration and adaptation, but the organizations also risked losing experienced skilled workers and increasing costs related to recruiting and training the replacement. Gordon and Whelan suggested that family policies and practices should be revised to encourage professional women with children to act entrepreneurially about their careers and organizations, move women into top management, address women’s needs for balance and achievement, and allocate rewards to keep women motivated. They also suggested that it is imperative to change organizational culture and attitudes toward women who effectively and creatively juggle mutable roles, value their work, and build supports networking and leadership roles for women.

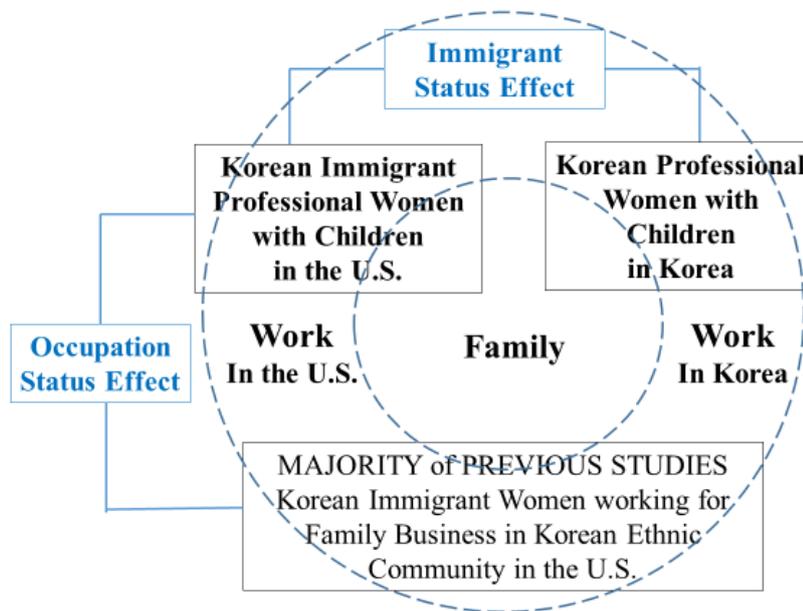
## Methodology

Purposive sampling or criterion-based sampling is used to recruit participants who are able to provide rich narratives for in-depth examination (Few, 1999). Seven married Korean professional women with children completed interviews during 2007, and seven married Korean immigrant professional women with children completed interviews during 2008. All participants met the following criteria: They (a) are between 35 and 60 years old, (b) were born and raised in Korea, completed their bachelor’s degree in Korean, and migrated to the U.S. (for Korean immigrant women criteria); (c) currently are married to a Korean man and have at least one child; (d) earned a master’s degree or higher; and (e) are currently employed in a profession (e.g., college professors, researchers, lawyers, etc.).

The following questions guide this study:

1. How do married Korean immigrant professional women with children in the U.S. describe their work, family, economic power, and overall well-being?
2. How do married Korean professional women with children in Korea describe their work, family, economic power, and overall well-being?

3. How does immigrant status and occupation status affect Korean professional women’s interpretation of work, family, and life satisfaction?



<Figure 1: Conceptual Map>

**Participants’ Background**

***Korean immigrant professional women with children (KIPW)***

Seven women in the U.S. participated in in-depth interviews. Three had completed a Ph. D (employed as college professors, a researcher in government institution), two women completed a Master’s degree (researchers), one was a lawyer, and one was a dentist. Their average age was 40 years. Three had one child, three had two children, and one woman had three children.

***Korean professional women with children (KPW)***

Seven women living in Korea participated in in-depth interviews. Three had completed a Ph. D in the U.S. and returned to work in Korea (two are professors and one is a researcher in the Korea National Assembly), four have a master’s degree (an analyst, directors of a finance company and IT company). Their average age was 39.4 years old. Three of the women had one child, and four had two children.

		Occupation	Education	Age	# of Children (age)	Husband Education
Korean immigrant professional Women with Children in U.S. (KIPW)	Participant A	Professor	Ph. D.	35	1 (8)	Ph. D.
	Participant B	Computer programmer	Master	59	3 (31, 29, 25)	Ph. D.
	Participant C	Dentist	D.M.D.	38	2 (9, 6)	Ph. D.
	Participant D	Lawyer	JD	40	1 (13)	Master
	Participant E	Professor	Ph.D.	38	2 (4, 2)	Bachelor
	Participant F	Clinical Dietician	Master	30	1 (5 month)	Bachelor
	Participant G	Science Researcher	Ph. D / Post-Doc	43	2 (7, 2)	Master
Korean professional Women with Children in Korea (KPW)	Participant K	Legislative researcher	Ph. D	35	2 (7, 3)	Ph. D
	Participant L	Professor	Ph. D	34	2 (6, 3)	Ph. D
	Participant M	Computer Engineering Manager	Master	35	2 (5, 3)	Master
	Participant N	Professor	Ph. D	55	1 (16)	Bachelor
	Participant O	Director	Master	47	2 (13, 15)	Ph. D
	Participant P	Finance Analysisist	Master	31	1(18 month)	Master
	Participant Q	Director	Master	38	1 (6)	Bachelor

<Table 1: Participant Demographic Background>

## Data Analysis

Since qualitative research designs are prompted by the researcher's interest in the local contexts, insights, or explanatory schemes related to real world problems (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003), the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in qualitative research (Marriam et al., 2002). In grounded theory, the researcher simultaneously collects and analyzes data. At least a two-step data coding process entails initial or open coding and selective or focused coding (Charmaz, 2002). After the constant comparative method of grounded theory is used, patterns and assembled structures are identified (Charmaz, 2002). Along with using grounded theory analysis, I use Alexander's (1988) nine principles of salience for sorting data. These principles are primacy, frequency, uniqueness, negation, emphasis, omission, error or distortion, isolation, and incompleteness. The transcripts of the interviews were the principal data sources of this study.

## Emerging Themes

### Korean Immigrant Professional Women with Children in the U.S.

#### Why this job? Reasons to choose and stay in current occupations

Korean immigrant professional women (KIPW) had focused on how they chose the current occupations and how they performed the works in their narratives. KIPW had a vast awareness of gender inequality and said that it would be very problematic if there was a sign of unfair evaluation of their work performance based on gender. However, not because of their gender, but because of their being married and having children, KIPW sometimes had to limit activities at work. Some women had experienced giving up opportunities to move up to higher positions or grow in their careers because they were married women with children (ren). Some had to avoid occupations and positions that required frequent travel or extended hours.

KIPW in this study had searched for jobs near where their husbands took work, except for Participant A whose husband migrated to the U. S. after her because she wanted to continue her education in the U.S. Participant C and Participant D had careers in Korea as a dentist and as a high school teacher, but followed their husbands who sought further education or career in the U.S. and had to begin their education again to pursue another degree for their professional work in the U.S. Participant C said she was still very sorry for her patients because she had had her colleagues take over her patients before coming to the U.S. Their specialty as a dentist and a teacher in Korea were not acceptable to work in the U.S so that both women had gone through some unaccustomed works, as a researcher at the lab where she had never studied before or as an office worker, until they got a degree in the U. S., but they took this experience very positively because they thought the new experience in the U.S. gave a base of their current occupation. In order to get a job in the area where her husband worked, Participant B changed her major and earned her master's degree. Although she was not quite satisfied with her work, she said she believed it was the right decision because her major and degree helped her keep the position and, most importantly, raise her three children. Participant E decided to stay in her current work because it allowed her to take care of her children the way she wanted to. She was able to breastfeed both of her children for one year while working and did not even have to pump milk to save for later. She was able to stay with her children by changing her work schedule and adjusting her husband's schedule. At the time of the interview, her four-year-old was attending preschool, and her two-year-old was with her. She had also adopted two nephews from Korea and raised them as her own. When she was asked about whether work and family boundaries were ambiguous or stressful, she said she tried to set clear psychological boundaries distinguishing work and family matters. She was enjoying doing both things at the same time under her current circumstances.

All KIPW said that their decisions about occupations were voluntary; no one forced them to do it. Therefore, most women did not feel their situation was unfair, but they did feel sorry about the situation.

#### Working environments

The starkest contrast between the U.S. and Korea was found in the theme of working environments. Work schedules for professional married women in the U.S. were quite flexible. Participant E was able to breast-feed her first and second child for one year each and kept the first child with her until he was three years old with the cooperation of her department chair and husband's flexible work schedule. For all KIPW, child illness was excused in their work as long as they do not abuse the excuse, Participant G said. The boss of Participant G complained about her missing work due to child sickness, telling her that "you are acting like you are the only mom in the world," but this did not intimidate her or make her worry about her evaluation because she believed that her absences did not delay the progress of her work. Participant A, a professor, sometimes had to bring her child to her office when the child was sick, but her colleagues and students welcomed her. When Participant C was not available to care for her sick children, her husband took the children to his office with sleeping bags. She said with a laugh that kids made themselves very comfortable in their father's office.

Participants attended parent-teacher conferences and any other important events held at school. They were not able to volunteer at their children's school or go birthday parties as stay-at-home mothers did for their children, but they thought their children understood this and it did not make them less motherly. Participant F, a clinical dietician, seemed to take time off very freely whenever she needed to, especially related to her baby. Because her job did not require any teamwork, her flexible use of time never affected her colleagues' schedules. She thought that was why her colleagues could be so supportive of her. She said she might quit her current job to visit Korea to see her parents and spend some time with them. She did not expect to have trouble getting a new job because of her specialized expertise.

### **Childcare and domestic work**

One participant had lived with a mother-in-law since she had started working, but the other six women in the U.S. managed their household work with their husbands. They sometimes needed the help of a part-time paid nanny, but it was quite temporary and not often. None of the women managed their household work to their satisfaction, but they found a middle ground where they and their husbands mutually assisted each other. Depending on availability and flexibility at their work, either the mother or the father took care of the children and took turns missing work when the children were sick. The couples did child care and domestic work according to their work schedule or workloads, not their traditional gender role ideology.

Participants C, D, and G described their relationship with their husbands as a team. Participant D said,

We are always working as a team, we have to... at the office [law firm] as well as at home. We *constantly* (emphasis added) talk about things, such as my child's schedule, work schedule, things to do, etc. ... We do not have [extended] family members here to help us. Although they are willing to come over from Korea and help me, especially my mom... she visited one time and saw how I lived... because she did not know anything here, she could not help me ... Rather, I had to take care of her ... gave her a ride wherever she needed to go and translated for her ... We [husband and I] rather would work without their help. We have to be a team to get things done.

Although the women said they were a team, none of the women was satisfied with her husband's domestic work performance. They thought that this had nothing to do with the husband's willingness to help because they said that their husbands had no idea what to do without being instructed. The husbands did household work when/what they were told to do. Some women gave their husbands to-do lists or kept telling them what they should do, or they sometimes gave up asking for help. No one expected an equal share of domestic work and childcare. They seemed to believe that an equal share was impossible, but they found a (subjective) fair share. One participant loved to cook and considered her kitchen to be her own space where her husband could not enter, but she requested her husband to do the rest of the domestic chores together.

### **Korean Professional Women with Children in Korea**

#### **Challenges professional women experienced in Korea**

Korean professional women (KPW) focused on the challenges in their works in their narratives.

Two KPW in the field of IT said that they had to give up the opportunity for promotion because their jobs entailed out-of-state projects. They had to give male colleagues the projects because their children were too young to be separated from them. Participant M said,

...I felt so sorry about my situation [giving up the project because of young children]...I thought I really fit in the project and was capable and confident to carry it successfully... but I had to say NO... rejected the project... [because] I needed to be with my kids... they were too young, and my husband was too busy... I cannot put them under my parents' care again...My parents already did too much for me...

Participant O also had the same experience. She said she accepted the reality and believed that there would be another way she could prove her effort at work. Participant O added she never received low evaluation due to her decision; rather, she was very fortunate to have bosses who understood her situation and supported the decision. She emphasized that she was one of the luckier ones.

Participant K quit a job that had better pay and more prestige to move to a current job so that she could have a more regular work schedule and be closer to home to take care of her children:

My husband, a professor, helped me a lot... We both had studied in the U.S. [for doctoral degree] and learned to share domestic chores and child care. But in Korea, we had to work more and longer, so one of us had to reduce the workload. I loved my previous job but the schedule was irregular and the workload was demanding but the pay was way better... I have to move to this job... My parents-in-law [who mostly took care of kids] and my husband are happy, and my kids like it... so I am content, too.

Participant N, a professor, avoided attending international conferences because of the feeling of obligation to her family. Participant N had been commuting to her work, staying three days at her work and returning home during the rest of the week. It took 3 hours to get to her work by express train. Her mother took care of her children and all domestic work while participant N at work. She said, "That is a wife who is expected to locate (to find her job) where her husband job is, but also that is a wife who is expected to commute when she gets a job distance from their home," because her husband had never tried to search for a job to move close to her work. She had been commuting for more than ten years, although it put tremendous strain on her work and family.

### **Working environment**

The work environment in Korea was quite different from that in the U.S. Overall, people in Korea work longer than people in the U.S. According to OECD Hours Worked data (2018), Korean worked 2,093 hours per year, compared to 1,782 in the U.S. in 2013; 2,024 hours in Korea and 1,780 hours in the U.S. in 2017. People in both countries worked longer than countries in OECD, an average of 1,759 hours in 2017. Accordingly, KPW worked longer and spent less time with families than KPIW in the U.S.

In addition, the physical working environment was quite different. When I visited Participant M's office for the interview, I found no family-related materials in her office, such as a child's picture. Later, I found no family-related items in the other participant's office, either. Participant M said, "I did not hang family pictures in my office or on the desk because my boss would think that I am thinking about my kids all day long." When their child was sick, they did not tell anyone about it because worrying about a sick child did not look professional. Family members or nannies took sick children to the doctor and cared for them. When Participant P returned home from work one day, her 18-month-old child turned his back on her because he was upset that she was not with him when he ran a high fever all day.

Participant M and Participant P usually work overtime due to the nature of their work, IT areas. When they had to go home to take care of children, they took their work home with them, finished it over-night, and brought it early in the morning the next day. Participant M said she did so without complaint because her female boss always did the same thing to compete with male colleagues.

Participant K's husband usually took their children to doctor's appointments because his work schedule was more flexible than hers. Then, her husband's colleagues teased him about doing women's work and criticized his wife's laziness. She said, "they are the highly-educated ones, should be opinion leaders in our society, but ... act confined by traditional gender role ideology. It is not just mother's working condition; it is also the husband's working condition to influence work and family."

### **Childcare and domestic work**

In contrast to KIPW, all Korean professional women with children (KPW) were assisted by family members or paid helpers (part-time or full-time). The main reason they have assistance in their homes was the geographical proximity to their parents, and cheaper labor in Korea than in the U.S. Primary support came from their or their husbands' parents. One woman hired a nanny and had her mother supervise the nanny. Another reason for seeking a third party's assistance was their work environments; longer working hours and less friendly working condition.

Although husbands of KPW were not involved in childcare and domestic chores as much as husbands of KIPW, KPW's husbands did *some* domestic work and childcare. KPW husbands did not have the same concepts of shared responsibility as the husbands of KIPW had, maybe due to handy formal or informal assistance. Four KPW participants complained that their husbands thought they should take care of child(ren) only while their wives were at work. As soon as the wives returned from work, the husbands stopped taking care of the child(ren). Thus, wives had no time for rest after work. In addition, because most KPW relied on their (husband's) parents to take care of the children, they felt some psychological burden to compensate for their parents' help by spending time together during the weekend even when they were paying their parents for their assistance. During weekends, KPW were expected to carry traditional daughter-in-law's duties, which led to more physical and emotional fatigue. Participant N had lived with her mother who had full responsibility for domestic chores and childcare, so that their husbands were never involved in any domestic works. Her husband mostly kept the traditional gender role and was not content with ideas of household work division at all.

KPW's work environment was quite different according to their occupation. KPW in the education field were relatively flexible in their schedule than KPW in the IT field. Unlike other KPW, Participant L, a professor,

was able to spend evening time with her children and her husband. She said, “(in the evening), I do most of the house chores by myself because I am better at it. My husband is trying to help sometimes, but it is not quite effective.” One day, her six-year-old son waked his husband up and requested to help her while she prepared dinner. She said,

...at elementary school, students were required to read the *Piggybook* (by Anthony Brown), and my son worried that his daddy might be turned into a pig as in the book because my husband always lies down on the couch watching TV while I do chores (although we both get home from work). So now, I expect my son will help me do some chores...

## **Immigrant Status and Occupation Status Effect on Korean Professional Women’s Life**

### **Language barriers**

Language barriers were one of the main themes in Korean immigrant women’s narratives. Women who worked on a team were especially concerned about their language skills. Most women felt isolated due to their lack of communication skills. Participant B, who was the only non-native English speaker on her team, reported,

Suppose there was a miscommunication. If we all speak in Korean, we would conclude we misunderstand each other. But in my work, they concluded that it was my fault... When discussing an assigned task, I do not have any problem and can manage it *if* (emphasis added) there is a communication problem. However, when talking about other than work, such as football, local food, etc., it is really hard to jump in [to the middle of a conversation].

Participant C, a dentist, had a hard time doing resident internship because the job required speed in presenting oral reports, and the faculty and her colleagues were not quite patient with her. She said that she overcame language barriers with her diligence, strong commitment to work, and cooperation with other colleagues. She said with a laugh that she never had problems with patients because (she thought) they had to understand what she said to them.

In education settings, Participant A and Participant E said that some students challenged participants in a disrespectful manner due to their language issues, but the department chairs were usually on their side, supporting KIPW and encouraging them to find better ways to communicate with students. They said that it made them depressed, but it did not make them feel incompetent. Most of the time, the problems arose from cultural differences, not from the language itself. With trial and error and constant feedback from students and the chairs of the departments, they were in the process of resolving those issues.

Participant D, a lawyer, said it was extremely hard to complete her degree and get a license because of language problems. She said she was pleased to be able to work for Korean immigrants who had minimal English fluency since she had already experienced how hard it was to learn a new language.

### **Economic independence**

Unexpectedly, economic independence was not the primary concern throughout the interviews. None of the participants considered their earnings to be the main resource in their family nor incentive for their independence. They believed that their husbands’ occupations were the primary, and theirs were secondary. Even those who earned more than their husbands said it did not give them any negotiable power in their marital relationships. They appreciated the money they could contribute to the family but did not think of their income as a source of the power of independence. Most of the women were sincerely committed to their families.

### **Attitude toward self, family, and work**

**Self-confidence.** Most participants showed a solid and positive sense of self. Those who had their own area of expertise (professors, lawyers, dentists, and researchers) and were satisfied with their current occupations showed high self-confidence in their narratives and gestures. Although one participant living in the U.S. was not satisfied with her current position, she was not looking for another position soon. All the participants in the U.S. were influenced by some immigrant factors, including language barriers, unfamiliarity with U.S. systems, acculturation problems, and social isolation. Some of them felt disadvantaged because their colleagues sometimes abused the fact that they were not native speakers. Because they were not familiar with the system and culture, they were not easily integrated into the groups at work they belonged to. Nevertheless, they overcame intimidating feelings of incompetence. One said,

I cannot speak English as they [the natives] do. I try to improve my English, but they cannot hear what I say as long as they close their minds. If they open their mind, I'm sure they can hear me without any problem. This is the thing I have to accept and ignore their treatment...

Most of them felt sorry about the lack of social relationships in their work; at the same time, they said it was also true that they do not have enough time for socializing because they did not have enough time even for their family and their assigned work.

KPW in Korea showed a different type of confidence due to cultural or societal influences. They talked in a subtle manner about their achievement, not quite overt. Participant O said that there is always someone to help her at her workplace and give her opportunities to work continuously. She was very grateful for her career opportunities and her husband's and children's help in getting her to this position. Women at the entry-level of their profession were not entirely satisfied with their current performance and strived to be more successful in their area of expertise. Participant C showed a desire to be perfect at her work and in her family, especially raising her children.

Most of the women in this study, both KIPW and KPW, rarely had time for themselves for leisure or time with friends for fun. They always lacked time. Participant E recently began playing tennis in the Korean community and said it was a breath of fresh air in her life. Participant C taught Korean at a Korean language school for Korean-American children in her community every Saturday and taught Sunday school in a Korean ethnic church. She said she did not have enough time to prepare for two different activities, but her participation was very meaningful to her and gave her hope that her children would learn Korean culture and developed an ethnic identity as Korean Americans. She also said proudly that her participation motivated many Korean stay-at-home mothers to become involved in Korean ethnic activities.

**Wholeness.** If the women were concerned only with their work performance, they would have felt sorry that they could not compete with males or single women because they are mothers who have a primary responsibility to take care of their children. If they were concerned about meeting the image of a perfect wife and mother, they would feel sorry that they were not taking care of their children and household chores as perfectly as a stay-at-home mother. However, rather than feeling overwhelmed by their imperfection in either role, they viewed work-family as a whole and appreciated what they are doing in being professional women and having a family at the same time. None of the women put their occupation before their family or thought that family responsibilities were preventing their success at work, even though each one had experienced some loss of chances to move up the ladder because of their status as mothers. Participant A said,

I would not be happy if I had only my degree [Ph. D] and my job without my own family. I also would not be happy if I stayed home for my family and did not have my own work. Once I tried to be a stay-at-home mother, but I gave up in six months and decided to go to a graduate school. It does not mean that I do not value my family or underestimate stay-at-home mothers. I admire stay-at-home mothers because I know I am not able to do so... In my family, I am not a perfect mother or a wife because of obligations at work. At work, I don't think I am able to perform as perfectly as I wish to be as a professional because of my family responsibilities, but I should accept it. I think we [married professional women] should not divide work and family into two worlds separately ... should put them into one. *I considered my work and my family as a whole instead of two separate spheres* (emphasis added).

## Discussion and Conclusion

This qualitative research examined Korean professional women's work and family experiences in the U.S. and Korea. Several points draw academic attention regarding work and family.

First, how Korean professional women with children in the U.S. and in Korea balanced their work and family were examined. Most of the participants in this study kept strong boundaries between work and family and tried not to spill over negatively. They have a strong sense of control in both areas. Self-esteem and value about their occupation (Carlson et al., 2006) are positively associated with positive spillover. In this study, the participants' professional work experience boosted their self-esteem and matured them as a person, which especially helped the relationship with colleagues at their workplaces. They highly valued both families and work because it enriched their quality of life and encompassed things happening around them as a whole. Although a desire for perfection rarely gave them time to relax or enjoy leisure, their overall life satisfaction through work achievement and family life was quite high. They weighed their family over their occupation and advised the next generation of professional women with children to do the same. They did miss having a community they could be involved in and hoped that a network for professional women with children would be built and be active online and off-line.

Second, a family-friendly environment and flexibility were the most critical factors that enabled women to balance work and family. However, as numerous researchers (Dengate, 2016; Hill, et al., 2008; Stone & Hernandez, 2013; Williams, Blair-Loy & Berdahl, 2013) have found, flexibility can be an advantage to working mothers can be a disadvantage to their co-workers. Most of the professional women in this study worked on their own schedules, so their flexibility had less impact on their co-workers. Nevertheless, the flexible policy must be examined regarding how it impacts other co-workers' burden or schedule. Compared to KIPW, KPW were more challenged to balance work and family because of their working contexts, such as authority hierarchies, traditional notions about mothers' working as supplementary, and the need for a longer time spent at work. Although the contents of policies for working mothers in Korea are somewhat more progressive than those in the U.S., the reality seems to lag. It is imperative that awareness about gender equality and societal attitudes toward working mothers and their husbands must be in accordance with the family policies.

Third, I examined the participants' work and family issues from theoretical perspectives. From the social exchange theoretical perspective, as Schwartz and Mare (2005) examined in their study that women's feeling of appropriate power and independence bound marital relationship stronger in a happy marriage, married Korean professional women in this study experienced similarly. Their work expertise gave them a feeling of control in their work and contentment in their family. Their secure occupation through their education and expertise are valuable resources in negotiating their household chores with their husbands. Most husbands who were similar to their wives in their occupation, education, and earnings, which are also factors that predict the higher quality of marital life (Schwartz & Mare, 2005), showed an egalitarian attitude and took their wives' aspiration about their occupation very seriously.

From the symbolic theoretical perspective, Korean professional women cared less about how culture and society traditionally expected them to behave as mothers and wives. They defined their roles very clearly as professional workers as well as mothers and wives. Knowing the boundaries between work and family helped them not to spillover in negative ways. They also did not put high role expectations on their spouses and themselves and modestly evaluated their role performance. They were ready to negotiate roles and duties and were satisfied with a subjective feeling of fairness. Most of all, they considered their life as a whole, not weighed too heavily on either work or family.

There are limitations to this study. First, although the Korean professional women with children in the U.S. and in Korea were selected from a screened narrow pool considering marital status with children, educational level, and immigrant status, there were still variations in their professions and their children's ages. Women working in educational settings had the most flexible and the most family-friendly working conditions because they mostly work alone, whereas women in IT had the least flexible working conditions because of the need to work as a team and an authority hierarchy. It is to be expected that participants from a similar professional occupation pool will have more congruent results. In addition, although most participants in this study had under age 10, given that previous studies showed that preschool age is the most demanding period for parents, selecting participants whose children are under age five may lead to more significant findings of how professional women with children balance between work and family.

It is hoped that this qualitative study contributes to a more in-depth understanding of Korean professional women's lives in the U.S. and in Korea. Since this study's focus is extended to married Korean immigrant professional women, it is also hoped that the findings will contribute to the development of programs for immigrant/minority women in workplaces and their families.

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