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Why the initiative of free childcare failed to be an effective policy implementation of universal childcare in South Korea

**Abstract**

Free childcare (*‘moo-sang-bo-yuk’* in Korean) for all children aged 0-5 was implemented for the first time in South Korea in 2012, initially being aimed at establishing universal childcare in order to alleviate parents’ childcare burden. Despite the headlines grabbing policy reform, it still remains questionable whether the policy implementation has had any positive impact on parents’ childcare burden, in terms of the state taking on more responsibility in this regard. The paper is aimed at exploring how the meaning of universal childcare was communicated during the policy initiation process. In order to do so, interpretative policy analysis was utilised as a methodological approach, whilst relevant policy documents and in-depth interviews were used for data collection. Why the policy implementation could not succeed in bringing universal childcare to the fore is critically examined. I argue that these failings occurred because the policy implementation was placed on the agenda with a lack of commitment to increasing the number of public childcare centres, as well as disengagement from understanding the gender relations necessary for delivering universal childcare effectively.

***Keywords:*** *free childcare, universal childcare, marketisation of care, policy interpretive analysis, gender relations, South Korea*

**Introduction**

When seeking to understand complex policy dynamics within a certain context, it is important to examine how a certain policy issue manages to enter the governmental agenda at a particular time, whilst at the same time determining the extent to which initial policy aims and objectives deviate within the existing policy structure and ultimately, even get dismissed (Estévez-Abe & Kim, 2014; Kingdon, 1995; Pierson, 2004). This paper is aimed at exploring how the original meaning of universal childcare1 (*‘gong-bo-yuk’* in Korean) was neglected and instead, distorted during the policy implementation. Then, there is critical examination as to why the policy implementation of free childcare could not succeed in establishing universal childcare as initially intended.

Despite the ambitious policy reform, regrettably, the policy outcome did seem to bring about little positive impact toward advancing universal childcare provision, especially regarding childcare cost and mothers’ employment. For instance, Yun (2015) showed that since the free childcare was implemented in 2013, in spite of a tenfold increase in Korean public spending on free childcare, many households with working mothers have given up public support services and ended up spending more on private childcare services. Similarly, Lee (2016) discussed further how the full subsidy, especially for children aged 0-2, hardly brought about any positive impact on mothers’ labour market participation either. Among highly educated mothers and high-income families, the quality of childcare was a more key concern, rather than simply reduced childcare cost for full-day-care-based care (Y-W Lee, 2016). Lee & Kwon (2017) compared the impact on childcare cost prior to the policy implementation of free childcare in 2011 with the situation post implementation in 2015. They found that its implementation had failed to address the mismatch between the time when it was available and mothers’ working hours among lower-income families. Moreover, it emerged that the childcare cost among high income families had increased due to extra childcare cost for private resources. Furthermore, Kang’s study (2019) supports the perspective that the childcare subsidy for free childcare does not necessarily reduce the childcare cost burden nor increase mothers’ labour force participation.

These rather disappointing findings raise the fundamental question as to why the policy implementation of free childcare did not prove to be a positive experience for working mothers as well as lower income families. As Michel and Mahon (2002) and many others have argued, the achievement of gender and class equality through socialising childcare should involve not just universal childcare provision, but also, reasonably paid parental leave, equitable pay and terms of employment as protected through legislation or social systems. The focus in this paper, however, is on providing free childcare when the care facilities are run through privately provided childcare centres. Free childcare heralds guaranteed universal access to all, including the children of parents who need childcare services. However, when the childcare is provided through marketisation, it tends to create the relationships between buyers (mainly parents and children) and sellers (mainly both for-profit and non-profit care providers) by enforcing the introduction of markets, according to their individual choices in the care markets (Brennan et al., 2012; Lewis & West, 2017). From this perspective of viewing care as a commodity in the market, state roles are relatively minimal, with respect to intervening in service reform, regulating service quality, subsidising cost, and controlling prices (Akgunduz & Plantenga, 2014; Lloyd, 2013; Wincott, 2006). Simply reducing childcare cost will not be sufficient to encourage women to participate in the labour market, unless adequate service quality is guaranteed. Despite free childcare being supposed to be provided without payment, it still needs to be determined whether or not it meets parents’ requirements.

In this paper, I examine the policy implementation of free childcare through the lens of ‘gender relations’. That is, I probe the different structural limitations and barriers that parents, mainly women, experience when employing or giving up childcare services in the market. This is because the decision as to whether to employ childcare services or not often depends on their main role within the family (whether main carer and/or earner), their current status in the labour market, including their income and employment status (Brennan et al., 2012; Choi, 2008; Ellingsæter & Leira, 2006; Kamerman & Moss, 2009; Kreyenfeld & Hank, 2000; Perälä-Littunen, 2018; Ungerson 2000). My main concern in this paper, therefore, is to investigate how these matters of gender relations were dealt with during the initial policy implementation process, if they were and if not, to examine why the issue of gender relations was not taken into account.

In order to do so, interpretive policy analysis (IPA) is deployed to reveal the manner in which the ‘policy meaning’ of universal childcare was communicated as ‘*a peculiar feature’* (Torgersosn, 2007) among policy stakeholders during the policy implementation. The data were gathered in various ways, including from relevant policy documents and in-depth interviews. The paper then discusses the policy’s failure to advance universal childcare and in light of this, critical reflections on future policy implementation in South Korea are provided. The next section situates traditional childcare provision in South Korea and the social consensus towards universal free childcare prior to this policy implementation. A theoretical discussion of gender relations in employing childcare services when the services are provided through private for-profit childcare provision is given, followed by the presentation of an analytical framework for this study. Through the use of IPA, I critically examine how the initial policy objective of universal childcare was communicated during the policy implementation of free childcare in 2013, which raises further discussion on childcare provision in South Korea today.

**Policy background: Traditional childcare provision and policy reforms towards universal childcare**

Traditionally, childcare provision in Korea was described as family oriented and/or as a Confucian care regime, relying heavily on women’s role within the family as the main caregiver (Goodman & Peng, 1996; Hiroko, Liu & Yamashita, 2011; Peng, 2009; 2011; 2012; Sung, 2003; Won & Pascall, 2004). However, the demand for public childcare provision has grown since the late 1990s due to extensive changes in the traditional family structure as well as steadily increasing female participation in the labour market (An, 2013; An & Peng, 2016; Choi, 2008; Cooke, 2010; Estévez-Abe & Kim, 2014; T-H Kim, 2011; Y-M Kim, 2006; Peng, 2009, 2014; Razavi, 2007). The issue of childcare, therefore, has become a public matter requiring the government to assume greater responsibility for universal childcare.

However, the debate around the state’s responsibility in childcare has been hotly contested, with a rather ambiguous concept of universal childcare that, thus, still requires a clear definition. Without being given any clear understanding of the concept, the debate around how to expand the state’s responsibility in childcare, in other words, how to achieve universal childcare, has raised two issues: whether to increase the number of publicly funded childcare centres or to utilise the predominately existing private-for-profit childcare centres to this end (Baek, 2009, 2011; Baek et al., 2011; J-H Kim, 2006, 2008; S-H Lee, 2016, 2017).

Despite more than 90% of childcare being provided by private for-profit daycare centres in South Korea, such as incorporated organisations or centres and home-based individuals (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2013; 2018), increasing publicly funded and provided childcare centres has been prioritised for two reasons: higher engagement with service monitoring in publicly funded and provided childcare centres as well as better childcare service experience amongst parents compared to the for-profit-childcare centres. For example, in 2013 nearly 93% of publicly funded and provided child daycare centres met the service standard accredited by the Korea Childcare Promotion Institute, whereas only 70% of private for-profit-daycare centres did so in the same year (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2013). The growth in service accreditation also showed that the childcare workers’ working conditions in those publicly funded and provided childcare centres were superior, with a higher level of wages for care workers compared to those in the pro-profit-daycare centres. Furthermore, the non-profit oriented service business tends to lead to better service satisfaction among parents (Baek, 2015). In fact, according to a survey in 2012 on the attitudes towards the childcare services, the service satisfaction regarding the private ones revealed the lowest compared to any other types of daycare centres (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2012).

The policy objective towards universal childcare seems to have been rather inconsistently pursued under the different presidential administrations. For instance, during the Roh Moo-hyun government (2003-2008), ‘The First Mid-Long Term 2006-2010 of Childcare Policy, *‘Saessak Plan’* (*meaning ‘Sprout Plan’ in Korean*), was announced and increasingly publicly funded. It aimed to provide public daycare centres to the tune of 30% of the total provision (The Presidential Counsel of Policy Planning Committee, 2007; Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2006), but this promise was not fulfilled (Chon, 2018, Lee, 2017). The next administration of Lee Myoung-baek (2008-2013) then supplemented the first plan and announced ‘The I-Sarang Plan 2009-2012’ (*meaning ‘Loving Children Plan’ in Korean*), which utilised the existing dominant private-for-profit daycare centres through subsidising them (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2011). This government favoured this type of centre through providing vouchers and subsidising private daycare for children from 0-2 years old (Chon, 2018).

Against the backdrop of these inconsistent and rather contradictory policy directions towards universal childcare, the policy agenda of free childcare for all children aged 0-5 emerged as a political driver during the 18th presidential election in 2012. Both the major political parties, namely the ruling conservative party of ‘*Saenuri dang*’ at that time, and the opposition ‘*Minju-tonghap*’ party, released manifesto pledges on providing free childcare for all children up to 5 years of age, regardless of parental income and employment status (Saenuri-dang Presidential Election Policy Manifesto, 2012; Minju-tonghap Presidential Election Policy Manifesto, 2012). With the victory of Park Geun-hye’s government (February 2013 – March 2017), the full subsidy was expanded to all children aged 0-5 irrespective of their parents’ income and employment status (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2013).

In following section, the key issues around providing free childcare are discussed, in particular, with a focus on when the provisions are marketised. This will lead to the development of a critical and analytical framework for assessing the implementation of universal childcare policy in South Korea.

**Theoretical background: Marketisation of childcare and gender relations**

The marketisation of childcare can be defined as the ‘mixed economy of welfare’, with the core notion of an internal market based on a purchaser/provider split. This often overshadows caregiver’s citizenship rights, especially the right to receive childcare as well as to have time to care for their children themselves. In fact, the citizenship of caregivers tends to be eclipsed by the assumption of there being an economic relationship between caregivers and care providers in the care market and the pursuit of self-interest among individual sellers in the relevant markets (Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler & Westmarland, 2007, cited in Brennan et al., 2012; Penn, 2011).

Interestingly, this trend towards the marketisation of childcare is not only the case in South Korea. In many countries, even social democracies (Bergqvist & Nyberg, 2002; Brennan et al., 2012; Farris & Marchetti, 2017; Whitfield, 2006), the trend regarding childcare provision has recently become increasingly privatised and marketised (Farris & Marchetti, 2017; Lloyd, 2013; Penn, 2009). In light of this situation, a counter narrative of providing universal childcare might have interested stakeholders, such as politicians, wishing to address gender issues in order to increase their popularity or to obtain political benefits (Beland, 2009; Melby & Wetterberg, 2009; Scanlon, 2008). Yet, a populistic, superficial policy approach towards issues of childcare fails to grasp fully gender sensitive perspectives and can easily lead to their inappropriate inclusion in policy agendas or simply cause them to be overlooked (Beland, 2009; Huh, 2005; Ma, 2005). This is further exacerbated when the service is provided through the private for-profit daycare sector.

In the context of the marketisation of childcare, disadvantageous gender relations occur for working parents and/or lone parents when employing childcare services in the care market. Such parents have to consider who is going to stay at home, if anyone, or how the childcare will be arranged and in the case of lone parents, they may even consider it a better option for them to stay at home (Fagnani, 2002; Flynn, 2017; Gambaro, 2012; Lewis, 1992; Lewis & West, 2017; Mahon, 2002). With regard to the links between using formal childcare services in the market and the impact on gender relations, I address two key elements in relation to providing formal childcare services.

First, the childcare cost matters (Gambaro, Stewart & Waldfogel, 2015; Morel, 2007). Clearly, economic circumstances can be an obstacle for women entering the labour market that may lead to them staying at home, caring for their own children or other dependents, rather than working outside the home. The driving forces behind these decisions need to be investigated and this balancing act is seen as the ‘opportunity cost between work and care’ (Le Grand, 2007). After accounting for all the costs and obstacles for women in the labour market, the decision involves determining whether it is more economic and/or achievable staying at home or going to work, if everything else is constant. This depends on how much parents, especially single ones, have to pay for childcare services in the market and how much women can earn in paid labour markets, in place of undertaking the care work themselves (Budig & Englad, 2001; Taylor-Gooby, 2004). In this context, free childcare could be the right idea, but when the service is provided through the private for-profit daycare sectors, it does bring into question how long and how much the government will be able to subsidise the cost. Moreover, there is the issue of how much the government will be able to regulate the service quality. This is because the good of daycare for children is not only about whether it is free, for it also matters that the service meets the standard expected by the user (Lewis & West, 2017; Akgunduz & Plantenga, 2014).

The second issue that should be considered is, therefore, whether the service provision suits the needs of the care-receivers as well as the caregivers. Williams (2001) has claimed that when the care is commodified in a relatively uncontrolled private market, this influences not only the quality of services, but also, the conditions of those who provide them. The concern here is that, if there is a marked stratification of the quality and service cost for parents, and if the satisfaction levels at the lower end do not suffice, then childcare responsibility will revert to being the duty of family members. Moreover, satisfaction with the service quality does not always depend on affordability, even if it is freely provided. For instance, everyone may be able to afford some sort of caregiving services through the government or employment related subsidies, but its variable quality means that some needs are not adequately met (Hofferth & Wissoker, 1992; Stolt, Blomqvist & Winblad, 2011; Williams 2001). The childcare market, described as ‘peculiar’ in Ball and Vincent’s study in 2006, puts trust and satisfaction with the service beyond the price (Ball & Vincent, 2006). It also raises the issue of equitable choice when employing childcare services in the childcare market. That is, caregivers and those receiving care should not be forced to use specific types of care services, but rather, should be able to design and adopt care arrangements of their choice (Blomqvist, 2004; Morel, 2007).

In the following section, I explain how these elements of gender relations can be included in the analytical framework for this study, which is followed by a discussion on IPA as a research method and explanation of the data collection.

**Methodology and methods: Interpretative policy analysis and the data collection**

For this study, there is a particular interest in policy meanings: how the initial policy objective of universal childcare was communicated during the policy implementation of free childcare in 2013. As a special branch of policy analysis with constructivist-interpretivist methodological and methodical approaches, interpretative policy analysis (IPA) shares an understanding of the social world as a set of structures and relationships between actors that are created by the meaning-making of powerful actors (Paul, 2011; Yanow, 2000, 2007). While traditional policy analysis tends to focus either on anticipated outcomes and/or the actual ones, IPA focuses more on the ‘silent and silenced’ meaning of policy initiation and implementation (Yanow, 2000). There are two key benefits of using IPA to achieve the aims of this study: firstly, it allows for uncovering of the manner in which the meaning of universal childcare (*gong-boyuk*) was communicated among policy stakeholders during the policy initiation process. Second, it facilitates examination of how the initial policy goal of universal childcare was discussed and hence, why the meaning of the policy objective did not find a consensus in the political arena.

The data were gathered through various ways: firstly, the political debates around free childcare provision that ensued have been substantively evidenced by drawing upon a wide range of documentary sources, including: news releases, legislative papers, publicly disseminated governmental policy reports, policy research institute reports and a national survey on ‘The attitudes toward childcare services’ conducted by the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education, in 2018. These relevant documents enabled me to establish my initial findings around the policy initiation process and current unresolved debate (Freeman & Maybin, 2011; Yanow, 2000).

Along with the documentary sources, I conducted in-depth interviews in Seoul, South Korea, in June 2015. Investigating political debates can prove to be a relatively sensitive topic for any potential interviewees. I started to recruit interviewees by getting in touch with some who I had encountered during my previous government work experience based in the Ministry of Health and Welfare. In turn, my contacts introduced me to other influential policy makers, who provided me with information regarding the overall picture and chronology of the policy reform. Having this existing professional network eventually led me to opting for convience and purposeful sampling, as a methodological strategy (Bryman, 2015), with six key experts in childcare policy development in South Korea being interviewed, including three academic consultants with various roles: one non-profit governmental foundation leader, one women’s civil organisation leader and one governmental researcher.

**Table 1 Background information on the selected interviewees**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Interviewees with pseudonymous surname | Position and role | Gender |
| Gwan | Academic and policy advisor  | Female |
| Yang | Academic and head of a multicultural family support centre | Female |
| Nam | Academic and non-governmental organisation activist  | Male |
| Man | Head of a non-profit governmental foundation  | Female |
| Pyo  | President of a women’s civil organisation  | Female |
| Hak | Government researcher  | Female |

The interviews lasted two hours on average, with the focus being on their critical reflections on the policy decision making process, the policy initiation as well as the policy watering down of free childcare provision. The interview subjects were positioned within the policy making agenda and hence, were deemed well qualified to provide insights regarding the focal topic, i.e. the policy initiative of free childcare. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in Korean first, then only translated into English after being subjected to analysis. This is because I was of the opinion that translating interview data into another language might bring change in subtle meanings, particularly given that exactly comparable vocabulaties are not always available in different languages. The interview data were manually coded along with the policy documents, which led to the generation of a set of themes and concepts, according to which the data were labelled, sorted and synthesised. These processes of data analysis were not linear. That is, the coding categories were refined and re-clarified on several occasions, with there being the need to revisit the originally systhesised data to search for new key themes in order to check my assumptions or to identify new underlying meanings and salient factors (Richite & Lewis, 2003).

Using the data gathered, I followed two stages of interpretative policy analysis for this study (Yanow, 2000): firstly, identifying how the policy initiative of free childcare was formulated for the first time and what key policy ideas and concerns were communicated during the initiative. I then, not only interpret the meaning of universal childcare, but also, critique the different meanings of the policy implementation. This will lead to the conclusion that disadvantageous gender relations led to problems for mothers wishing to access free childcare.

**Identifying the policy issues and problems**

How did free childcare become a policy initiative? Notably, it became a topic on the agenda after free school meals were granted in Gyeonggi Province public schools in 2009. The early debate around the free school meals was more in the way of a dispute over budget and policy priorities (Bake, 2015; Lee & Lee, 2013), but the issue quickly moved into the central political arena during the elections of June 2010 for local government and education commissioners. As the free school meal debate turned into a more general one about ‘universal welfare’, the Mayor of Seoul, led by the conservative party, failed in his attempt to reject free school meals in the August 2011 referendum. This was a pivotal moment in Korean social policy geography and ‘*it wasn’t really a matter of whether you were in either the conservative or the opposition parties. Most politicians thought they had got to be in favour of universal welfare, for otherwise, they knew that they might lose political popularity*’ (Interview with Man, head of a non-profit governmental foundation).

With this political favouring of universal welfare during the presidential election time, the candidate Park addressed *‘five promises for a happy family*’ in her party representative speech and one of them was ‘*to support all childcare costs for all children aged up to five years old* *in order to alleviate the mum and dad burden of childcare*’ (H-J Kim, 2012). However, proposing free childcare for all children up to five years of age would appear to have overlooked the financial difficulties that the ruling party, *Saenuri-dan*g, was experiencing at that time. The Lee Myung-bak government (2008-2013) had already promised ‘free childcare for children aged 0-2’ in his government administration’s new year speech in January 2012. However, due to the unexpectedly high number of claimants’ concern regarding the government budget on this expansion of free childcare was intensely debated even within the party (Park, 2012). Despite the warning, with the victory of the conservative party, the implementation of free childcare was agreed by the government ruling party consultation group on 30 December 2012. Then, very soon after President Park and her Presidential Committee published the policy blueprint of free childcare for children aged 0-5 in their presidential transition commission report and its implementation was announced in February 2013 (The 18th Commission on Presidential Transition, 2013).

However, having no clear budgeting plan, the policy initiative showed the lack of a long-term vision for supporting free childcare as well as the irresponsible attitude of the central government towards local government. Unsurprisingly, the budget for childcare services reached KRW 8.3 trillion (US$ 7.2 million) in 2013, just before the start of the free childcare roll-out and nearly half of it (49%) was paid for by local government. There was considerable conflict over who should pay, with the focus being on allocating the responsibility for childcare costs between the central and local government. Regarding which, the government decided that the allocation of finances should be 20% for the central and 80% for local government. However, this decision over the budget debates was described as ‘war’, as shown in many press bulletins and newspapers (Bae & Park, 2012; Joo, 2013). For example, the City Mayor of Seoul, Park Won-soon, was firmly against this decision and fundamentally disagreed that the local government should be responsible for the financing of childcare (Cha & Chang, 2013). Aware that daycare provision was nearly 92% dominated by private for-profit sector providers (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2013), the policy action to provide free childcare has reverted to the unresolved dilemma of who should pay for the free childcare - the central or local government?

I argue that the policy initiation process could have brought forward the success of universal childcare through a systematic and feasible budgetary plan being on the table. The Citizen’s Solidarity for Social Welfare of Seoul, a non-governmental organisation, heavily criticised the situation saying that, ‘*while the initial aim of moving towards universal childcare appears to be very far away, instead, it clearly shows that the government’s idea of free childcare was shaped as a means to obtaining political popularity*’ (Citizen’s Solidarity for Social Welfare of Seoul, 2013). This claim was also taken up by other civil organisations, such as the People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, Korean Women’s Association United as well as a number of parental civil organisations and trade unions (Korean Women’s Association United, 2013).

**Examining the policy implications for gender relations**

This section examines the policy implications of the populistic policy idea of free childcare by demonstrating how this approach fails to grasp fully gender sensitive perspectives when the service is provided through highly marketised childcare provision.

*The cost of ‘free’ childcare*

Whilst free childcare was meant to be ‘free’, this did not necessarily cover the whole cost. Indeed, a survey on the attitude toward childcare services (2018) shows that 53% of the respondents said that ‘*childcare care costs were still a burden on their shoulders*’ in spite of the free childcare available (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2018). Despite the available free childcare, more than 30% of mothers said that they had experienced a career interruption due to the lack of trustworthy childcare centres for their children (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2018). It also became apparent that ‘*there have been no significant reductions in parents’ real burden in meeting childcare costs*’ (Interview with Pyo, president of a women’s civil organisation). Similarly, Hak, the government researcher, also commented that ‘*the principle of the policy was free, but the reality can’t be free’*. This is because the standardised childcare cost was not distinguished from the full cost, which included every expenditure necessary for bringing up children (Baek, 2015). This means parents tended to spend the money that they saved from having free childcare on items such as private tuition, sports, music, painting, language and/or *hagwon* (after-school lessons). The free childcare only applied to the standard childcare cost, as the way of subsidising for-profit providers, which varied according to the age of the children and was dependent on the geographical location of the childcare centres that the children attended.

 ‘*The cost of any extra-curricular activities, such as field trips, English classes or other activities was not included, which meant parents still needed to pay extra charges. This was particularly so when they used the private sector, because the owners were at liberty to ask for any amount as additional payment*’

(Interviewee with Hak, government researcher)

Whilst this study may not be able to demonstrate such a direct impact of free childcare on childcare cost given the limited data, the evidence does seem to suggest that free childcare provision may not necessarily alleviate the parents’ financial burden as intended, especially with the predominance of the private for-profit daycare sector in South Korea.

*How service quality impacted on the rate of take up of childcare*

Service quality is defined as the extent to which childcare provision meets parental needs and expectations regarding the desired quality of childcare services and equitable choices. These can be; however, challenging or even problematic for government, where the state has relatively little influence on improving the service quality offered when promoting a market-based approach (Lloyd, 2013; Penn, 2009; Plantenga and Remery, 2009). Under this arrangement, service quality becomes an issue for parents in terms of whether it is sufficient to warrant taking up the provision (Kreyenfekd and Hank, 2000; Song, 2009). In fact, when the free childcare initiative was being implemented for the first time in 2013, child homecare allowance was also extended for those mothers who decided not to use any free childcare services (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2013). In the beginning, it was specifically given to poorer households with infants under the age of one year, but then, was further extended by covering all pre-schoolers from 0-7 years old in 2013. Despite there being a concern that child homecare allowance may discourage women from entering the labour market, especially among mothers with low incomes, the main policy communication became more weighted on having equitable choices between the mothers who used the services and those who did not (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2014). According to the Statistics on Childcare, the number of families claiming child homecare allowance skyrocketed to over one million during the first year of the Park government in 2013, when it was given to all children aged under five years (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2014). This was nearly eight times the government budget for childcare compared to the previous year (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2010; 2016). This, again, imposed serious demands on the governmental budget allocated for free childcare as well as the home childcare allowance. While the range of policy options was increased, it remains open to question whether the quality was of a high enough standard for parents to find it suitable for their children. This is because merely setting up options, such as child homecare allowances, not only could hinder the implementation of universal childcare, but also, could force women back into the home. I argue that ‘*due to the worry about losing political popularity amongst mothers’* (Interview with Gwan, academic and policy advisor*)* who did not use the childcare services, the child homecare allowance was expanded, rather than there being a timely response to the issues of better quality and equitable choice in the marketised sector of childcare provision*.*

Another point that was overlooked while the free childcare idea was being discussed, was who needed to be prioritised in this policy setting. Without a doubt, childcare services need to be provided for everyone when required; however, those in precarious situations need to be put at the front of the queue and assisted in obtaining effective provision. This does not imply that non-working mothers should be excluded from consideration, but with the limited resources in terms of the governmental budget and publicly funded and provided daycare centres, priorities should have been established in favour those who needed the service most. However, the problem that emerged in this paper is that free childcare services were, in fact, introduced without any priority being given to working mothers and/or with little consideration of gender relations. As a result, given the constraints of the government budget, the policy implementation of the free childcare created new tensions between working and non-working mothers.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Whilst free childcare provision could have been a significant policy shift in terms of advancing universal childcare in South Korea, I conclude that it cannot be classified as a success for two reasons. First of all, the policy reform of free childcare was initiated as a means to obtaining political popularity, rather than a political endeavour aimed at advancing universal childcare in the country. Under the guise of reform, the fundamental problem that the provision of childcare was largely dominated by private for-profit providers was neglected as well as there being no clear budgetary plan commensurate with advancing universal childcare. According to the statistics on childcare in 2018, only 7.8% of daycare facilities, in total, were run by publicly funded and provided daycare centres, while nearly 90% were still run by private for-profit ones (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2018). Without doubt free childcare is the ultimate goal of achieving universal childcare, yet supply side subsidising with no increase in public daycare could lead to the growth of the private for-profit daycare sector. In fact, when the Korean government introduced the supply side of subsidies with the extended scheme of basic subsidy towards the private sector in 2004, it promoted a dramatic growth of the private for-profit daycare providers in the childcare market, while doing very little to increase public childcare services (Lee 2017; Baek 2009; J-H Kim 2006; 2008, Chon, 2018). This institutional legacy of the past has been also found when there is no resolving the issue of the predominance of the private for-profit sector, especially in many neo-liberal countries, such as the UK, Canada and Australia (Penn, 2013). Probably free childcare through subsidising daycare centres was not the best way forward given the currently dominant private for-profit daycare sector in the Korean childcare market.

Second, political parties failed to address the issues related to gender relations when the service was provided through marketised childcare provision. This is because it was hard to ensure that funding went towards improving quality and not just boosting profits, when the state was subsidising for-profit providers through free childcare (Gambaro, Stewart & Waldfogel, 2015). Whilst free childcare in the existing childcare context has apparently alleviated the standard cost of care, as regulated by the authorities, this has not resolved those extra-curricular charges in the private for-profit daycare centres. Moreover, within the ongoing largely private for-profit provision structure, I argue that the existing problem of relatively lower satisfaction with service quality in those private sector daycare centres as well as the financial burden of extra childcare still remain. This could be another reason why Korean parents still turn towards relying on their own informal resources, as shown earlier in the studies of Yun (2015) and Lee (2016). The policy options have been numerous and varied, through expanding child homecare allowances for all children under five, to offering hourly-rate day care. In spite of this, parents, mainly mothers, are still having to make their choice confined by limitations, such as varying service quality in the private for-profit daycare centres and the challenges regarding work-life balance when participating in the labour market. Advancing universal childcare is not just about providing free childcare of an acceptable service standard, for it also needs to be delivered in such a way that everyone who requires it can gain access to it.

In 2018, the free childcare was further extended by poviding six hours of free childcare for full-time mothers and 12 hours for those seeking employment or requiring long term provision due to their participation in the labour market. These varying hours of free childcare given to full-time and working (or potential working) mothers have brought about tensions between these two cohorts. As discussed earlier, it might be quite hard to revoke the policy as parents have now experienced the benefits of free childcare. In 2021, there seems no still clear social consensus or agreement of universal childcare, with probing questions being raised, such as ‘Who will pay for the free childcare?’, ‘Why should the government be responsible even for stay-home parents’ childcare?’ and ‘How much should the government be responsible for the service quality?’.

Taking the above into conisideration, I argue that the state’s role in this process of constitution and reconstitution (Lewis 1992; Daly and Rake, 2003; Williams 2001) should be further clarified, especially in light of the predominant private for-profit sector. First, the initial policy examination around the issue of how to bring about universal childcare should return to the policy discussion table and prioritise the issues of how to improve the service quality standard and how to guarantee equitable choices. Given that the marketisation of childcare is inevitable, the state’s intervention will need to be put at the centre of the policy implementation when subsidising the private for-profit childcare sector. This is not just because subsidising the private sector encourages the growth of such institutions, but also because it creates stratification of the use of childcare services among private consumers in the market.

The paper is intended to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, including policy makers, government leaders, researchrs, academics and childcare providers. I suggest some policy implications: first, whilst free childcare is considered to be a noble objective, whether providing it through the private for-profit daycare sector is the best option will need to be re-examined. The ultimate policy goal of advancing universal childcare through private for-profit means has its limitations as this study has revealed. Instead the original policy agenda of ‘*gonggongsung*’, that is, increasing the number of publicly funded daycare centres should be brought back to the policy table along with providing universal childcare with a good service quality. Even in the present-day context of Korean childcare provision, when the marketised arrnagment seems to be inevitable, the fundamental importance of providing free childcare through the publicly funded daycare centres should be pursued in order to ensure that all childcare provision is of a high standard.

Note.

1. In this paper, childcare only includes daycare centres and/or nurseries for 0-5 years old children (*bo-yuk-si-sul and/or eo-rin-i-jib in Korean*). The information on kindergartens (*yu-chi-won in Korean*) is excluded.

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