

The socialization of childcare and a missed opportunity through path dependence:  
the case of South Korea

**Abstract**

The paper aims to investigate how the policy proposal to socialize childcare in South Korea has been discarded by the Ministry of Gender Equality (MGE) under the Roh Moo-hyun government (2003-2007). Building on in-depth interviews and policy documents, the paper proposes that there was a policy shift in the MGE's policy adoption resulting from the combined effects of path dependence and the dominance of neo-liberal policy ideas. I argue that these existing political realities hindered socialization efforts even when there was recognition of the need for public childcare provision within and outside the MGE.

*Key words: socialization of childcare in South Korea, path dependence, Ministry of Gender Equality, privatization of care*

## **Introduction**

South Korea is an interesting case for those scholars interested in the politics of social investment. When we look at the percentage of children (from birth to 5 years old) in formal childcare, South Korea has demonstrated a substantial increase -- going from a laggard to a strong performer among OECD countries. For example, the enrolment rate of under-threes in formal childcare there increased by nearly 300 percent between 2003 and 2010 (OECD 2011; Estevez-Abe and Kim 2014; Estevez-Abe and Naldini 2016; S-h, Lee 2016). However, most of the growth in childcare provision happened in the publicly subsidized private sector in South Korea (S-h, Lee 2016). Most scholarship on the recent expansion of childcare services in South Korea tends to focus on the volume and rarely studies why some countries choose a particular form of private-public mix (Estevez-Abe and Kim 2014; Estevez-Abe and Naldini 2016). This paper contributes to the literature by delving into the politics that determines why a country chooses the provision of publicly provided services as opposed to private services or vice versa. Because it is an important case where provision of childcare services has grown dramatically, this paper focuses on the politics of childcare expansion in South Korea.

More specifically, this paper investigates how policy proposals aimed at expanding public provisions of childcare services were discarded by the Ministry of Gender Equality (hereafter referred to as MGE) in favor of policies that promoted the growth of private services. This paper focuses on MGE because, during the Roh Moo-hyun government (2003-2007), the jurisdiction over childcare was transferred from the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) to the MGE. The decision had much to do with President Roh Moo-hyun's desire to increase the state's responsibility in providing childcare as well as in promoting gender equality. The childcare provision in Korea is generally served by two different types of facilities -- day care nurseries and kindergartens. The former is for children from birth to five years old and provides basic infant and early childcare currently under the MHW; the latter is for children from three to five years old and functions

according to educational laws concerning elementary and secondary schools under the Ministry of Education. As this paper only focuses on the former, if one considers the number of children using day care nurseries in 2002, nearly 90% of them were enrolled in some form of private day care service, for which parents often paid more than twice as much as for public alternatives (MHW 2002). In recognition of the high cost of private childcare, the government reaffirmed state commitment to childcare with a policy slogan of “*gonggongsung*,” which means “the reinforcement of publicly funded and provided day nursery childcare services.” Instead of expanding the supply of public childcare facilities, the MGE introduced the “basic subsidy scheme,” which extends the governmental subsidy to children who used the childcare services not only in the public childcare facilities but also in the private. As a consequence, this public subsidy scheme promoted a dramatic growth of the private sector in the Korean childcare market while it did very little to increase public childcare services (Baek 2009; J-h, Kim 2004, 2006). This paper examines how the MGE initially embraced the idea of expanding public childcare provision, but instead discarded the idea and opted for promoting private services.

This paper is organized into six sections. The following second section provides an overview of childcare policy development in South Korea during the last two decades. Sections three and four then present the analytical framework and explain the methodology adopted in this paper. Section five presents the evidence based on in-depth interviews of policymakers and policy documents. Section six briefly concludes. To put it briefly, this paper attributes the shift in the MGE’s policy adoption to the combined effects of path dependence and the dominance of neo-liberal policy ideas.

### **The childcare policy developments in South Korea since the early 2000s**

Childcare has become a vital policy issue in South Korea since the early 2000s because of changes in family types and a large drop in fertility rates. In particular, the low fertility rate caused a big shock when it dropped to 1.08 in 2003. Many explained Korea’s

low fertility rate in terms of its polarized labor market and gender discrimination in the labor market (Y-m, Kim 2006, 2010; Kwon 2002; Korean Women's Development Institute 2000). Clearly, traditional assumptions about gender roles, based on families consisting of male breadwinners and female housewives, were challenged by new socio-economic realities. Given the traditional norm of childcare being the mothers' responsibility, the public provision of childcare services was underdeveloped in South Korea. In 2002, the publicly funded and provided day nurseries comprised only 6% of total provision, whereas the rest of the childcare centers were run by private owners such as legal corporations or individual providers (MHW 2002). Overall, there were seven types of childcare centers available, categorized by ownership: national/public, legal corporation, incorporated organizations, center-based individual, home-based individual, parents cooperative, and workplace-based. Whereas the first two (national/public and legal corporations) are categorized as publicly funded and provided childcare centers that are run not-for-profit by the state, local governments, or social welfare corporations, the remainder are deemed to be private childcare centers since they are profit-making.

These figures contrast widely with the extent of public childcare provision in Sweden, where a public guarantee of universal access to high quality childcare meant that more than 70% of children were enrolled in publicly subsidized childcare centers in the late 1990s (Skolverket 1998, cited in Bergqvist and Nyberg 2002). Similarly, the contribution of public expenditure toward childcare as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) reveals the extent of the role of the public sector. This was only 0.1% in South Korea in 2002 while it was 1.0% in Sweden, 0.8% in the UK, 0.4% in Germany and 0.3% in Japan for the same year (OECD 2013).

This lack of publicly funded and provided childcare provision in South Korea can be explained by the predominance of the private sector in the care market -- providers owned by incorporated corporations or individuals who pursue profits. For example, in 2002, nearly 86% of total childcare facilities were run by private providers such as incorporated

organizations, center- or home-based individuals, while only 6% were run by publicly funded and provided childcare facilities and 7% by legal corporations (MHW 2003, 2015). This predominance of private childcare provision has the side effects of poor service quality, relatively high childcare cost, poor working conditions for care workers, and, as a result, low levels of satisfaction expressed by parents (J-h, Kim 2003, 2004).

The Roh government (2003-2007) was determined to rectify the lack of public childcare and the aforementioned problems in the private sector. The government coined the slogan of “the alleviation of the burden of caring within a family and the provision of high quality of childcare services” and tried to expand social care-related expenditures (The Presidential Counsel of the Policy Planning Committee 2007). This was often described with the political rhetoric of “*gonggongsung*,” which, in general terms, means “the reinforcement of publicly funded and provided day nursery childcare services.” Therefore, the rhetoric of “*gonggongsung*” implied a clear policy orientation in favor of socialization of care by means of expansion of the public sector both in spending and service provision.

In line with this, the Presidential Committee on Ageing and Future Society (PCAFS) within the Roh administration announced its First Childcare Support Policy in 2004, which served as the foundation for the expansion of childcare policies (Baek and Seo 2004). This policy announcement stipulated the principle of sharing responsibility for the costs of childcare between central and local governments and parents. The proposal specified the state’s share of the payments and this policy shift was accelerated with the transfer of the jurisdiction of childcare from the MHW to the MGE.

Specifically, the MGE introduced a “basic subsidy scheme,” which applied to both public and private sectors, so that the financial support was extended to those children who used the services not only in the public but also in the private spheres. In fact, prior to this, government involvement had been limited to funding publicly provided childcare facilities,

which comprised only 6% of total facilities in 2002. This funding covered the operating expenses of public facilities and care workers' salaries. For the private sector, only home-based individual centers, amounting to 36% of the total in 2002, received government subsidies. However, the state contribution only covered 10% of care worker salary costs in each center (MHW 2004, 120-143).

With the political rhetoric of "*gonggongsung*," the basic subsidy support was to be extended from simply covering public provision to covering a portion of the cost for young children attending private childcare facilities. Although this announcement also included the planned extension of graded support for children, which aimed to increase the number of children in a family that could be eligible for financial aid, this is not the focus of this paper. The basic subsidy has been fiercely contested over time regarding whether it has actually driven the growth of the private childcare centers by, in effect, subsidizing them. A great number of questions have been widely voiced such as, who provides the services, who regulates the service quality, and to what extent the service quality needs to be regulated. However, this paper focuses only on the basic subsidy in order to investigate the political journey toward the creation of policy aimed at pursuing the socialization of childcare under the Sa-ssak Plan: Mid-Long Term Plan for 2006-2010.

### **Theoretical background and the analytical framework**

Scholars such as Pierson discuss the political importance of path dependence, because past policies, or lack thereof, shape the configuration of stakeholders. In South Korea's childcare policies, the underdevelopment of public options had given rise to a critical mass of private service providers. These providers saw the new discourse of public commitment to childcare both as a challenge and as an opportunity. Public service provision would hurt their businesses, but public subsidies could help boost the demand for private services. These providers had more intense preferences than other actors in the political arena. Moreover, the predominance of neo-liberal ideas in South Korea meant

that those groups within and outside the MGE who favored public provision of services could not rely on a dominant ideological rhetoric.

Socialization of childcare is based on the idea of childcare being a public responsibility rather than solely a private matter (Blomqvist 2004; Brennan et al. 2012; Fraser 1997; Mahon 2002; Meyers and Gornick 2003; Stolt et al. 2011). As discussed previously, the socialization of childcare in South Korea has been addressed with the phrase “gongongsung,” which literally means reinforcing public responsibility for childcare. This political effort to advance the socialization of childcare has been closely associated with gender equality (Mahon 2002), including in South Korea, where the Roh government transferred the duty of childcare from the MHW to the MGE in order to make childcare policy favorable to improving women’s employment and fertility rates (Lee 2011; The Presidential Counsel of Policy Planning Committee, 2007). However, in many countries including South Korea, such policy responses to the socialization of care and gender equality have been challenged by high levels of privatization in their existing childcare markets, a perspective which stresses neo-liberal ideas about competition and decentralized authority (Levy and Michel 2002; Mahon and Phillips 2002; Penn 2013; Randall 2002; Sala 2002). The following section outlines some theoretical underpinnings of how the issue of childcare has become politicized and driven by awareness of gender equality in the political arena, but at the same time, challenged by the influence of policy path dependence.

Politicizing childcare has been deeply entwined with gender equality in the political arena. This is exemplified by Michel and Mahon (2002) who examine the various forces contesting the most appropriate forms (if any) of non-parental childcare with particular attention paid to feminists’ arguments and their strategic orientation in favor of gender equality. These academic debates appear to have encouraged political concern regarding the caring issue (Claire 2010; D’Addion and Mira d’Ercole 2005; Thevenon 2011; Williams 2001), and in recent years policymakers have started to implement new childcare

services promoting universal childcare provision. For instance, political efforts in many European countries have tried to encourage female employment with more interest given to the provision of childcare, even in some countries where universal childcare has been historically a low policy priority (Lewis 2001; Mahon 2002). This political experience of some European countries in particular has shown that bringing gender into the equation has been the most significant determinant for accomplishing the socialization of childcare (Ellingsater and Leire 2006; Jenson and Mahon 1993; Kamerman and Moss 2009; Leira 2002; 2006; Melby et al. 2009; Szebehely 1998). These examples demonstrate the importance of achieving gender equality but also highlight policy conundrums and challenges, especially those pertaining to the promotion of market-based childcare provision (Lloyd 2013; Penn 2013).

Whilst there has been on-going discourse focussed on care and gender, the political response to the demand for childcare provision in many welfare states has been subject to the notion of privatization, which stresses neo-liberal ideology about competition and decentralized authority. Emanuel Savas defined this tendency toward the privatization of care provision as “the act of reducing the role of government, or increasing the role of the private sector, in the activity or in the ownership of assets” (Savas 1987; 3 cited in Kim, Kim, and Boyer 1994). The logic of privatization typically assumes that since public institutions are ineffective and wasteful in providing care services, competition with decentralized control is a better option for organizing care provision (Stolt, Blomqvist and Winblad 2011). The term privatization of care can be used alongside additional terminology describing the marketization of care provision. This refers to governmental measures and methods used to introduce market mechanisms to allocate care provision (Brennan et al. 2012). This marketization of care tends to create relationships between buyers and sellers by contracting out service delivery and financing users to purchase services according to their individual choices in the care market. From this perspective of

viewing care as a commodity, state roles are relatively minimal with respect to intervening in service forms, regulating service quality, subsidizing cost, and controlling prices.

Given the context of the privatization of care, it is difficult to introduce policy directions moving toward the socialization of care and gender equality into the political arena, and such initiatives are likely to be altered so as to be consonant with prevailing neo-liberal ideological norms. For example, under the Conservative Party government in UK, from 1980 to 1991, the number of private nurseries increased more than threefold while there was a huge demand of childcare, especially from young mothers. Since the party embraced neo-liberal ideology, the Conservative government's childcare reform efforts emphasized the importance of the private sector's actual and potential contribution and helped the state legitimize a more prominent respectability for those private organizations (Randall, 1995). In Sweden the Social Democratic Party lost its historically dominant position in the 1980s and this opened the way for neo-liberal ideas of marketization and privatization to take hold; however, the implementation of such policies was fairly limited. For example, while the Social Democratic government opened up the possibility for public support to be given to centers not run by municipalities, it continued to exclude private for-profit childcare facilities from receiving such support (Bergqvist and Nyberg 2002).

Policy responses to new policy challenges tend to be constrained within existing policy patterns; thus, new changes might be difficult to develop and implement even when there are strong governmental and political efforts to do so (Kingdon 1995). This policy tendency of retaining the prevailing policy regime is regarded as path dependence (Pierson 1996, 2001); in other words, "what happened at an earlier point in time will affect the possible outcomes of a sequence of events occurring at a later point in time (Sewell 1996, 262-3 cited in Pierson 2004)." This earlier point, also referred to as a "critical juncture," when an initial choice or decision was made, creates boundaries that limit future choices (Hogan 2006). Pierson (2000) further describes historical sequences of path dependence as

generating increasing returns, which entrench patterns of policy behaviour due to the relative benefits of the current activity compared with other possible options. These increase over time and generate positive feedback in each move down that path. This policy path dependence does not mean that policy change can never occur, but it is difficult to stray away from the existing policy path. However, it is also important to note that this policy path dependency should be understood as comprising incremental change and continuity, although it tends to be impossible to reverse the prevailing policy patterns (Peters, Pierre and King 2005; Pierson 2004).

In the following sections, I focus on three aspects of the policy decision making process under the MGE. First, how did the issue of socialization of childcare become a policy agenda item and what was the initial idea behind it? Second, what were the policy options available in order to pursue the socialization of childcare, and who was involved in the pertinent debates? Third, what were the policy responses? As policy changes occur incrementally and continuously, I discuss them as sequential policy options in order to illuminate the policy dynamics as well as policy feedback in the debates.

### **In-depth interviews with key policy makers and policy documents**

In order to capture the policy path dependence surrounding the initial policy idea of socializing childcare, in-depth interviews and policy documentary analysis were chosen as the most appropriate approaches for data collection. As investigation of the decision making process and policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation stages (Becker and Bryman 2004) are of interest, in-depth interviews with ten key policy actors were conducted for this study. Many of the interview subjects held different positions within the policy making agenda and hence, were deemed well-equipped to provide insights regarding the focal interest, i.e. the reforms. The details of the interviewees are shown in Table 1. Regarding the political debates that ensued, these have been factually and substantively evidenced by drawing upon a range of documentary sources including:

publicly disseminated governmental policy reports and research institute reports, academic journals and conference papers, legislative papers, as well as national budgets and accounts regarding childcare policy provision.

Table 1. Background information on the selected interviewees

| Interviewees | Position and role                                     | Main activities  |
|--------------|---|--|
| A            | Political appointee                                   | A chairperson in a presidential advisory body in the Blue House  |
| B            | Governmental researcher                               | A senior researcher on childcare and family in the Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs                               |
| C            | Academic consultant                                   | A main actor who worked on the revision of the Childcare Act in 2004 and a professor in a department of Social Welfare         |
| D            | Women's group organization leader                     | A secretary general in the Korean Women's Association United   |
| E            | The first minister of the Ministry of Gender Equality | Previously the representative of the Korean Women's Association United   |
| F            | Senior civil servant                                  | A head of department of childcare in the Ministry of Gender Equality   |
| G            | Governmental researcher                               | A senior researcher in the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education under the Prime Minister                                |
| H            | Parliamentary member                                  | The Director of the Bureau of Women in Democratic Party  |
| I            | Civil organization group leader                       | The leader on the issue of childcare in the Committee of Social Welfare in the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy |
| J            | Political appointee                                   | A public official in special services in social  |

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
|   |  | policy in the Blue House  |
| K | Academic consultant  | A main actor who worked on childcare cost and a professor in a department of Economic                                       |
| L | The second minister of the Ministry of Gender and Equality | Previously a professor in a department of Sociology and previously the director in the Korean Women's Development Institute |

### **Transformation of the initial idea of socializing childcare**

Following the analytical framework, I closely look at each policy option around the socialization of care, including: how the socialization of care became a main policy agenda item; what the options were; who was involved with these debates; and what was the policy feedback from relevant policy groups.

#### ***1. How to alleviate the financial burden on childcare in the private sector?***

As described earlier, nearly 90% of children in day care were cared for in private settings and their parents were often charged far more than those using public childcare centers (PCAFS 2004; MGEF 2006). However, the overall usage of childcare services outside the family was quite low. A 2003 survey on the use of all childcare services demonstrated that only 14% of mothers of children from birth to two years old used any childcare service and just 31% of those with children aged three to five years did so (MHW 2003). The financial burden associated with private childcare services was identified as being one of the main reasons behind parents' reluctance to use private care services (PCAFS 2004; MGEF 2006). The effect of the financial burden was also considered to be a factor in steering mothers' decisions toward care for their children by themselves and stopping their participation in the labor market, especially when the children were quite young (from birth to two years old). Having considered the actual take-up rates of childcare services, it was not surprising that the administration's preferred strategy to

alleviate the financial burden was to expand public childcare centers as a reasonably affordable alternative to the expensive private ones.

This concern about the alleviation of the financial burden for parents was often associated with the socialization of care by progressive civil organizations such as the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) and Korean Women's Association United (KAWU)<sup>1</sup>. Their policy preference for the socialization of care seemed to be shared with the government of the day and their objectives were clearly voiced while they were attending "winding-up" discussions<sup>2</sup> (called in Korean 'kkeutjang-toron'). These meetings had been organized by the minister of the MGE as soon as the duty of childcare was transferred to it and from the MHW in June 2004<sup>3</sup>. The main aim of these consultations was to reach a social consensus which would encompass all different childcare issues being advanced by a range of stakeholders from diverse childcare-related fields such as: the childcare workers, the trades unions, women's organizations, non-governmental organizations, academia, and governmental researchers. The PSPD and KWAU, along with other participants such as progressive academics, strongly expressed their opinion about increasing publicly provided and funded childcare centers. For example, a statement titled "Social Community Agreement" was proposed by several groups including not only the PSPD and the KWAU but also the MGE, Korea Edu-Care Association (KECA) organized by public and national childcare providers, labor groups, and entrepreneurial business groups. The statement outlined an agreement regarding the need have more public childcare provision:

*The universal childcare provision should be provided to give access childcare and to make a better quality service, which leads to higher birth rates (the likelihood that a woman will have a child because she can for reasons that are not necessarily to do with her own fertility) and childcare for women. For this, groups of civil and labor groups suggested having specific plans and objectives to make it happen. For instance, the civil group and women's group argue that we should*

*have 30% of our childcare provision as 'public' and the labor group suggests we should have 50% of public care provision.*

*(Social Community Agreement: the agreement to resolve low fertility and ageing society, June 20<sup>th</sup> 2006)*

However, despite there being an agreement among many actors in favor of the socialization of care through this public provision, there were also strong arguments voiced to the contrary. The following comment by an academic consultant indicates that government responsibility for childcare should remain limited to a residual involvement:

*I have been strongly against the argument about increasing the number of public childcare centers. In my economic view, the public provision by the state's intervention is completely wrong. The state must not produce any goods as a producer, because they are relatively inefficient at producing goods, compared to what private owners do in a market.*

*(Interviewee K, academic consultant/professor)*

In fact, it appears that approval of the expansion of the number of publicly provided and funded childcare centers was not reflected in policy actions; it was weakly addressed in the two key policy announcements in 2006, namely the "Sa-ssak Plan: Mid-Long Term Plan for 2006-2010" issued by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MGEF, formerly MGE<sup>4</sup>) and the "Saromaji Plan for 2010" issued by the PCAFS in the same year (MGEF 2006, PCAFS 2004). These two key policy announcements demonstrated the strong intent of the MGEF to increase the number of public centers its original target being to double the number by 2010, which would represent approximately 10% of total of childcare centers (MGEF 2006). However, at this point, doubts began to emerge as to whether this goal was going to be feasible and the leader of the PSPD criticised the Sa-ssak Plan arguing that it lacked specific details regarding how this commitment was to be rolled out (J-h, Kim 2006). Despite the MGEF's claim that the number of public childcare centers

would be doubled from 1,352 in 2005 to 2,700 by 2010, according to the Sa-ssak Plan, this would still only represent 10% of the total number of places provided to children. In general, this specific intention to increase public provision was not sufficiently explicit in the policy announcement regarding how many public centers were to be built, nor did the announcement address the matter of how to raise the money that this would require.

Interviewee J, a political appointee in the Blue House strongly criticised this saying that “there was only verbal discussion about increasing public childcare provision up to 30%, and nothing actually appeared in the specific policy plan”. Despite the political will to increase the number of public childcare centers, the policy proposals were not sufficient to alter the fundamental nature of the existing childcare infrastructure, which was predominately under private ownership. Interviewee C, an academic consultant, disappointedly commented that “I am 100% sure that there were powerful lobby groups behind the scenes who manipulated the policy direction. You know that in the policy making process hearing, the expert groups were always taken in first place, but lobby groups were always there last”. Respondents noted that, later, discussion about the expansion of the public childcare centers had shifted to being a discussion concerning how to utilize the extant private childcare centers that already made up 90% of provision in the market (interviewees C, D, I and J, academic consultant, women’s group leader, a civil organization group leader and political appointee respectively). In fact, this policy shift away from the original intention to socialize childcare appeared to be promoted by the private sectors’ lobby groups, who were positioned to reap benefits from particular policy outcomes.

With respect to this lobbying, interviewee J regretted that at the time ‘we were always too much concerned about the existence of private associations behind us and tended to be conscious about resistance to our decision,’ which strongly hints at the policy-related intervention by private sector representatives in the care market. This notion of private sector intervention regarding the policy direction can be linked to the close

relations with local elected representatives enjoyed by local councillors. Interviewee F, a senior civil servant, explained that private associations were becoming politically powerful at the local level saying that ‘the private childcare associations including the Korean Private Nursery Education Association (KPNEA) tended to become political by doing lobbying in the local regions.’ When many private centers were first built in the 1990s, almost all had been built in semi-urban areas, such as small towns, due to the availability of cheap land for development; often private owners had developed good relations with their local councillors whilst negotiating these projects. One of the senior civil servants who dealt with childcare in the MGE described the relationship between the private owners and local politicians as follows:

*The Private Childcare Association tended to get along well with the local councillors. When the private businesses started, most of them had been built in rather rural areas, due to low land prices. Additionally, they were getting very politically powerful in every single election and having their voices heard.*

*(Interviewee F, senior civil servant).*

Private sector representatives also lobbied to affect funding plans, because expanding the number of public childcare centers required adequate funding from the central government and other funding from local governments for the centers’ operational costs. This shows another political obstruction raised during the policy debates by the private sector lobby groups related to budget-based arguments. The interview with the minister shows that the MGE and the discussion group members, including herself, who advocated the expansion, struggled to persuade bureaucrats in the Ministry of Strategy and Finance (MSF) to give them funding. She described the stance adopted by the MSF at the time saying “the MSF didn’t let us have the budget on childcare expansion, as much as we wanted and they preferred to maintain a different level of governmental support for childcare.” It was difficult for her to find a persuasive answer that satisfied the finance

officials' questions regarding justifications for why the number of public childcare centers should be increased while there was existing capacity in the private sector. Moreover, expansionist advocates tried, but failed, to explain and justify why the state needed to take on responsibility for caring work to their conservative counterparts in the MSF.

It seems that the MGE did not have much power to influence the MSF in order to advocate for their initial policy agenda of socializing childcare. More specifically, there was an insurmountable difference in understanding regarding the nature of childcare and the duty of the state for taking responsibility for its provision. It appears that the MGE ultimately failed in persuading the MSF to release a sufficient share of the budget for increasing the number of public childcare facilities. In short, it may be reasonable to surmise that the idea of increasing public childcare centers became little more than a superficial slogan circulated in official documents. One of the informants, who was a political appointee in the Blue House at the time, pointed out that:

*The departmental people from the MSF were only looking for the sentences which didn't include any word of expanding public childcare centers. The most significant consideration for them was not women's issues in understanding childcare provision but the way of delivering the childcare services. It was quite hard even for the minister of the MGE to persuade the MSF to release more budgets for expanding the number of public childcare provision centers.*

*(Interviewee J, academic consultant / political appointee).*

This budget-based conflict between the MGE and MSF appeared to be an entrenched political issue during the policy debate. The interview with one of the committee chairpersons in the Blue House revealed the intractable problem faced in reforming the care market – namely, the pre-existing dominance and reliance on the private sector. Hence,

the goal to increase the number of public childcare centers was very difficult to achieve considering the pre-existing unbalanced nature of the market structure, which was so heavily weighted in favor of private provision from the outset:

*We did not have enough public facilities at that time and we also needed to make social care provision better, especially based on public schemes. However, as you know, childcare provision was originally encouraged to be built on a private basis. Because of this initial approach, we needed to grasp the influential power of the private childcare centers' associations.*

*(Interviewee I, political appointee).*

It is true that the childcare provision in South Korea was initially established by private sector actors, who were supported by earlier administrations such as the Kim Young-sam government (1993-1998) and Kim Dae-jung (1998-2002). This was a strategy for bringing more women into the labor market. This long-standing dominance of private providers ensured that their voices were heard and that they could influence policy change in alignment with the MSF's views which similarly, were not in favor of increasing the number of public facilities. This underlines the policy dependence of retaining the prevailing dominance of private childcare provision as discussed earlier (Pierson 1996; 2001). Due to this path dependence, the original policy proposals made by the Roh administration were incompatible, first, with the existing dominance of the private sector in practical terms and, second, with the engrained neo-liberal influence of ministry bureaucrats, particularly with respect to the budget related conflict at the policy level.

## **2. *How best to utilize private childcare centers?***

Without resolving the matter of alleviating parents' financial burden of childcare, the policy attention returned to the existing private childcare providers and how best to utilize them. As Pierson argued, this clearly shows an example of policy path dependence which reverts to existing policy patterns. In this current case the cost would be less than

establishing new public childcare facilities (Pierson 2004). An interview with one of the political appointees in the Blue House indicated that the discussion on the expansion of the number of public childcare centers was no longer being mentioned by the time she was appointed to work on the policy plans in 2005. She claimed firmly that the concern about how to resolve the financial burden among parents had jumped to a discussion of how to utilize private childcare centers within the public childcare provision. In short, there had been a shift to a discussion of not only how best to utilize private childcare centers as care providers, but also about including them as integral to the proposed scheme for the new subsidy.

Once the policy debate had moved forward to address ways of utilizing the existing private sector facilities, the contest became focussed on equity in two dimensions: equity among parents (service users in the care market), and equity across the treatment of the public and private sectors. As the scheme delivering the basic subsidy involved financial support for institutions, regardless of their type, it could be interpreted as an extension of equity either for parents (and their children) or the childcare institutions. This new policy rhetoric emphasizing “being equitable” under either of the two interpretations, was apparently attractive, even to the MGE. This was because, to some extent, the original concerns about alleviating the financial burden on parents seemed, at last, to be getting resolving. During an interview with the former first minister of the MGE, she showed her strong conviction that any methods adopted to support childcare had to be based on the children who needed the services in the care market. She explained her position and views about the policy changes, which for the first time included the private sector in the subsidy arrangements, as follows:

*I am still continuously arguing that all government subsidies for childcare should be based on the way it is to be given to the children being cared for in the care market, regardless of the types of institution. Although I could not completely change this in my ministerial period, I was strongly sure that the*

*change was on the right track.*

*(Interviewee E, the first minister).*

In fact, with this newly adopted policy value of equity, the policy proposal seemed to have progressed more smoothly than at any time before. No policy groups, such as the private sectors' agents or representatives from the MSF, were lobbying against it. One of the senior government researchers, who had proposed that the basic subsidy should be applied for the first time to private centers, described her reasons for suggesting this avenue to the minister:

*I am sure that I was the first person who proposed to introduce the basic subsidy. That was for the equity among children, for example, between the public users and the private ones.*

*(Interviewee G, senior governmental researcher).*

However, despite this tacit agreement to subsidize the private childcare facilities, opinions still differed regarding the nature of the childcare delivered in the private childcare facilities. These voices were not very forcefully expressed, but there was lingering reluctance amongst some to include private childcare in the government subsidy system. In particular, progressive social groups, such as the PSPD, voiced concerns about the quantitative growth of the private market that would take place if these providers were assisted through the subsidy. One civil organization group leader showed that he regretted the approval of awarding the basic subsidy to cover both sectors:

*It is true that the introduction of basic subsidy has contributed to the growth of private facilities. In terms of this, I feel very sorry about this.*

*(Interviewee I, academic consultant/a civil group organization group leader)*

Similarly, the KWAU argued that the first task for the government should be to increase public provision rather than to promote private centers by, in effect, subsidizing them. Nevertheless, in spite of these arguments against subsidizing private facilities, the financial burden suffered by parents using private provision could not be ignored by the PSPD and KWAU. The leader of the KWAU reflected on the approval of the basic subsidy in the winding-up meeting group:

*I think the proposal of the basic subsidy was a momentous decision in the development of Korean care provision by having considered the responsibility of the government. Although there was a consideration of whether to extend the public provision, I could not help approving the basic subsidy in order to resolve the financial burden on private users. However, I regret it since then this system has increased the number of private facilities in this country.*

*(Interviewee D, women's group organization leader).*

### **3. How far should the government intervene and regulate quality in the care market?**

Without doubt, growth of the private sector in the overall composition of the care market occurred when subsidizing started. The introduction of the basic subsidy was, however, considered a sufficient excuse for the government to regulate service quality. This fuelled a fierce debate centring on the issue of how far the government should intervene and regulate the private operations (Interviewee B, governmental researcher). The KPNEA was strongly opposed to an accreditation initiative, arguing that the accreditation system would only hinder them from functioning efficiently in the care market. Relations between the KPNEA and the MGE had been cordial when responsibility for childcare was initially transferred to the MGE from the MHW. At that time, the first minister of the MGE had attempted to include them in the system by giving them the basic subsidy and extending the graded subsidy to cover their work. As a consequence, against

the backdrop of this amicable relationship with the MGE, the KPNEA expected to continue to receive more favorable support from the MGE, as compared with that which they had enjoyed from the MHW. However, with the enforcement of the accreditation system under the second ministerial period of the MGE, as reported by an informant in the MGE, the private sector was likely disappointed when told that the government sought to enforce a very rigorous accreditation system. The interview extract below from a senior servant within the MGE clearly reveals that the relationship between the MGE and the KPNEA was bound to break down over the institution of this accreditation system:

*The KPNEA has become angry with all governmental regulation, particularly the accreditation system because they were not used to this kind of governmental central regulation when they were under the MHW. But now they began complaining about all things, even the basic subsidy which they claimed now was too small for them, they said.*

*(Interviewee F, senior civil servant)*

In fact, the espoused aim of the accreditation system was originally to improve service quality, especially in the private childcare centers. However, over time, the assessment guidelines for accreditation no longer appeared to be as strict as had been originally intended. A governmental researcher explained during her interview that this gradual distortion of the purpose of accreditation was because the MGE needed the backing of the private sector (Interviewee B, governmental researcher). She bitterly criticised it for being an accreditation system in name only, because it had such limited powers that it did not bring about any substantial changes in terms of maintaining or improving the quality of the services available to parents in the care market:

*I knew that the minister didn't want to do this since she didn't want to lose the support from the private association as key providers of the service. She had carried them on her back during the policy establishment.*

*(Interviewee B, governmental researcher)*

The above narratives show another deviation from the original policy agenda goal of socializing childcare. Although the MGE was determined to improve the service quality for providers in the private sector by subsidizing them, at the same time the MGE could not risk the political support it received from the private sector, which had been dominant in the care market. Comments from the women's group leader show that she was of the opinion that lobbyists from the private sector had opposed and successfully intervened to halt the implementation of a robust accreditation system:

*There was no doubt that this accreditation should be the way to weed out facilities with poor quality of service. Yet, this argument was rejected by the lobbyist group from the private sector. They powerfully protected themselves, arguing that they could not follow this accreditation system, insisting that the assessment and regulation cost them money to administer, which could be quite demanding on them.*

*(Interviewee D, women's group leader)*

The MGE knew that the issue of maintaining service quality had to be tackled, and yet the nature of the intervention regarding service quality was questionable. One of the government researchers who participated in designing the accreditation system described how, under pressure from the powerful private sector lobbying parties, the accreditation concept ran into difficulty (Interviewee G, senior governmental researcher). Another respondent who worked on the complete revision of the Childcare Act explained that the work to improve service quality had been central to her remit. She was seemingly resentful about the final amendments written into the Act to dilute it when publicly released in January 2004:

*While I belonged to the working party for the revision of the Act, I identified strict indicators to assess service quality in the market, especially for the*

*private childcare centers. I strongly argued that the assessment should be compulsory and adopted in all facilities. However, I discovered that the contents I had raised during the discussion did not feature in the document publicly announced in January 2004. I do not know why.*

*(Interviewee C, academic consultant and professor)*

## **Concluding remarks**

This paper has investigated how the socialization of childcare in South Korea has been transformed from the initial policy proposal for increasing public childcare facilities. Under the MGE, there was concerted political endeavour concerned with care and gender among reformers including: the ministers and governmental officers within the MGE as well as the civil organization PSPD, the women's group KWAU, and progressive academics. Although the ministers of the MGE and the policy reformers successfully brought the issue of childcare with associated gender perspectives into the political arena, these political efforts were hindered by the constraints of existing policy patterns, neo-liberal policy ideas within the government, and the legacy of the entrenched privatized childcare provision in practice.

Because of this policy path dependence, it was difficult for the MGE to find a foothold with the MSF, which refused to grant them any purchase regarding the extensive budget allocation debates, especially during the MGE's first ministry. By the time of the second ministry, it had become even harder for the MGE to persist with their original ideas for the socialization of childcare. This time, the ministry could not take the risk of jeopardizing support from the private owners who dominated provision in the childcare market. The ministry eventually had to reach a compromise and make a trade-off in order to negotiate some basic regulation of quality standards in the market. It could have taken this opportunity to push forward their initial objectives to socialize childcare by bringing about a rigorous assessment accreditation system, but in practice this was not possible.

After all the discussion, the proportion of public childcare facilities remained at only 5% in 2008, which was actually slightly lower than the 6% reported prior to the policy reform in 2002 (MHW 2015).

Even though the opportunity to increase the number of public childcare centers was not realized, I argue that this political situation should not be overlooked for two reasons. First, the politics around the debates, particularly centered on the MGE, played a significant role in initiating the state's responsibility for childcare. This state-centered gender politics highlighted the issue of childcare as being related to women's caring work and gender through attempting to address the financial burden of childcare and ensuring service quality in the care market. Second, the policy implementation of the basic subsidy under the MGE justified the state's intervention in regulating service quality in the care market. It can be contended from this study that the socialization of care no longer revolves around the matter of who provides services and who runs the childcare facilities. Instead, in South Korea, now the more important political debate revolves around the role of the state in ensuring that all children and parents who use the facilities within the market are provided with an adequate childcare service. In this context, the MGE has endeavoured to enhance the role of the state as a service regulator in the care market, even though the outcomes could have been more extensive.

Without doubt, under the MGE during the Roh era, the socialization of childcare was attempted through gender equality but opportunities were missed. The political endeavour could have been, but unfortunately proved not to be, a crucial turning point to advance the journey toward the socialization of childcare. This research could not obtain extensive details about how the lobby groups negotiated on behalf of the private sector. Lobbying emerged as a significant factor in the case of childcare but as it often takes place behind closed doors, details remained elusive. Reflecting on the experience analyzed above, I argue that policy changes for advancing the socialization of childcare and gender equality

can be hindered by the political conflation of neo-liberal policy patterns within the government and the marketization of care in care practice.

## NOTES

- 1) PSPD is a civil group representing people's voices under the motto of 'social solidarity' and its members are known for driving forward progressive ideas in the midst of policy production. The KWAU is another progressive civil group which advocates for women's interests and legal rights.
- 2) These meetings were independent from the PCAFS, which already existed within the new administration in the Blue House. The Blue House is the executive office and official residence of the President of South Korea and is called 'Cheong Wa Dae' in Korean.
- 3) The political background and discourses around the transfer of the duty of childcare from the Ministry of Health and Welfare to MGE in June 2004 were examined in my PhD thesis.
- 4) The name of the Ministry of Gender Equality (MGE) was changed to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MGEF) in June in 2005 which emphasised the duty of administering general issues regarding family matters.
- 5) All Korean literature has been phonetically presented in English

## References<sup>5</sup>

- Baek, Sun-hee. 2009. *Kim Dae-jung/Roh Moo-hyun jungbooeui boyook-jungchaek pyoungga* [The policy evaluation of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments' childcare policy]. *Sanghwangwabokji* 28: 95-141.
- Baek, Sun-hee, and Moon-hee Seo. 2004. *Youngyua boyukbub gaejunge ttareun boyuksisuljang mit boyukgyosa jakyukchedo yeongoo* [A study on the qualification for childcare centers' owners and the care workers after the new Childcare Act]. *Korea Journal of Child Care and Education* 39 (12): 171-195.
- Becker, Saul, and Alan Bryman. 2004. *Understanding research for social policy and practice: themes, methods and approaches*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Bergqvist, Christina, and Anita Nyberg. 2002. Welfare state restructuring and childcare in Sweden. In *Child care policy at the crossroads: gender and welfare state restructuring*, ed. S. Michel, and R. Mahon, 287-307. New York and London: SAGE.
- Blomqvist, Paula. 2004. The choice revolution: privatization of Swedish welfare services in the 1990s. *Social Policy & Administration* 38 (2): 139-155.
- Brennan, Deborah, Bettina Cass, Susan Himmelweit, and Marta Szebehely. 2012. The marketisation of care: rationales and consequences in Nordic and liberal care regimes. *Journal of European Social Policy* 22 (4): 377-391.
- Claire, Annesley. 2010. Gender, politics and policy change: the case of welfare reform under New Labor". *Government & Opposition* 45 (1): 50-73.
- D'Addio, Anna Christina, and Marco Mira d'Ercole. 2005. Trends and determinants of fertility rates: The role of policies. *OECD Social, Employment and Migration, Working Paper No. 27*. Paris: OECD.

- Ellingsæter, Anne Lise. 2006. The Norwegian childcare regime and its paradoxes. In *Politicising parenthood in Scandinavia*, ed. A. L. Ellingsæter and A. Leira, 101-144. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Estevez-Abe, Magarita, and Young-Soon Kim. 2014. Presidents, prime ministers and politics of care – why Korea expanded childcare much more than Japan. *Social Policy Administration* 48: 666-685.
- Estevez-Abe, Magarita, and Manuela Naldini. 2016. Politics of defamilialization: a comparison of Italy, Japan, Korea and Spain. *Journal of European Social Policy*. 26(4): 327-343.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1997. *Justice Interruptus: critical reflections on the 'postsocialist' condition*. New York: Routledge.
- Hogan, John. 2006. Remoulding the critical junctures approach. *Canadian Journal of Political Science (Revue canadienne de science politique)* 39 (3): 657-79.
- Jenson, Jane, and Rianne Mahon. 1993. Representing solidarity: class, gender and the crisis in Social-Democratic Sweden. *New Left Review* 201(September – October): 76-100.
- Kammerman, Sheila. B, and Peter Moss. 2009. *The politics of parental leave policies: children, parenting, gender and the labour market*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Kim, In-chul, Mahn-kee Kim, and William Boyer. 1994. Privatisation of South Korea's public enterprises. *The Journal of Developing Areas* 28 (2): 157-166.
- Kim, Jong-hae. 2004. *Boyookserviceui gonggongsung hwakdaebangan 1* [How to extend public childcare provision], Paper presented for the Discussion to extend public childcare provision, PSPD and KWAU, May 6.

- Kim, Jong-hae. 2003. *Boyookservice baljeonul wihan habrijeock suntackul wihae* [The best policy options to develop childcare services], Paper presented for the Discussion to develop childcare provision, PSPD, April 23.
- Kim, Jong-hae. 2006. *Jungjanggi boyookgyehoik ane daehae* [About the mid-term childcare policy]. *Bokji Donghyang* 3: 29-33.
- Kim, Yeon-myung. 2006. Towards a comprehensive welfare state in South Korea: institutional features, new social and political pressures, and the possibility of the welfare state, Working Paper No. 14. London: Asia Research Center: London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Kim, Yeon-myung. 2010. *Hanguk bokjigukga sungkyuk nonjang 1* [The debates on the Korean welfare regime 1]. Seoul: Ingangwa Bokji.
- Kingdon, John W. 1995. *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Korean Women's Development Institute (KWDI). 2000. *Hangukgajokui byunwhawa yeosungui yeokhal mit jiwie gunhan yeongu* [A study on the Korean families' changes and the women's role and the status], Seoul: KWDI.
- Kwon, Hyuck-joo. 2002. Welfare reform and future challenges in the Republic of Korea: Beyond the development welfare state? *International Social Security Review* 55 (4): 23-38.
- Lee, Sung-Hee. 2016. Has childcare become less of a burden in South Korea? - exploring the nature of pre-and post-reform childcare provision. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 22(4): 414-442.
- Lee, Sook-jin. 2011. Institutionalization of care labor and differences among women. *Feminism Yeongu* 11(2): 49-83.

- Leira, Arnlaug. 2002. *Working parents and the welfare state: family change and policy reform in Scandinavia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leira, Arnlaug. 2006. Parenthood change and policy reform in Scandinavia, 1970s-2000s. In *Politicising parenthood in Scandinavia: gender relations in welfare states*, ed. A. L. Ellingsæter and A. Leira, 27-51. UK: Policy Press.
- Levy, Denise Urias, and Sonya Michel. 2002. More can be less: child care and welfare reform in the United States? In *Child care policy at the crossroads: gender and welfare state restructuring*, ed. S. Michel, and R. Mahon, 239-265. New York and London: Routledge.
- Lewis, Jane. 2001. The decline of the male breadwinner model: implications for work and care. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 8(2): 152.
- Lloyd, Eva. 2013. Childcare markets: an introduction?" In *Childcare markets: can they deliver an equitable service?*, ed. E. Lloyd and H. Penn, 3-18. UK: Policy Press.
- Mahon, Rianne. 2002. Gender and welfare state restructuring: Through the lens of child care. In *Child care policy at the crossroads: gender and welfare state restructuring*, ed. S. Michel, and R. Mahon, 1-27. New York and London: Routledge.
- Mahon, Rianne, and Susan S. Phillips, 2002. Dual-earner families caught in a liberal welfare regime? - the politics of child care policy in Canada? In *Child care policy at the crossroads: gender and welfare state restructuring*, ed. S. Michel, and R. Mahon, 191-218. New York and London: Routledge.
- Melby, Kari, Anna-Birte Ravn, and Christina Carlsson Wetterberg. 2009. *Gender equality and welfare politics in Scandinavia: the limits of political ambition?* UK: The Policy Press.

- Meyers, Marcia K., and Janet C. Gornick. 2003. Public or private responsibility? - early childhood education and care, inequality, and the welfare state. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 34 (3): 379-412.
- Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MGEF). 2006. *Sa-ssak Plan: mid-long term plan*. Seoul: MGEF.
- Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW). 2002. *Statistics on childcare 2002*. Seoul: MHW.
- , 2003. *Statistics on childcare 2003*. Seoul: MHW.
- , 2004. *Guidelines on childcare 2004*. Seoul: MHW.
- , 2015. *Statistics on childcare 2015*. Seoul: MHW.
- Michel, Sonya, and Rianne Mahon. 2002. *Child care policy at the crossroads: gender and welfare state restructuring*, New York and London: Routledge.
- OECD. 2011. *Social expenditure database 2011*. Paris: OECD.
- , 2013. *Social expenditure database 2013*. Paris: OECD.
- Presidential Committee on Ageing and Future Society (PCAFS). 2004. *The first childcare policy support* [The childcare care supports for the future workforces and women's labour market participations]. Seoul: PCAFS.
- Penn, Helen. 2013. Childcare markets: do they work? In *Childcare markets: can they deliver an equitable service?*, ed. E. Lloyd and H. Penn, 19-42. UK: Policy Press.
- Peters, B. Guy, Jon Pierre, and Desmond S. King. 2005. The politics of path dependency: political conflict in historical institutionalism. *The Journal of Politics* 67(4):1275-1300.
- Pierson, Paul. 1996. The new politics of the welfare state. *World Politics* 48 (2):143-179.

- . 2000, Increasing returns, path dependence, and the study of politics. *The American Political Science Review* 94 (2):251-267.
- . 2001. Coping with permanent austerity. Welfare state restructuring in affluent democracies. In *The new politics of the welfare state*, ed. P. Pierson, 410-456. UK: Oxford University Press.
- . 2004. *Politics in time: history, institutions, and social analysis*, 17-53. UK: Princeton University Press.
- Randall, Vicky. 1995. The irresponsible state? The politics of child daycare provision in Britain. *British Journal of Political Science* 25(3): 326-348.
- . 2002. Child care in Britain, or, how do you restructure nothing? In *Child care policy at the crossroads: gender and welfare state restructuring*, ed. S. Michel and R. Mahon, 219-238. New York and London: Routledge.
- Sala, Vincent Della. 2002, Modernization and welfare-state restructuring in Italy: the impact on childcare? In *Child care policy at the crossroads: gender and welfare state restructuring*, ed. S. Michel and R. Mahon, 171-190. New York and London: Routledge.
- Stolt, Ragnar, Paula Blomqvist, and Ulrika Winblad. 2011. Privatization of social services: quality differences in Swedish elderly care. *Social Science & Medicine* 72 (4):560-567.
- Szebehely, Marta. 1998. Changing divisions of care-work: caring for children and frail elderly people in Sweden. In *Gender, social care, and welfare state restructuring in Europe*, ed. J. Lewis, 257-283. Aldershot: Ashgate.

The Presidential Counsel of Policy Planning Committee (PCPPC), 2007. *Anjungjeok Janyueyangyook Jiwonchekeye Guchuk* [Stable childcare supports: the efforts to enhance public childcare provision]. Seoul: PCPPC.

Thévenon, Oliver. 2011. Family policies in OECD countries: a comparative analysis. *Population and Development Review* 37(1): 57-87.

Williams, Fiona. 2001. In and beyond New Labor: towards a new political ethics of care. *Critical Social Policy* 21 (4): 467.