

# STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON FEMALE LABOR: GENDER INEQUALITY IN SOUTH KOREA'S PRIVATE SECTOR FROM 2015-PRESENT

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**Abstract:** Despite sustained policy efforts to promote gender equality, significant gender imbalance persists in South Korea's labour market, particularly within the private sector. This study examines determinants in female labour force participation in South Korea's private sector from 2015 to the present, focusing on employment stability, wage disparities, managerial representation, and age-specific participation patterns. Drawing on gender stratification theory, the study analyses how social norms and institutional practices jointly shape women's labour market outcomes. Using national labour statistics, the analysis reveals three key findings. First, substantial gender wage gaps persist across both regular and irregular employment, despite similar working days between women and men. Second, women remain significantly underrepresented in managerial and executive positions, even as participation in professional and service occupations has increased. Third, female employment follows a pronounced life-course pattern, with sharp declines during childbearing years and partial recovery at later ages, reinforcing cumulative career disadvantages. These findings suggest that rising female labour force participation has not translated into equitable employment outcomes. Instead, gender inequality is reproduced through labour market segmentation, weak enforcement of equality legislation, and persistent gendered expectations surrounding caregiving responsibilities. By focusing explicitly on the private sector and recent labour market trends, this study contributes updated empirical evidence and a structural explanation for the persistence of gender imbalance in South Korea's labour market. The findings underscore the need for policy interventions that prioritize employment quality, effective enforcement, and institutional reform alongside participation rates.

**Keywords:** Gender inequality; South Korea; female labor participation; gender imbalance; employment stability

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## INTRODUCTION

South Korea is widely recognized as a developed economy, having undergone rapid industrialization and economic growth since the 1970s. During the early stages of development, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, female labour played a crucial role in labour-intensive light manufacturing industries, contributing significantly to productivity and economic expansion

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(Seguino, 1997). Although women were often employed under poor working conditions and received relatively low wages, this period marked an important expansion of women's participation in the labour market. From 1960s, women's access to education expanded, narrowing the gender gap in educational attainment and gradually opening new employment opportunities. Legislative measures, including the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, further supported women's participation in economic activities.

In subsequent decades, South Korea's continued economic development and industrial restructuring contributed to improved gender parity in education and formal employment opportunities. Government policies increasingly promoted female labour force participation, recognizing its importance for economic growth, particularly in the context of rapid population ageing and persistently low fertility rates. While rising female employment has often been associated with fertility decline in South Korea, comparative evidence from other high-income OECD countries suggests a more complex relationship, whereby higher female labour participation may support fertility through increased income stability and access to social support systems (Dyner et al., 2022).

Despite these policy efforts, significant gender imbalances in labour force participation persist until today. South Korea continues to record one of the lowest female labour force participation rates among OECD countries. In 2023, the female participation rate stood at 55.6 per cent, compared to 73.3 per cent for males (Statista, 2024). Moreover, women's employment trajectories frequently follow an "M-shaped" pattern, characterized by labour market exit during marriage and childbirth and partial re-entry later in life. This pattern contrasts sharply with male employment trajectories and reflects ongoing structural barriers to sustained female employment (Kim, 2011).

Gender disparities are particularly pronounced in leadership and decision-making positions. Women accounted for only 5.2 per cent of executive positions in private companies in 2021, far below the OECD average of 25.6 per cent (Nam, 2021). Similarly, women held just 12.8 per cent of corporate board seats in 2022, significantly lower than the global average of 31.3 per cent (MSCI ESG Research, 2022). Although overall female economic participation has increased, much of this growth has occurred in non-regular, temporary, or part-time employment. As a result, apparent improvements in participation may obscure persistent inequalities in job security, wages, and career advancement.

Previous research has examined gender inequality in South Korea's labour market; however, many studies treat the labour market as a homogeneous entity without clearly distinguishing between the public and private sectors. Evidence suggests that gender balance is comparatively stronger in the public sector, where recruitment procedures and promotion systems are more institutionalized. In contrast, the private sector continues to exhibit entrenched gender disparities, particularly in promotion practices, managerial representation, and workplace culture. This study addresses these gaps by examining female labour force participation in South Korea's private sector from 2015 to the present, with a focus on identifying the factors sustaining gender imbalance and their implications for women's career advancement. Specifically, the objective of this study is to examine the primary social and institutional factors contributing to gender imbalance in private-sector labor participation.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Existing literature broadly agrees that female labour force participation in South Korea has increased over time, particularly among married women. However, this apparent progress conceals

persistent structural inequalities, as much of the growth in female employment has occurred in non-regular, temporary, or part-time positions. Kim (2011) argues that the continued prevalence of the “M-shaped” employment pattern demonstrates that gender imbalance remains deeply embedded in South Korea’s labour market. Increased participation, therefore, does not necessarily translate into stable or equitable employment outcomes.

A growing body of research highlights sectoral differences in gender equality, with the public sector exhibiting relatively higher levels of gender balance than the private sector. Studies suggest that women’s representation in public employment has benefited from standardized recruitment procedures, transparent promotion systems, and stronger institutional safeguards (Kim, 2011; Lee, 2017). In contrast, the private sector continues to display persistent gender disparities in hiring, promotion, and managerial representation. Although human resource managers in private firms may formally endorse gender equality, employees continue to perceive ongoing discrimination and inequality in workplace practices and organizational culture (Lee, 2017; Shim, 2021).

Several studies have examined factors influencing women’s labour market participation. Early work by Kim (2003) identifies marriage and childcare as key determinants of women’s labour market withdrawal, though this analysis focuses primarily on age-based participation patterns and provides limited insight into institutional and cultural influences. Other scholars emphasize workplace discrimination and weak enforcement of labour regulations. Louise et al (2014) identify inadequate legal enforcement, traditional gender norms, and organizational resistance to equality policies as major contributors to persistent discrimination in South Korean workplaces. However, much of this research relies on data that predate recent labour market changes, underscoring the need for updated empirical analysis.

Cultural norms rooted in Confucian values have also been widely cited as shaping gender inequality in employment. Lee (2017) finds that traditional expectations regarding women’s domestic responsibilities limit their promotion opportunities, particularly in the private sector. Women are often perceived as less committed to their careers due to anticipated family obligations, restricting their access to managerial and executive positions. Although improvements in female educational attainment have narrowed gender gaps in human capital, education alone does not guarantee equal labour market outcomes. Several studies suggest that, unlike in other advanced economies, higher education does not significantly enhance women’s promotion prospects in South Korea’s private sector, where employers continue to favour men for leadership roles even when women possess equal or superior qualifications (Kim, 2003; Lee, 2017).

Another strand of literature examines the relationship between female labour participation and demographic change, particularly fertility decline and population ageing. Conventional arguments suggest that rising female employment contributes to lower fertility rates; however, comparative studies indicate that in many OECD countries, higher female labour participation is positively associated with fertility when supported by effective family policies (Dyran et al., 2022). At the same time, population ageing has increased caregiving demands within households, disproportionately affecting women. Although some studies acknowledge elder care as a constraint on female employment, this factor remains underexplored in the South Korean context.

Overall, existing research provides valuable insights into gender inequality in South Korea’s labour market but reveals several limitations. First, many studies fail to distinguish clearly between public and private sectors, despite evidence of substantial differences in employment practices and gender outcomes. Second, much of the literature focuses on individual-level factors such as education or childbirth without adequately integrating social norms and institutional

practices. Third, relatively few studies examine recent labour market trends using post-2015 data, particularly with regard to women's participation in managerial positions in the private sector.

To address these gaps, this study focuses explicitly on female labour force participation in South Korea's private sector from 2015 to the present. By integrating social norms and institutional practices within a unified analytical framework, the study seeks to identify the key factors sustaining gender imbalance and to explain how these factors shape women's labour market outcomes.

## **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

This study applies gender stratification theory as its primary analytical framework to examine gender imbalance in labour force participation in South Korea's private sector. Gender stratification theory conceptualizes gender inequality as a systematic and structural outcome of unequal access to resources, power, and opportunities between men and women, embedded within social norms and institutional practices (Blumberg, 1984). Unlike individual-level explanations that focus on personal choices or human capital differences, this theory emphasizes how gendered outcomes in the labour market are produced and sustained through broader social structures.

Previous studies on gender inequality in South Korea's labour market have employed a range of theoretical approaches. Institutional theory has been used to analyze how regulatory environments, organizational behavior, and cultural norms shape employment practices, particularly in relation to weak enforcement of gender equality legislation (Patterson & Walcutt, 2014). Similarly, theories of regulatory noncompliance and voluntary compliance have been applied to explain firms' limited adherence to equal employment regulations. While these approaches are useful for understanding policy implementation failures, they focus primarily on enforcement mechanisms and offer limited insight into how deeply embedded social norms interact with institutional practices to shape women's labour market outcomes.

Resource conservation theory (RCT) has also been used to analyse workplace inequality by focusing on unequal access to economic and organizational resources, such as wages, promotions, and training opportunities. However, RCT does not sufficiently account for historical, cultural, and normative factors that shape gendered expectations in the labour market, particularly in societies where traditional gender roles remain influential (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Similarly, role congruity theory highlights how gender stereotypes influence perceptions of leadership and competence, often disadvantaging women in managerial roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). While this perspective helps explain bias in promotion and evaluation processes, it does not fully capture the broader institutional and structural mechanisms sustaining gender inequality.

Gender stratification theory provides a more comprehensive framework by integrating social norms, cultural expectations, and institutional practices into a single analytical model. Blumberg's (1984) general theory of gender stratification emphasizes that gender inequality emerges from the interaction between gender roles, social norms, and organizational and state institutions. These elements jointly determine access to economic resources, occupational status, and decision-making power. In the labour market, stratification is reflected in disparities in employment stability, wages, occupational segregation, and representation in leadership positions.

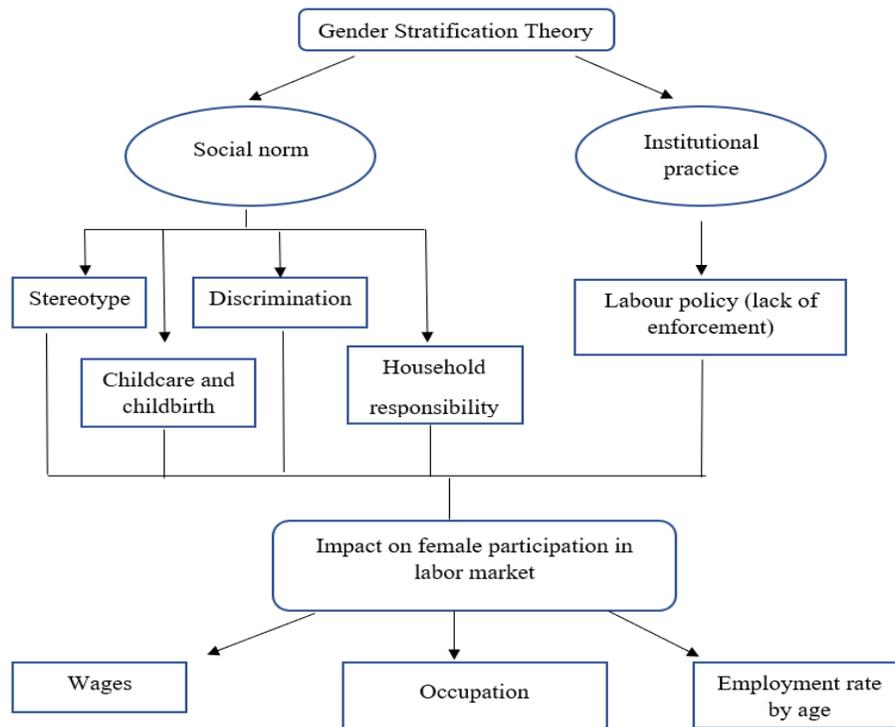
In the context of South Korea, gender stratification theory is particularly relevant due to the persistence of traditional gender norms rooted in Confucian values, which continue to shape expectations regarding women's roles in household labour, childcare, and caregiving. These norms interact with institutional practices in the private sector, including long working hours, seniority-based promotion systems, and limited enforcement of gender equality policies. As a result, women

face structural constraints that restrict sustained labour market participation and upward mobility, particularly during key life stages such as marriage, childbirth, and caregiving for elderly family members.

Applying gender stratification theory allows this study to examine gender imbalance in labour force participation through two interrelated dimensions. First, it enables an analysis of outcome-based inequalities, including gender differences in employment type, wages, occupational position, and age-specific participation rates in South Korea’s private sector. Second, it provides a framework for identifying underlying mechanisms, specifically social norms (such as stereotypes, discrimination, and gendered caregiving expectations) and institutional practices (such as labour policies and their enforcement) that reproduce these unequal outcomes.

Figure 1 presents the analytical framework developed in this study, illustrating how social norms and institutional practices interact to shape female labour force participation in South Korea’s private sector. Social norms, including gender stereotypes, discrimination, household responsibilities, and expectations surrounding childbirth and childcare, influence women’s labour market behaviour and employers’ decision-making processes. Institutional practices, particularly labour policies with weak enforcement mechanisms, further reinforce these norms by failing to provide effective protection against discrimination or adequate support for work–life balance. Together, these factors affect women’s employment outcomes, including participation rates, wage levels, and representation in managerial positions.

**Figure 1: Theoretical Framework**



By employing gender stratification theory, this study moves beyond descriptive analysis of gender gaps and offers a structural explanation for the persistence of gender imbalance in South Korea’s private sector. The framework enables a systematic examination of how social norms and

institutional arrangements jointly constrain women’s labour market participation, despite rising educational attainment and policy efforts to promote gender equality. An important but often underexplored dimension of gender inequality in South Korea’s labour market is the distinction between public and private sectors. Several studies indicate that gender balance is comparatively stronger in the public sector, where recruitment and promotion procedures are more transparent and standardized. Kim (2011) notes that female representation among successful civil service examination candidates has increased substantially, reflecting a narrowing gender gap in public employment.

In contrast, the private sector remains characterized by discretionary hiring and promotion practices, weaker enforcement of equality regulations, and greater reliance on informal networks. Lee (2017) finds that while private-sector organizations often claim to offer equal opportunities, employees continue to perceive significant gender discrimination in workplace culture and advancement opportunities. These findings suggest that sectoral differences play a critical role in shaping gendered employment outcomes.

Despite this evidence, many existing studies treat the labour market as a unified whole, failing to account for the distinct institutional dynamics of the private sector. This omission limits the ability to identify the specific mechanisms sustaining gender inequality and highlights the need for sector-specific analysis. While gender inequality exists in both sectors, the private sector more closely approximates the conditions assumed by gender stratification theory, namely hierarchical organizations with unequal power distribution, limited transparency, and market-driven incentives that prioritize cost efficiency over equality. By focusing on the private sector, this study isolates the structural mechanisms through which gender stratification is reproduced, thereby strengthening the theory–context alignment and the study’s analytical contribution

## **ANALYSIS OF FEMALE LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH KOREA’S PRIVATE SECTOR**

This section examines trends in female labour force participation in South Korea’s private sector from 2015 to the present, focusing on three key dimensions: wage disparities, representation in managerial positions, and employment patterns by age. Guided by gender stratification theory, the analysis highlights how persistent gender inequality is reflected not only in participation rates but also in employment quality and career advancement.

### **Gender Wage and Employment-Type Disparities**

Based on the labor market report from the Ministry of Employment and Labor in 2025, gender imbalance in monthly wages remains huge among regular and irregular workers, as illustrated in the Figure 2 and Figure 3. Among regular workers, the number of working days for women and men has remained largely comparable since 2015, indicating that differences in working time do not account for the observed wage gap. Despite similar working days, male regular workers consistently earn significantly higher monthly wages than their female counterparts. Although women’s average monthly wages have increased over time, the gender wage gap remains substantial, suggesting that wage inequality is structural rather than productivity-based. For example, in 2015, female regular workers worked an average of 22.7 days per month, compared with 22.8 days for male regular workers. Despite this minimal difference in working days, males earned a substantially higher average monthly wage of 3.67 million won, while females earned 2.35 million won. By 2024, the average number of working days had declined to 19.6 days for female regular workers and 19.8 days for male workers. During the same period, average monthly

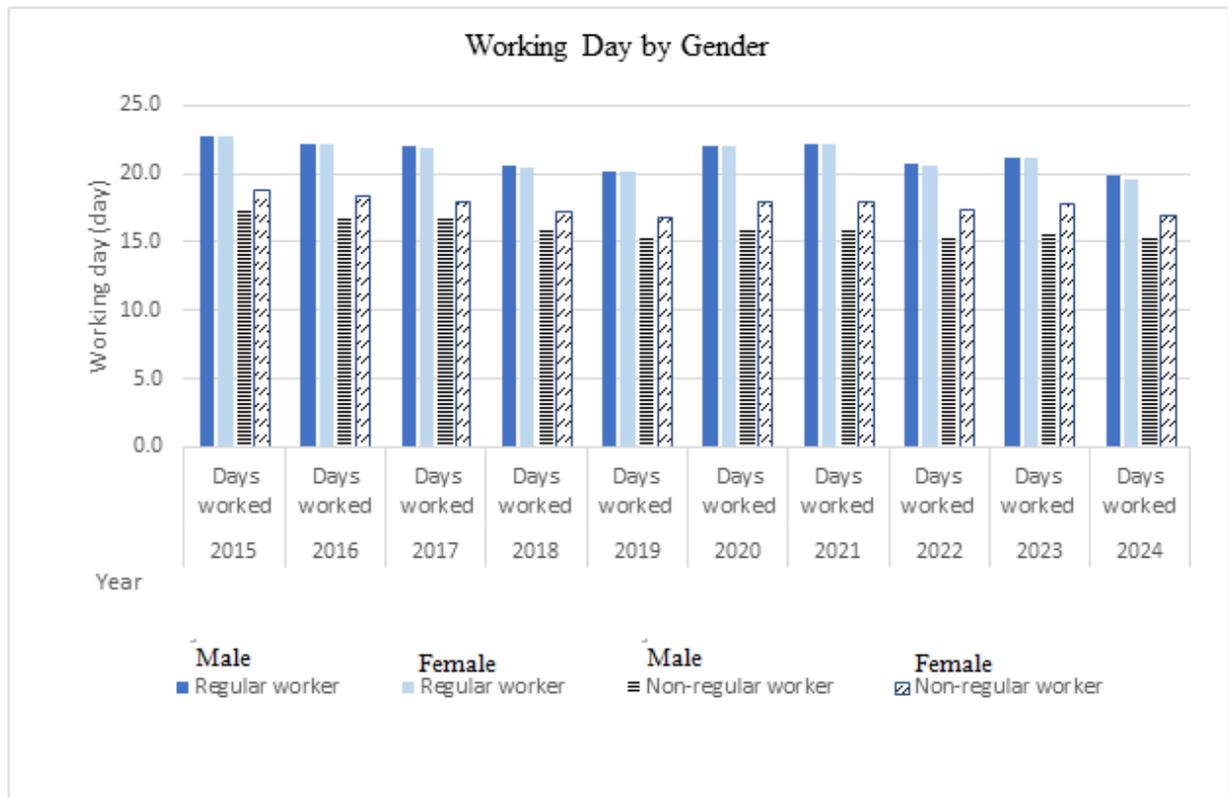
wages increased to 5.00 million won for males and 3.54 million won for females. As a result, females’ monthly wages as a percentage of males’ wages rose from 39.1% in 2015 to 41.5% in 2024 (Table 1). These figures indicate that female monthly wages increased between 2015 and 2024; however, a substantial wage gap between female and male regular workers persists. In addition, the graph shows a notable reduction in the number of working days for regular workers by 2024, reflecting efforts to promote improved work–life balance.

Table 1 Female wage rate compared to male 2015–2024 (Unit: Percentage (%))

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Female Non-Regular Worker	39.5	38.9	39.3	39.7	40.3	40.0	39.3	39.5	39.1	38.6
Female Regular Worker	39.1	39.4	39.7	40.3	40.4	40.7	40.8	40.9	41.4	41.5

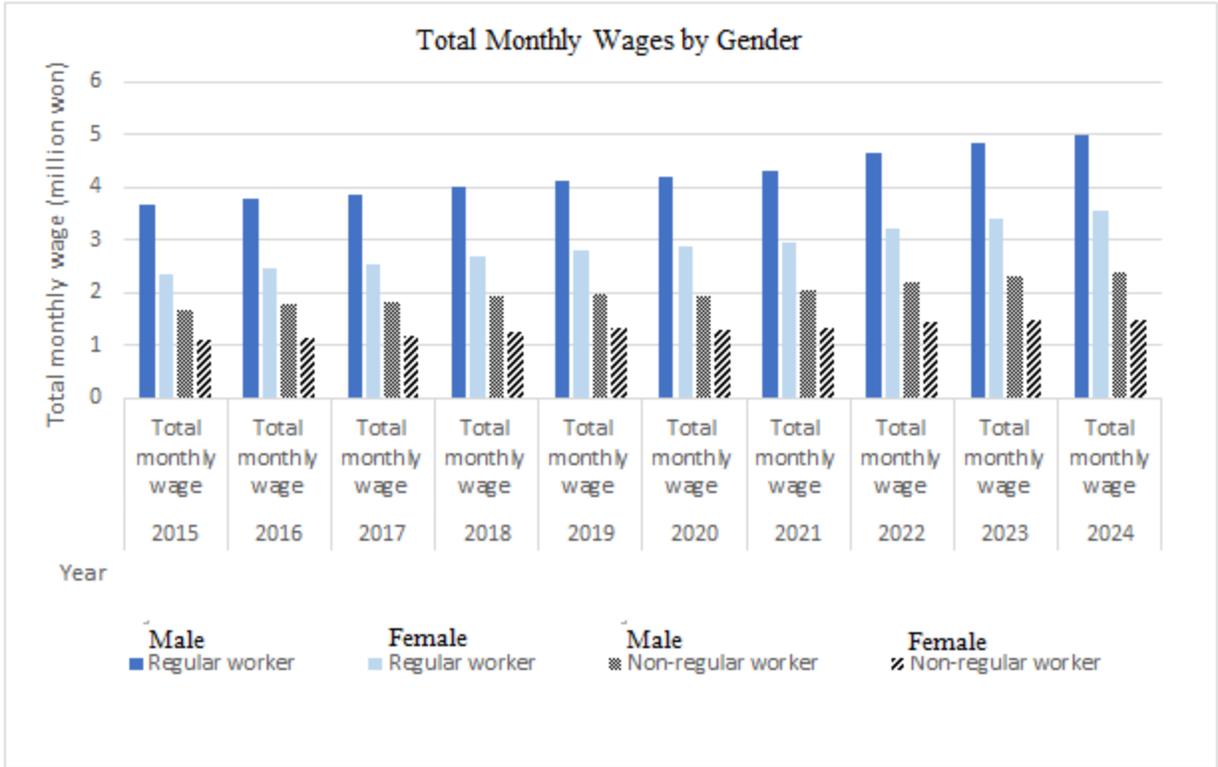
Source: Ministry of Employment and Labor, ROK, 2025.

Figure 2: Working Day by Gender



Source: Ministry of Employment and Labor, ROK, 2025.

Figure 3: Total Monthly Wages by Gender



Source: Ministry of Employment and Labor, 2025

The disparity is even more pronounced among irregular workers. Female irregular workers consistently work more days per month than males, yet receive lower wages. Moreover, the relative wage position of female irregular workers has not improved over time; in fact, women’s wages as a percentage of men’s wages in irregular employment declined slightly between 2015 and 2024. For example, in 2015, female irregular workers worked an average of 18.7 days per month, compared with 17.4 days for male irregular workers. Despite working more days, females earned a lower average monthly wage of 1.09 million won, while males earned 1.67 million won.

This pattern persisted in 2024: female irregular workers continued to work more days than males, but their average monthly wages remained lower. The graph shows no significant growth in monthly wages for female irregular workers between 2015 and 2024. In 2015, female irregular workers earned 39.5% of the wages earned by their male counterparts; by 2024, this proportion had declined slightly to 38.6%.

These findings suggest that while the average monthly wages of female regular workers have shown some progress toward wage parity, gender-based wage inequality remains pronounced in South Korea, particularly among irregular workers. Korean female labour is disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid, less secure employment, reinforcing gender stratification within the private sector.

From the perspective of gender stratification theory, these findings reflect unequal access to economic resources and employment stability. Women’s overrepresentation in irregular employment and persistent wage gaps across both employment types demonstrate how institutional practices and labour market segmentation systematically disadvantage female workers, even as overall participation increases.

### Female representation in Managerial and Professional Positions

Figure 4 and Table 2 present occupational distribution by gender, highlighting trends in managerial and professional employment. While female representation in managerial positions increased from 2017 to 2021, it remains significantly lower than male representation and continues to lag far behind OECD averages. For instance, in 2021 the percentage of female managers in South Korea was 16.3%, which is less than half of the OECD average of 33.7% (The Korea Herald, 2023). Korea is one of the three countries with less than 20 percent women in management roles, along with Turkey and Japan. According to the OECD, these positions include a broad range of leadership roles, from corporate executives to heads of educational institutions and government officials. In contrast, countries like Latvia (45.9%), Sweden (43.0%), Poland (43.0%), and the United States (41.4%) demonstrate much greater female representation in management (The Korea Herald, 2023).

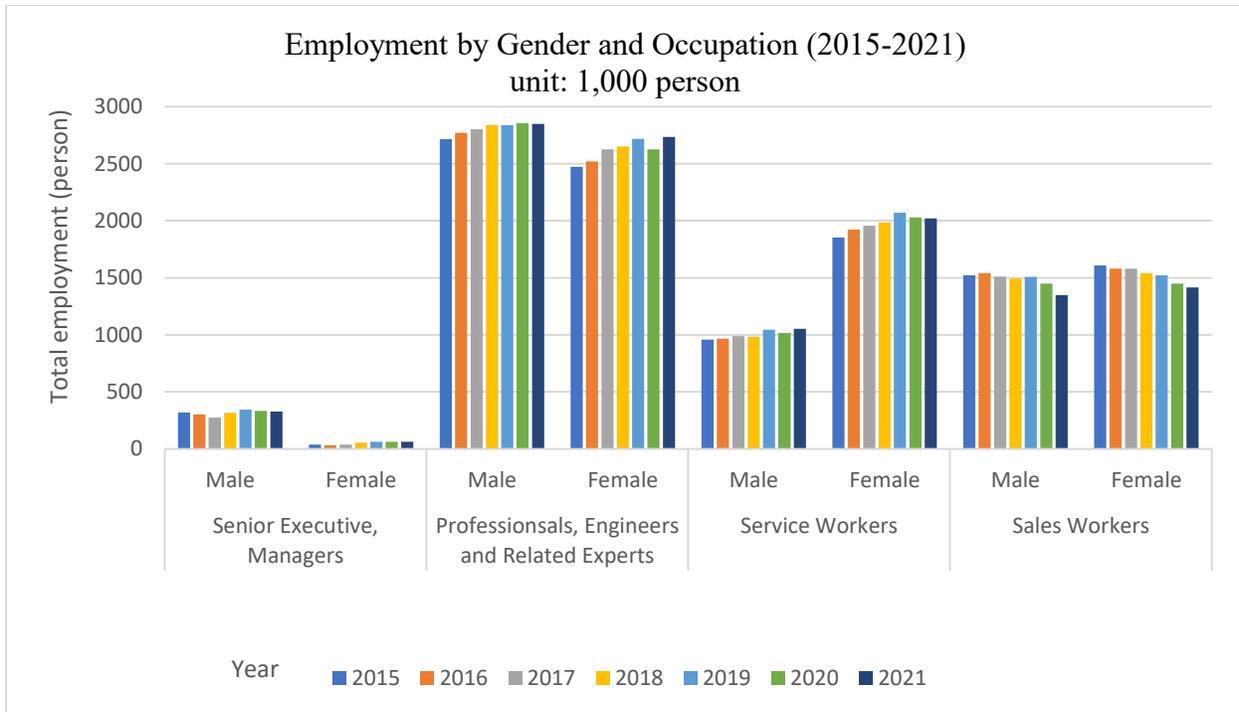
In contrast, Korean women are well represented in professional, service, and sales occupations, with participation levels approaching or exceeding those of men in these categories,, as illustrated in the figure four. This occupational segregation indicates that women’s labour market participation is increasingly concentrated in roles with limited decision-making power and fewer opportunities for advancement. The persistence of a managerial gender gap suggests that formal improvements in education and workforce participation have not translated into equitable access to leadership positions in the private sector.

Table 2 Total employment by gender and occupation from 2015-2023 in private sector  
(Unit: 1000 People)

Occupation	Gender	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Senior Executive, Managers	Male	321	302	274	317	345	334	329	373	398
	Female	37	33	39	54	63	62	64	64	78
Professionals & Related Workers	Male	2714	2772	2802	2839	2839	2855	2849	2985	3158
	Female	2474	2519	2625	2652	2718	2626	2736	2900	3010
Service Workers	Male	959	967	990	984	1044	1016	1053	1148	1187
	Female	1854	1922	1956	1985	2072	2030	2020	2121	2278
Sales Workers	Male	1522	1542	1510	1495	1509	1448	1349	1274	1206
	Female	1607	1579	1581	1542	1522	1449	1416	1407	1415

Source: The Seventh Korean Standard Industrial Classification (KSIC), Korea Labor Institute, 2024.

Figure 4: Employment by Gender and Occupation (2015-2021)



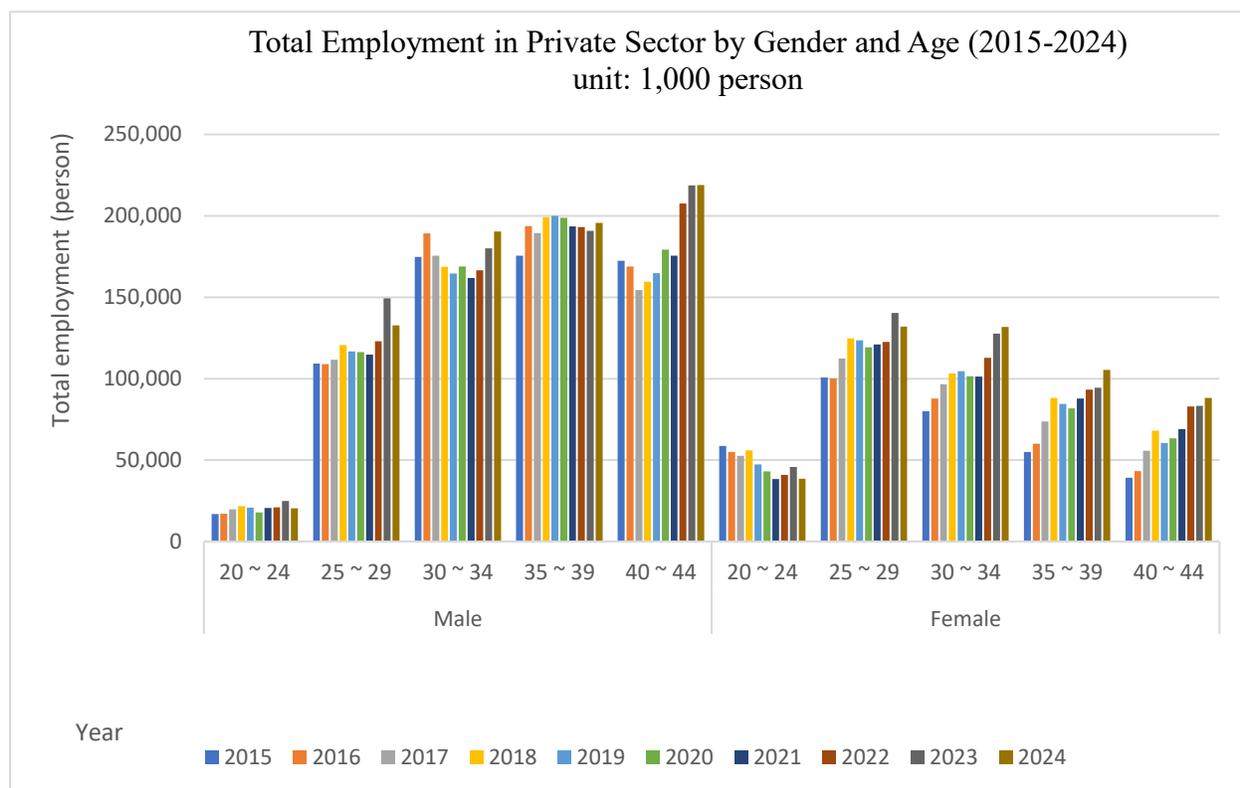
Source: The Seventh Korean Standard Industrial Classification (KSIC), Korea Labor Institute, 2024.

These patterns align with gender stratification theory’s emphasis on unequal access to power and authority. Social norms regarding leadership suitability and institutional promotion practices continue to favour men, limiting women’s upward mobility despite comparable qualifications and experience (Chanda et al, 2024; Baek et al., 2025). Females are often perceived by employers and organizations as being less committed to their careers due to family commitments and responsibilities, which may lead to career interruptions (Cooke, 2010). This aligns with the recent survey conducted by Embrain Public on behalf of nonprofits Gapjil 119 and the Beautiful Foundation August 2023, was of 1,000 working adults, including 435 women revealed that women experience significantly more workplace sex discrimination than men. For instance, 45.1 percent of women reported hearing sexist remarks from colleagues, and 44.8 percent felt they were unfairly tasked with stereotypical duties like preparing coffee. These numbers were over three times higher than those reported by men. The survey also highlighted disparities in employment and income, with one in four women feeling discriminated against during job recruitment and pay negotiations, compared to less than 8% of men (Moon, 2023).

**Employment Patterns by Age and Life Course**

Figure 5 illustrates employment trends by gender and age in the private sector. Female employment has increased overall since 2015, particularly in larger private firms, indicating greater entry into the labour market. However, significant gender differences emerge when employment is analyzed by age group.

Figure 5: Total Employment in Private Sector by Gender and Age



Source: The Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), by Ministry of Employment and Labor, 2025.

Table 3: Total employment in managerial positions by age and gender from 2015-2019 (Unit: 1,000 person)

Gender	Age Group	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Male	20-24	271	203	118	13	13
	25-29	1,864	1,764	1,433	1,190	564
	30-34	5,295	4,032	4,038	2,738	1,883
	35-39	10,322	8,573	7,582	5,421	3,985
	40-44	23,027	17,686	17,134	13,501	9,753
Female	20-24	112	191	83	14	34
	25-29	829	422	770	688	136
	30-34	1,956	1,378	1,471	648	328
	35-39	2,360	1,878	3,355	1,727	1,000
	40-44	3,540	3,547	3,787	2,456	1,595

Source: The Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS), by Ministry of Employment and Labor, 2025.

As indicated in the Figure 5 and Table 3, female employment rates peak in the late 20s but decline sharply between the ages of 30 and 34, a pattern that differs markedly from male

employment trajectories. This decline corresponds with typical life-course events such as marriage, childbirth, and increased caregiving responsibilities. Although female employment rates begin to recover between the ages of 35 and 44, the recovery does not fully offset earlier labour market exits and is often characterized by re-entry into non-regular or lower-status employment. It is important to highlight the challenges that female employees face when participating in South Korea's private sector, particularly after the age of 40 in managerial positions.

This age-based employment pattern reflects the persistence of the “M-shaped” labour participation curve and highlights the cumulative disadvantages women face over their careers. From a gender stratification perspective, the concentration of caregiving responsibilities among women and the lack of institutional support for work–life balance create structural barriers to continuous labour force participation. These interruptions contribute to long-term disadvantages in wages, job security, and promotion prospects despite many women are highly educated and skilled.

## **DISCUSSION**

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that gender imbalance in South Korea's private-sector labour market persists across multiple dimensions. First, wage inequality remains substantial, particularly among irregular workers, despite similar working hours. Second, Korean women continue to be underrepresented in managerial and executive positions, even as participation in professional and service roles increases. Third, employment patterns by age reveal structural barriers associated with childbirth, childcare, and caregiving responsibilities, leading to interrupted career trajectories for women. Together, these findings confirm that improvements in female labour force participation do not necessarily translate into gender equality in employment outcomes.

### **Factors Contributing to Gender Imbalance in Labour Participation**

Drawing on gender stratification theory, as articulated by Rae Lesser Blumberg (1984), the analysis highlights how social norms and institutional practices systematically reinforce gender disparities in the labour market. Gender stratification theory emphasises that unequal access to power, resources, and opportunities is deeply embedded in social and organisational structures. The key factors include social norms—such as gender stereotypes, discrimination, childcare and childbirth responsibilities, and household duties—as well as institutional practices, particularly labour policies and their weak enforcement. By examining these dimensions, this section aims to identify the primary drivers of gender imbalance in labour participation in South Korea's private sector.

#### **Social Norms**

##### *Gender Stereotypes*

Gender stereotypes represent a significant factor contributing to gender imbalance in labour participation in South Korea's private sector. Stereotypes, as a form of social prejudice, are deeply rooted in traditional Korean cultural values, particularly Confucianism. According to Louise and Brandon (2014), hierarchical thinking remains prevalent in South Korean society, especially in the workplace. This has resulted in a business environment characterised by male dominance, authoritarianism, and male chauvinism.

Many Korean companies continue to view females as socially and economically subordinate to males. Consequently, female employees are often perceived as less committed to their careers due to their anticipated family responsibilities, which are assumed to lead to career

interruptions (Cooke, 2010). Such assumptions frequently result in the exclusion of females from senior and decision-making positions, reinforcing male-dominated corporate hierarchies and limiting females' opportunities for career advancement (Bhakuni, 2025).

For example, within the hotel industry, males are often granted more promotion opportunities than females. This disparity is commonly justified by the belief that females are heavily involved in traditional family responsibilities, such as fulfilling obligations during cultural holidays like Lunar New Year. Employers may interpret these responsibilities as a lack of commitment to the organisation compared with male employees (Lee, 2017). This example illustrates how deeply entrenched gender stereotypes continue to shape workplace expectations and reinforce male dominance in South Korea's private sector. As such, gender stereotypes constitute a major contributor to labour participation inequality.

### *Gender Discrimination*

Closely related to stereotypes, gender discrimination remains a deeply embedded social norm in South Korea and significantly contributes to labour market inequality. Discrimination frequently occurs during recruitment, employment, and promotion processes. For instance, many Korean companies show a preference for hiring male workers based on the belief that males possess greater capability and long-term availability than females (Louise and Brandon, 2014).

Additionally, the proportion of females employed in temporary or irregular positions has increased due to both involuntary factors such as employment discrimination and voluntary factors, including childcare and family responsibilities (Kim, 2011). In some cases, female employees are pressured by companies or unions to resign "voluntarily" and are subsequently rehired under irregular contracts with lower wages and reduced job security, particularly during periods of corporate downsizing (Cooke, 2010).

Gender discrimination is especially pronounced during economic crises. During the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, females were disproportionately affected by layoffs and forced into precarious employment. At that time, approximately 4.2 million females—representing 70% of the female workforce were employed in temporary jobs. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, 46.3% of employed females experienced direct or indirect employment adjustments, such as temporary business closures or forced leave. These measures disproportionately affected pregnant workers and those on parental leave, highlighting how gender discrimination intensifies during periods of economic instability (Kim, 2021).

Even when females possess equal or superior qualifications, they remain less likely than males to be hired or promoted. Persistent biases often result in females' contributions being undervalued, while males are more readily rewarded for leadership traits that are traditionally associated with masculinity (Bhakuni, 2025). As a result, females are frequently required to work harder to prove their competence and are less likely to be encouraged to pursue leadership roles (Patterson, Bae, & Lim, 2013).

According to a survey conducted by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions' Labour Institute, 31.1% of respondents identified gender stereotypes and discrimination as key contributors to labour market inequality, particularly in relation to the wage gap (Moon, 2025). These perceptions stem from traditional views that position males as primary breadwinners and females as caregivers. Overall, stereotypes and discrimination remain central social norms that sustain gender imbalance in South Korea's private sector.

### *Household Responsibilities*

Household responsibilities also play a crucial role in contributing to gender imbalance in labour participation. In South Korea, domestic duties such as housekeeping and childcare are predominantly shouldered by females. This unequal division of labour creates significant challenges for females attempting to balance paid employment with domestic responsibilities. married women face discrimination in the workplace because employers in large enterprises and in some occupational groups prefer to employ men or unmarried women. This phenomenon has been documented in a number of empirical studies such as by Lee et al. (2008), for South Korea.

The gender division of housework remains particularly unbalanced in dual-income households. Although laws and policies promoting maternity protection and work–life balance exist, they are often symbolic rather than effective and tend to benefit only specific groups of females (Kim, 2011). Consequently, many females with children struggle to remain employed, as they are expected to manage the majority of household and caregiving duties.

Moreover, South Korea is rapidly becoming one of the most aged societies globally. The growing elderly population has increased the demand for family-based elder care. In Korean society, caring for elderly parents is viewed as a familial obligation, and females are generally expected to assume this role. As a result, elder care has become a significant and growing barrier to female labour force participation. Many females are forced to leave the workforce to care for elderly family members who require long-term assistance (Dyanan, Kirkegaard, & Stansbury, 2022). Unlike childcare, elder care is often prolonged and intensifies over time, requiring specialized skills and sustained emotional and physical labour. Limited access to public eldercare services further exacerbates career disruption for females (Lee, 2024). Therefore, household responsibilities represent a major structural barrier to female labour participation.

### *Childbirth and Childcare*

Childbirth and childcare are additional critical factors contributing to gender imbalance in labour participation. Although female labour force participation in South Korea’s private sector has increased over time, career disruptions related to pregnancy and childbirth remain widespread. These disruptions often force females to make difficult decisions regarding childbearing, as motherhood can significantly hinder career progression (Kim, 2003).

Many females withdraw from the workforce temporarily or permanently following childbirth (Kim, 2011), and evidence suggests that labour participation often begins to decline even in the year preceding childbirth (Dyanan et al., 2022). These challenges have contributed to declining fertility rates and delayed childbearing in South Korea. Females with preschool-aged children face particularly severe constraints, as caregiving demands limit their ability to engage in full-time employment. Consequently, many are pushed into irregular or part-time positions with lower wages, reduced benefits, and limited job security.

Childbirth and childcare responsibilities also disproportionately affect females’ career advancement. In South Korea’s private sector, female representation in senior leadership remains extremely low. For example, Samsung has no female internal directors and only two female external directors. Approximately 20% of female private-sector employees identify childbirth as a major factor disrupting their careers, often due to difficulties balancing work and childcare responsibilities (Matsuura, 2025).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 49% of female respondents reported leaving their jobs due to childcare demands, while 28% shifted to part-time work (Kang, 2024). Similarly, a survey by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions’ Labour Institute found that 61.9% of females had experienced career breaks, compared to 40.6% of males. Male career breaks were

typically associated with job dissatisfaction or career advancement, whereas female career interruptions were primarily driven by marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth (Moon, 2025). These gender-specific career disruptions often result in lower wages and fewer promotion opportunities, reinforcing long-term inequality, and contributing to the continued prevalence of the “M-shaped” employment pattern of Korean female participation in the labor market.

### **Institutional Practices**

Institutional practices play a critical role in sustaining gender imbalance in South Korea’s private-sector labour market, particularly through the uneven implementation and enforcement of labour and welfare policies. Although policies such as the Equal Employment Act aim to promote gender equality by prohibiting discrimination in areas including wages, benefits, working hours, sexual harassment, and childcare, compliance remains limited. Amendments introduced in 2004 sought to increase female employment and implement affirmative action programs; however, many companies continue to disregard these regulations. Some firms deliberately underpay women to reduce labour costs, believing that legal penalties are insufficient to deter profit-driven discrimination (Louise and Brandon, 2014). The lack of strict enforcement, reliance on voluntary compliance, and weak deterrence mechanisms have undermined the effectiveness of gender equality legislation (Cooke, 2010).

Although the government has introduced family-friendly policies such as paid parental leave, flexible working arrangements, and investments in childcare infrastructure, many private-sector firms continue to prioritize long working hours and presenteeism. These workplace norms disadvantage females who require work–life balance and often force them into prolonged career breaks, especially after getting married and having children. As a result, many females face long-term exclusion from stable employment or are compelled to accept lower-paying positions (Bhakuni, 2025). In the public sector, standardized employment contracts, transparent promotion systems, and stronger institutional monitoring reduce the risks associated with utilising welfare benefits. Employees in public institutions generally face fewer implicit penalties when taking parental leave or adopting flexible work arrangements, allowing welfare policies to function more effectively as intended.

In contrast, private-sector firms retain substantial discretion over hiring, evaluation, workload allocation, and promotion decisions. Long working-hour cultures, presenteeism, and expectations of uninterrupted availability remain deeply embedded in many private organizations. These workplace norms discourage the use of parental and paternity leave, particularly among women, who continue to bear primary responsibility for childcare and household labour. Even when welfare benefits are formally available, private-sector employees may avoid using them due to concerns over career stagnation, wage penalties, or job insecurity.

Furthermore, although public childcare facilities have expanded in coverage, their operating hours often fail to align with the long or unpredictable working schedules characteristic of private-sector employment. This mismatch disproportionately affects female workers, who are more likely to adjust their labour market participation to accommodate caregiving responsibilities. As a result, many women experience prolonged career interruptions or are channeled into non-regular, lower-paying positions that offer greater flexibility but limited advancement opportunities.

For instance, a survey by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions’ Labour Institute found that 16.2% of respondents identified weak government gender-equality policies as a major barrier to female labour participation (Moon, 2025). Another survey conducted in September 2024 by Global Research for The Hankyoreh, involving 1,000 South Koreans aged 19–44, found that

84.4% of women believe that having children places women at a disadvantage (Hankyoreh, 2024). According to Yee Jae-yeol, a sociology professor at Seoul National University, women's expectations toward society have increased, yet families and workplaces have failed to keep pace. He described this gap as an institutional and cultural lag, which contributes to women rationally choosing to delay or avoid marriage and childbirth to avoid career interruption (Hankyoreh, 2024). The survey also revealed significant gender differences in perceptions of workplace discrimination, with 70.5% of women describing it as severe compared with 38.6% of men. Korean women tend to perceive childbirth and child-rearing as involving heavier personal burdens, including career suspension. This perception is supported by the findings of Kim and Hahn (2022), who reported that Korean mothers experience a substantial long-term income decline (approximately 66%) due to reduced labor force participation following childbirth, a challenge that fathers typically do not face. This income disparity largely stems from career disruptions experienced by women after childbirth. Although the Korean government has introduced policies such as improved employment protections and expanded public childcare facilities, many Korean women continue to encounter these challenges in practice.

Taken together, these institutional practices demonstrate that gender imbalance in South Korea's private sector does not stem from the absence of policy interventions, but from the organisational conditions that shape their uneven implementation. While gender stratification operates across both public and private sectors, the private sector more clearly reveals how discretionary management practices, weak enforcement, and workplace norms interact to reproduce gender inequality. This sectoral distinction underscores the importance of analysing institutional practices alongside welfare policy design when assessing female labour force participation and employment outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined female labour force participation in South Korea's private sector from 2015 to the present, with the aim of identifying persistent patterns of gender imbalance and the factors sustaining them. Despite increased female participation over time, the findings demonstrate that gender inequality remains deeply embedded in employment outcomes, particularly in wages, employment stability, and access to managerial positions.

The analysis shows that women continue to face significant wage disparities across both regular and irregular employment, even when working patterns are comparable to those of men. In addition, women remain disproportionately concentrated in non-regular employment and underrepresented in decision-making roles, indicating that labour market participation has expanded primarily in lower-quality and lower-status positions. Age-specific employment patterns further reveal that women experience systematic career interruptions during childbearing and caregiving years, resulting in cumulative disadvantages that persist throughout the life course.

By applying gender stratification theory, this study demonstrates that these inequalities are not the result of individual choices or human capital differences alone. Rather, they reflect the interaction between entrenched social norms and institutional practices within South Korea's private sector. Gendered expectations surrounding caregiving responsibilities, combined with organizational cultures characterized by long working hours and weak enforcement of equality policies, continue to constrain women's sustained labour market participation and career advancement.

The findings have important policy implications. Efforts to promote gender equality should move beyond increasing participation rates and place greater emphasis on employment quality,

wage equality, and access to leadership positions. Strengthening enforcement of existing labour regulations, reforming workplace practices that disadvantage caregivers, and promoting a more equitable distribution of unpaid care work are essential steps toward reducing gender imbalance in South Korea's private sector. Without addressing these structural constraints, gender inequality is likely to persist despite continued policy initiatives.

This study has several limitations. The analysis relies on aggregate labour market data, which limits the ability to capture individual-level experiences and firm-specific practices. Future research could incorporate qualitative interviews or firm-level case studies to examine how organizational cultures and managerial decision-making processes shape gender inequality in greater detail. Additionally, comparative studies examining private-sector labour markets across East Asian economies may further illuminate the role of cultural and institutional variation in shaping gender stratification

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