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INTRODUCTION

Social policy support for families in South Korea during and after the pandemic of COVID-19, from a comparative perspective

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Abstract
The pandemic of Covid-19 exposed critical gaps in social policy and underscored the foundational role of families and households in both societal and economic stability. This introductory chapter to a Special Issue explores the interdependence between formal economic participation and unpaid domestic labour – collectively referred to as 'social reproduction'. Drawing on feminist political economy, the chapter addresses how gendered and undervalued reproductive labour is essential to economic growth and the realisation of international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly gender equality and inclusive growth. This Special Issue uses South Korea as a comparative case study due to its unique economic trajectory, rapid demographic ageing, stark gender inequalities, and limited social protection systems. The country's long working hours, low fertility rate, and pronounced wage and care burdens on women illustrate how inadequate social reproduction support can threaten broader social and economic sustainability. The pandemic further intensified these issues, disrupting institutional supports and deepening inequalities. This Special Issue collectively examines how policies across different contexts either alleviate or exacerbate the tensions between productive and reproductive labour, using South Korea as a focal point for comparison. This comparative analysis highlights the need for structural reforms and cultural change to support effective social reproduction policies, emphasising that gender-equal leave, accessible childcare, and shared caregiving responsibilities are crucial for work-family balance and social well-being. South Korea's experience illustrates both progress and ongoing challenges, offering valuable lessons on the limitations of market-driven approaches and the importance of resilient, state-supported family policies.

Keywords: East Asia; welfare state; social policy; care policies; migrant workers; labour market

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted gaps and inadequacies in social policy support for families while also revealing how families and households serve as the foundations of society and economic growth (Cowling and Nunn, 2020; Mezzadri, 2022a, 2022b). The papers in this Special Issue[1] all address social policy support for households and families to balance domestic work with participation in the formal economy. Constraints of space and avoidance of repetition mean that this introductory chapter spells out the common conceptual background to the policy problems that each individual paper

[1]The special issue arises from a research collaboration among international scholars from six different countries involved in our Economic and Social Council networking grant (grant no. ES/W010712/1).

explores. Each of the papers deals with some aspect of how policy facilitates or inhibits work-family balance, gender equality, leave policies, childcare, child-wellbeing, and informal care policies. In this introduction, we group these domestic responsibilities under the banner of 'social reproduction' and assert that this provides the essential conditions for economic growth.

Following this, we claim that the achievement of international normative commitments such as 'inclusive growth' and individual Sustainable Development Goals (especially 'gender equality') is dependent on policies that can provide effective support for households and families to balance social reproductive work with formal economic participation. Further, we claim that the social reproduction processes undertaken in households and families are under stress from both common and country-specific crisis tendencies. Across all the papers we use South Korea as a common comparative reference point because this case is both exceptional and illustrative of some of the pressures that might arise in other countries if support for households and families is not provided or is ineffective.

We expand on our core background claims before summarising the distinct contributions of each of the papers and how they each extend the common ground which underpins them.

Households and families as the basis of the economy

Feminist political economists have long drawn attention to the relatively neglected (in policy as well as the study of policy) process of social reproduction. Social reproduction refers to 'the work of maintaining life' (Rai and Goldblatt, 2020). Bakker (2007) breaks this definition down into three components: biological reproduction, the reproduction of the labour force, and care and domestic work that allow these functions to occur. Others have added the reproduction of norms and values that glue society together and underpin social, political, and economic processes such as formal and implicit contracts and relations of mutual responsibility (Elson, 1998).[2]

In simple terms, social reproduction is the work that must be done if individuals are to be active in society overall, including through paid labour in the formal economy. It is the cooking, cleaning, care, and socialisation necessary that any one individual can actively participate in society in a socially acceptable way and operates 'everyday' (Elias and Rai, 2019) and across generations. This work is a central input to the functioning of both society and 'the economy'. As Nancy Fraser (2014) puts it; it is the "background conditions of possibility" for all social organisation, including economic processes. However, because much social reproduction work is undertaken in unpaid domestic contexts or through community 'volunteering', mutual help, and self-provisioning, it simply does not count in most estimates of economic activity (UN, 2016; Waring, 2018).

Given the dynamic and inter-subjective nature of social participation, the work required for effective social reproduction also evolves over time and space. The socially reproductive work necessary for social participation at any one point in time and space is likely to be different from that at any other, as a combination of expectations, power struggles, and technology shift the nature and distribution of the burden of socially reproductive work. In this sense, socially reproductive work is 'variegated' (Bakker and Gill, 2019) and comparative research is necessary to unpick the nature of social reproduction in any one society at any one point in time.

Social reproduction is gendered in multiple ways. The most obvious is that most of this work *is* done by women and on an unequal basis to men. For example, using time-use data for 64 countries, the International Labor Organisation estimated that women spend around three times as much time as men on unpaid care work (Addati and Cattaneo, 2018). The UN estimates that valuing unpaid domestic work could add 40% to global GDP, and this is without thinking about revaluing the paid work (to eradicate gender pay gaps) that women do in the labour market. This gendered aspect of socially reproductive work was graphically demonstrated in the recent Coronavirus pandemic, when lockdown measures disproportionately affected women who took on the majority of the burden of new care, volunteering,

[2]For recent reviews of social reproduction see (Bakker, 2020; Bakker and Gill, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2017).

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and home-schooling responsibilities (Cowling and Nunn, 2020; Etheridge and Spantig, 2020; Kolakowsky-Hayner et al., 2021; Xue and McMunn, 2021).

Achieving sustainable development goals requires support for households and families

Social reproduction is crucial for multiple international normative commitments, including inclusive growth as a framing concept for the Sustainable Development Goals. Growth itself depends on socially reproductive activity, and for it to be inclusive, the value of this work must be recognised and valued but is often excluded from formal measures of growth. Policies to recognise, value, and sustain social reproduction, such as balancing work and family life and ensuring a more equal gendered distribution of domestic work, are essential for meeting international normative commitments like inclusive growth and the SDGs.

Households and families under stress

Social reproduction is not just essential for the functioning of societies and economies and meeting international commitments. A range of research has suggested that it may be under stress in the aggregate – at global and societal scale – and can be damaging at an individual scale. In both senses, these aggregate and individual pressures might undermine both economic and social structures and attempts to move toward normative commitments.

Many researchers have focussed on the way that dominant political economy trends such as 'neoliberalising' reforms, financialisation, retrenchment of state services and individualised social responsibility (including 'responsibilisation') (Bakker, 2003; Bakker and Silvey, 2008; Katz, 2001; LeBaron and Roberts, 2010) create pressures on social reproduction. In such conditions, the work of social reproduction can be 'depleting' and harmful at the individual scale (Rai et al., 2014; Rai and Goldblatt, 2020) and might also lead to societal crises in the stable reproduction of social and economic processes. Whether such crises are latent and offset by continued 'coping' (Fawcett et al., 2023; Hargreaves et al., 2018) with the harmful effects of stressed social reproduction or add up to a societal crisis is an empirical question that can only be ascertained through detailed country-level research (Nunn, 2019; Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage, 2019; Nunn and Tepe, 2022).

The next sections demonstrate the relevance of this conceptual and general empirical discussion to the specific issues of the aftermath of COVID-19 and the comparative case of South Korea.

Why COVID-19, Why South Korea?

The answer to the question is relatively simple and straightforward. The COVID-19 pandemic restructured and made visible some of the ways the formal and informal economies are related to one another (Mezzadri, 2022b), recasting and reinforcing existing inequalities at the same time as illuminating them. In particular, the pandemic revealed the interconnection between scales of social reproductive activity from individual households, communities, and collective institutions such as schools and hospitals through to societal and economic reproduction at the scales of the nation-state and global economy. Pandemic lockdowns created concern over reproduction at the macro-scale of society and the economy, closed or rendered collective institutions in a crisis state, and placed much more visible emphasis on the behaviour of households as the basic unit of society, economy, and polity (Mezzadri, 2022a).

So why South Korea? South Korea serves as an illustrative example, for us to explore the point at which individual and household scale depletion might threaten a societal scale crisis in social reproduction. Korea experienced rapid growth during early industrialisation in the late 1960s which persisted until the economic crisis of 1997. Following the crisis, comprehensive neoliberal reform was implemented, which included large-scale lay-offs, an increase in early retirement, and increased casualisation of labour. The effect of these economic changes was profound, with an erosion of the male breadwinner ideology, increasing dual-earner households as well as a rise in single-parent and single-adult

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households. Furthermore, increased ageing has led to growing inequality between households and wage earners, lowering pay returns to education, alongside an increasing care burden for family structures with less capacity to cope with it (Shin, 2019).

While many countries face pressures from demographic ageing and care demands, these are particularly pronounced in South Korea (Park and Lee, 2015; Lee, 2017, 2019, 2021). The country has a highly liberalised labour market and intergenerational inequality, which has become increasingly apparent since the financial crisis in December 1997. The effect of these economic changes was to reduce state expenditure and hamper a return to growth. Unemployment spiked and combined with falling wages this led to increased inequalities (Shin, 2019; Shin and Kong, 2014). Confidence in the Korean economic miracle faltered and political dissent increased. However, growth has recovered since and output per hour worked is now above the OECD average, and output per capita sits just below it. Unemployment is one of the lowest in the OECD. Judged on economic indicators Korea is one of the most advanced countries in the world.

However, the economic effects of the 1990s crisis on families and social reproduction have sustained. The poverty rate is higher than the OECD average overall and particularly pronounced for older age groups who have inadequate pension coverage. Working hours are some of the highest in the OECD. House prices are relatively high in comparison to wages and household debt is considerable and among the highest in the OECD. The old age dependency ratio increased from about 12% in 2005 to 22% in 2020 (highest in the OECD) and marking South Korea as a 'super-aged' society, with over 20% of the population aged 65 or older (The Korea Times, 2024). This shift has been driven largely by a dramatic decline in the fertility rate, alongside the ageing population. The country was a 1.08 fertility rate in 2003 (often referred to as the '1.08 shock') and has declined further still to 0.81 in 2021 and is the lowest in the OECD. Moreover, while women's participation in the labour market noticeably increased from the late 1960s to the early 2000s, it stalled in the aftermath of the financial crisis and austerity reforms. Despite the economic need for more women to work, their employment is held back by the burden of informal care, including childcare, within the family (Lee, 2016; Sung, 2018) and a substantial employment wage gap of more than 30%, the highest in the OECD (OECD, 2022). In addition, the comparative participation rate of men and women varies according to age group. That is, the rate for women in their late twenties and early thirties is lower than those observed for other age groups. In contrast, men's rate in these age groups tends to be higher than for other age groups.

Recently, COVID-19 has reinforced and exacerbated these inequalities. While not suffering the same sorts of negative economic effects from 'lockdowns' as some other countries, South Korea was, nevertheless, impacted by the severe disruption to global production networks, including in both the supply of raw materials and the collapse of consumer markets. The result has been an even more segregated labour market, with a growth in the problems faced by non-regular workers, particularly pronounced female unemployment (as women exited the labour market to look after children shut out of schools) and lack of social protection coverage being graphically exposed. Moreover, a further implication of COVID has been to accelerate existing patterns of automation, thus threatening jobless growth, further inequality, and social exclusion (Shin, 2022). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted the institutional support for working families and exposed gaps in it. The lack of work-family balance support has left many women facing physical and emotional exhaustion as well as economic vulnerability. Moreover, the pandemic has meant that the formal economy has increasingly penetrated household and family life, turning the household into an intensive and ambiguous space involving numerous activities related to work, childcare, parenting, housework, shopping, leisure, and religion. These changes have added to the pre-existing double and triple burden of work, care, and domestic labour (Lee et al., 2020).

The combined effect of all this is that if any country with an advanced economy has a social reproduction crisis; it is South Korea. Yulee (2022) concludes that the workplace culture in South Korea and the financialisation of social risk are contributing to a necro-politics in which future growth is premised on 'progress by death' as the ultimate form of 'depletion' at the household scale. The age dependency rate, household debt, and most particularly the fertility rate indicate a contraction in the

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reproduction of society and a looming challenge associated with future growth and/or 'jobless growth'. This is a widely recognised problem, and successive governments have taken action to increase female participation and the fertility rate. However, these policies have often lacked substance or have proven ultimately ineffective.

South Korea is an ideal comparator for examining the effectiveness of policy responses to social reproduction challenges related to economic competitiveness, fertility, childcare, and women's economic participation. Comparative approaches to understanding these challenges, with South Korea as the reference, form the basis for this Special Issue.

The papers in this special issue

In this special issue, we explore how social policy has supported (or not) social reproductive activity in families, during and subsequent to the COVID-19. The papers identify how policy and practice can better support families and households, with this being a stepping-stone to more inclusive growth and social cohesion, starting from the discrete policy problem of reconciling work and caring responsibilities as a barrier to gender equality. Each social policy response in South Korea is investigated through comparison with policy experiences in different welfare systems such as the Czech Republic, France, Japan, Singapore, Sweden, Taiwan, and the UK/England. While there are some divergent and contrasting questions posed for each society, the varied comparative perspectives mean that there is much to learn for researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners from this comparison. The aftermath of the pandemic interacts with different longer-running trends to raise several important questions for each country, which cut across the thematic foci we propose on different aspects of family support. These include: How will inter/intra-family/household inequalities change over the long term as a result of the pandemic? How will political support for social policy expenditure be affected by the pandemic and its outcomes?

For example, Sung and McNamee's paper "*Gender and work-family balance in the Time of Pandemic: A Comparative Study of Policy and Practice in the UK and South Korea*" reveals the gender disparity in unpaid care work, which has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. By using online surveys among mothers and their partners in South Korea and the UK, they capture the cultural differences in relation to gender roles and the differences in time use between mothers and their partners. While equal sharing of unpaid work within the household is a key indicator of marital satisfaction for women, findings from the survey imply that both countries need to further develop work-family balance policies together with organisational culture change to allow men to take parental leave and adopt flexible working patterns.

In light of the cultural shift in policy development and organisational culture change, Gurin and Gornick's paper "*Pushes and pulls of father leave policy reform: Unpacking divergent father leave reforms in the Czech Republic and South Korea*" provides a theoretical and empirical understanding of the factors driving policy change, which are public policy preferences, electoral competition, negative feedback, and crises (financial, fertility and pandemic). By examining the evolution of father-leave policies in the Czech Republic and South Korea, the authors argue that negative feedback impedes progress, while crises and electoral competition contribute to substantial differences in father-leave policy reforms across the countries.

Within a similar policy context but using a different research approach and methodology, Han's paper "*Assessing Gender Equality in Childcare Leave Policies and in the Labour Market: A comparative analysis across 21 countries*" examines the extent of gender equality in childcare leave policies in various countries. By utilising Z-scores, Han measures the overall level of gender equality in childcare leave such as the duration gap and the uptake gap between genders in childcare leave, considering the significance of practical implementation and usage of the leave system. The author further explores the relationship between overall gender equality in childcare leave and labour market outcomes such as gender employment and wage gaps. Scandinavian countries have high gender equality, while East European and English-speaking countries have low equality. However, the study reveals a negative correlation

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between gender equality in leave and the gender employment gap, suggesting that equal leave policies can help reduce gender disparities in the workforce.

Shifting the focus to family policy and gender equality, Ryu's paper "*Unravelling variations in 21st Century East Asia's Pronatalist Family Policy Through the Lens of Inclusiveness*" explore variations in how East Asian countries have responded to declining fertility rates. The study finds that Japan and Singapore have promoted a stratified approach, Taiwan has favoured a targeted strategy, while South Korea has pioneered inclusive support. However, the findings also indicate that all three countries have recently moved toward more inclusive pronatalist family policies, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In line with inclusive pronatalist family policies, Lloyd and Lee's paper "*Comparing the English and Korean marketized childcare systems in the context of promoting maternal employment*" explores two marketised Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) systems to identify similarities and differences in childcare policy provisions, noting that maternal employment rates have not increased significantly in either country. By applying Kagan's systems theory, the authors argue that despite recent childcare policy reforms, the marketised systems and their infrastructure do not appear to be operating efficiently, and high-quality universal childcare should be prioritised, especially in Korea. Moreover, they highlight that reforming childcare policy should be accompanied by changes in labour market policies as well as socio-cultural factors.

From a child-centred perspective, Im and Kim's policy brief "A Comparative Study on Childcare-Related Social Policy Support During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Focusing on South Korea, France and the UK" reveals childcare gaps during the crisis of Covid-19 pandemic. Examining childcare-related social policies in four domains - ECEC, family leave, working conditions, and financial support - the study highlights distinct patterns shaped by different care regimes and varying degrees of policy change. Using Hall's framework of policy change, the findings reveal that, compared to France and the UK, Korea has undergone a paradigm shift from facility-based care to family-centred policies and cash-based measures. The study also explores how different welfare states adapted to the crisis, offering valuable insights into the flexibility and resilience of childcare systems under stress.

In the similar context of focusing on children's wellbeing, Richardson and Ryu's paper "*How 'shock-proof' are child well-being indices in high-income countries? Implications for research and policy post-crisis*" raises concerns about the relevance and reliability of current measures and indices of child-well-being, particularly during COVID-19. Addressing the performance of child income poverty measures during the crisis, the authors, emphasize the importance of quality-assured, crisis-proof indicators of child-wellbeing. They assess the UNICEF's *Innocenti Report Card 16* on child well-being and the Korean Child Well-being Index, both conceptually and methodologically, arguing that current child-wellbeing indices fail to fully capture the effects of crises on children. The paper further asserts that existing child-wellbeing indices must be thoroughly reassessed, particularly in the wake of severe crises, with improvements in data collection at both national and indicator levels. Ultimately, the authors argue that to enhance future crisis responses and improve child well-being, establishing high-quality, crisis-proof indicators is essential.

Finally, Kim, Ko and Park's paper *"Comparative Study on Informal Caregiver Support Policies in the Long-Term Care System for Older Adults Amongst South Korea, the UK, and Sweden"* employs a comparative case study method to analyse informal caregiver support policies in long-term care (LTC) systems for older adults. It compares South Korea, the UK, and Sweden, which have structured LTC systems with varying caregiver support policies. The study aims to understand how these policies alleviate caregiver burden and improve their quality of life. Using Colombo et al. (2011)'s framework, the authors conclude that Sweden emphasises reducing the caregiver burden by increasing formal care, while the UK and South Korea focus more on supporting informal caregivers' rights and well-being. However, the level of support and regulatory rigor varies significantly among the three countries.

The papers collectively highlight several key implications for social reproduction. First of all, as discussed above, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses in care infrastructures and accelerated policy reforms in some countries including South Korea but also reinforced pre-existing inequalities in

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others. The findings indicate that unpaid care work remains a major barrier to gender equality in both household and labour market participation. The unequal distribution of care responsibilities, as seen in Sung and McNamee's study, reinforces traditional gender roles and limits women's opportunities. Secondly, the findings also indicate that policies such as parental leave, childcare provisions, and financial support play a crucial role in enabling or constraining social reproduction. As seen in the papers by Gurin and Gornick, Han and Kim et al., and the policy brief by Im and Kim the institutional support in different welfare regimes influences how effectively those policies address gender disparities and workforce participation. Furthermore, as seen in the papers by Lloyd and Lee, and Ryu, countries that implement universal childcare provisions and inclusive pronatalist policies tend to experience higher female labour force participation and more balanced caregiving responsibilities compared to stratified or market-drive systems.

South Korea provides an informative and compelling case. Unlike many Western welfare states, the country historically relied on market-based and family-dependent care provision. However, the lowest fertility rates globally promoted policy innovations, though the studies suggest that despite increasing investments in parental and childcare, cultural and workplace norms continue to hinder effective uptake. Korea's experience highlights structural barriers such as a rigid labour market along with long working hours, limit the effectiveness of work-family balance policies. Comparisons with countries like France and Sweden reveal that cultural attitudes and workplace flexibility are as crucial as formal policy provision. Gurin and Gornick's analysis suggests that Korea's policy shifts have been influenced by political competition and crisis such as declining fertility rates, economic pressures, and COVID-19 disruptions. These factors shape the extent to which policies address social reproduction challenges. In fact, the simultaneous similarities and differences between the other countries make the perfect vehicle for comparative social policy research around innovation, effectiveness, and change in social policy support for families and households. In particular, the comparisons help us better understand how social policy does/does not and could better support families to pursue sustainable and inclusive growth and social cohesion.

Towards more effective and comprehensive social policy support for families

This comparative analysis emphasises that effective social reproduction policies require both structural reforms and cultural shifts. Korea's evolving policy landscape provides important lessons about the limitations of market-driven childcare, the importance of state intervention, and the need for broader social and workplace transformations to support gender equality and family well-being.

A recurring theme across the studies is the intersection of work-family balance, gender equality, leave policies, childcare, child-wellbeing, and informal care policies. Findings show that while South Korea has made strides toward inclusive family policies, persistent challenges remain, particularly in addressing unpaid care work, fathers' participation in caregiving, and the effectiveness of childcare provisions. Comparative analyses reveal those countries with stronger gender-equal leave policies tend to experience reduced employment and wage gaps. Additionally, crisis responses, such as Korea's shift toward family-centred childcare support, offer insights into how welfare states adapt under stress. The studies also underline the importance of long-term policy planning, particularly in elder care and child well-being. While some nations, like Sweden, prioritise reducing caregiver burdens through formal care, others, including the UK and South Korea, focus on supporting informal caregivers. Similarly, measures of child-wellbeing need refinement to more accurately capture the impact of crises and guide policy improvements.

Overall, the issue underscores the need for more integrated, evidence-based, and crisis-resilient social policies. Strengthening gender-equal family policies, improving access to high-quality childcare, and ensuring well-supported caregiving structures are essential steps toward fostering social cohesion and sustainable policy development in South Korea and beyond.

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