

# Beyond the Policy Rhetoric: The Limitations of Gender Mainstreaming in South Korea Relating to Women and Childcare

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*This article examines the limitations of the gender mainstreaming discourse regarding the issue of childcare by women in South Korea, an area of responsibility that was transferred from the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) to the Ministry of Gender Equality (MGE)<sup>1</sup> in 2003. Through employing a discursive institutionalism approach, this article articulates that whilst the gender mainstreaming discourse has been interpreted at the surface level of politics, it has been formulated differently behind the scenes due to various policy interests. I argue that the discourse has remained at the level of superficial political rhetoric with underdeveloped understanding about the relationship between childcare and gender, thus retaining a stereotypical view of women as caregivers.*

**Keywords:** Gender mainstreaming, South Korea, discursive institutionalism, gender politics, Ministry of Gender Equality.

## Introduction

Gender mainstreaming (GM) is a strategy for bringing gender-sensitive perspectives into the policy decision making processes in order to pursue gender awareness and as a result, advance 'gender equality' across all policy agendas (Council of Europe, 1998; Daly, 2005; Walby, 2005; Squires, 2007). Emerging from the 1995 United Nations (UN) Beijing Platform for Action on incorporating a gender equality perspective 'in all policies at all levels and at all stages' (Council of Europe, 1998:13), the language of GM was quickly adopted by more than 160 governments and international/regional institutions worldwide, including the Council of Europe and European Union (Daly, 2005; Caglar, 2013; Scala and Paterson, 2018). However, this ambitious intent was subject to much ambiguity in terms of how this transnational policy discourse could be adapted to each nation's domestic policy decision-making processes (Y-o Kim, 2004; Daly, 2005; Scala and Paterson, 2018). A number of methodological tools and operational frames have been developed to incorporate the concept into policy implementation processes, such as gender analysis, gender-based assessment, and gender budgeting. However, challenges continue to revolve around the understanding of 'gender mainstreaming' and 'gender equality' in politics (Mazey, 2002; Daly, 2005; Orloff and Palier, 2009; Meier and Celis, 2011; Scala and Paterson, 2018).

In South Korea, GM was accepted as a key strategy for achieving women's empowerment in accordance with the United Nations' statement on GM strategy in the Platform

for Action at the fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 (Huh, 2005; Ma, 2005; E-s Kim, 2008). This GM movement led to the Korean government passing the 'Basic Act on Women's Development' in 1995 promoting gender equality in all areas of politics, the economy and culture, with the creation the Presidential Commission on Women's Affairs in the same year. Subsequently, the Commission became the Ministry of Gender Equality (MGE) in 2001 under President Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003). This widening of the Korean political arena to include gender equality appears to have been significant in creating a space for gender issues in politics and in setting up structures for promoting women's interests and rights (McAdam, 1996; Sperling, 1998; Siim, 2000; Squires, 2000; Y-o Kim, 2001; C-b Park, 2005; Estévez-Abe and Kim, 2014). Women's issues, such as the economic and political empowerment of women, women's health, and violence against women, were addressed in all presidential elections as primary national tasks that needed attention.

Among those, the issue of childcare was significant, particularly with respect to the position of women in the labour market (Huh, 2005; Ma, 2005; Y Park, 2005) and taking into account the lowest fertility rate in history up until that point in 2005, recorded at 1.08, which was the lowest of OECD countries (S-H Lee, 2013, 2017). President Roh Moo-Hyun (February 2003–February 2008) believed that childcare should be considered a women's issue, especially with regard to ensuring greater childcare support for them. As he stated, 'Once you give birth, the government will look after your children' (Congratulatory address given in the Women's Week Celebration, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2003). One of his pivotal decisions was to transfer the governmental duty of childcare from the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MHW) to the MGE (The Presidential Counsel of Policy Planning Committee, 2007). I argue that this should be considered a critical juncture, signifying a shift in the government's stance, which now operated on the belief that the demand for childcare fell under the umbrella of women's issues. In fact, soon after the transfer, the MGE introduced the 'basic subsidy scheme' in 2005, which extended the governmental subsidy to cover all children with the concern of alleviating financial burden of childcare cost, particularly those parents who used private sector childcare services. The introduction of the basic subsidy scheme resolved the initial policy concern (J-h Kim, 2006; Back, 2009; S-H Lee, 2017) regarding childcare, whilst at the same time stimulating the policy discourse of GM elevated around socialising childcare in South Korea, the latter being the under researched main focus of this work. For example, free childcare was initiated in 2013 for the first time and this was further extended in 2018 by providing six hours of free childcare for stay-at-home mothers and twelve hours for those seeking employment or requiring long term childcare due to their participation in the labour market.

However, despite the issue of socialising childcare becoming a mainstream policy agenda within the government, the duty of childcare was given back to the MHW in 2008 under the new conservative administration of President Myung-bak Lee (February 2008–February 2013). This returning back to the MHW leads me to question whether the policy dialogue of GM was conducted in a robust and solid manner during the first transfer from that ministry to the MGE, and if not, to explore what institutional constraints obstructed this, which could be taken as a lesson for the current childcare policy development in South Korea.

In this article, I critically examine the limitations of GM through consideration of the issue of women and childcare in South Korea. There are two questions put forth for debate. First, how did GM bring the issue of women and childcare onto the policy agenda in South

Korea? Second, how was the GM strategy formulated while the Korean government responded to the childcare issue? In order to address these questions, discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2010; Grube, 2016) is drawn upon to analyse two aspects of the GM development: first, the manner in which it was interpreted to raise substantive awareness of the GM as 'policy content'; and second, the way GM was communicated to generate specific policy solutions and programmes as an interactive 'policy process'. While 'policy content' refers to the original nature of policy discourse (what it should be), 'policy process' is the idea put into practice, which may be different from that intended (Schmidt, 2010: 4, cited in Grube, 2016; Schmidt, 2008; Schmidt, 2010).

In the following section, I offer a brief context of GM pertaining to the issue of childcare and the government's decision regarding the transfer of duty from MHW to MGE, followed by the theoretical foundation of discursive institutionalism and the methodological approach utilised. Moving forward, I seek to uncover how the policy discourse on GM brought the issue of childcare onto the policy agenda and further, how the policy discourse was interpreted by different policy agencies and constructed using prevailing stereotypes of gender roles regarding childcare. I conclude with a discussion of the findings and some reflections on further policy discourse around the issue of childcare in South Korea today.

### **Gender mainstreaming discourse and the transferred duty of childcare from MHW to MGE**

The gender norms regarding women's childcare responsibility in South Korea were very resistant to change, which was attributable to traditional Confucian ideas that were likely to lead women to accept an unconditional obligation to take on the roles of housewives and/or caregivers in families (Palley, 1994; Sung, 2003; Won and Pascall, 2004). However, since the late 1990s, Korean society has undergone significant changes with respect to family structure and size, including a shifting demographic profile, particularly impacted upon by ageing and low fertility. Moreover, there has been a polarised labour market in terms of gender-biased work status and occupation. These socioeconomic and demographic transitions have led to the Korean government reducing women's caregiving responsibilities and encouraging their labour market participation through the expanded availability of childcare services (Shin and Shaw, 2003; Sung, 2003; Won and Pascall, 2004; Kang, 2007; Lee-Gong, 2011; Sung and Pascall, 2014). For example, the government fully revised the Childcare Act in 2004, with the aim of establishing universal childcare provision as well as improving the service quality in the sector. The 'Presidential Committee on Ageing in Future Society' under the Roh administration announced 'The First Childcare Support Policy' in 2004 and served as the foundation for the expansion of public childcare services (Baek and Seo, 2004).

Moreover, the expansion of childcare provision was regarded as the most significant area where a gender friendly approach was needed. This is because the awareness of gender roles in caregiving work had drawn attention to gender issues regarding such work and work-life balance. Having acknowledged the relationship between caregiving work and gender, the Roh government transferred the duty of childcare from the MHW to the MGE in order to manage the issue of childcare, adopting the stance that gender perspectives should be brought into consideration (PCPPC, 2007). Before the transfer, governmental intervention on the issue of childcare was focused on supporting low-income families and

overseeing their children's well-being, which had led to residual and selective systems of childcare provision (Yoo, 1999). Unlike this earlier approach to childcare, i.e. a residual strategy focused on only one group of children, namely those from poorer families, the newfound perspectives on gender shifted the policy focus to include an element of gender sensitivity (S-H Lee, 2013).

In this article, I seek to explore further how GM brought the issue of women's childcare onto the policy agenda and how the original policy idea of gender equality around childcare was formulated when the duty of childcare was transferred from the MHW to the MGE.

### **Discursive institutionalism and the analytical framework**

A policy idea can be as subjective as a policy discourse (Bacchi and Rönblom, 2014), as it produces by itself policy interest and can even help formulate policy actors' decision making. The scholarly literature on understanding policy development, employing conceptual approaches, such as traditional institutionalism, including historical institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism, mostly focuses on historical structure and policy agencies to explain how likely it is for a given institution to change or maintain the status quo (Pierson, 1994; Kingdon, 1995; Katzenlson, 1997). This approach (*vis-à-vis* institutionalism) to policy development may help to analyse policy interests of policy actors and/or the resulting institutional performances. However, it still does not clearly explain how a certain policy idea can affect the policy actors' interests and consequent institutional changes. Specifically, in order to bring a gender perspective using the traditional institutionalism approach, it is challenging to explore how a policy idea (GM in this study) has impacted on the policy arena as well as policy interests, or even alternative ideas generated thus leading to institutional changes (Finlayson, 2007; Schmidt, 2008; Hogan and O'Rourke, 2015).

In order to explain policy dependency and even deviations in policy, the approach should move from stressing the structure of historical legacy ('history matters') to how the ideas shape policy interests and policy actors' decisions ('ideas matter'). The 'ideas matter' approach is well argued by Grube (2016), who explains how certain policy rhetoric can become stickier ('rhetoric policy dependency') due to the existing political landscape. More specifically, he contends that policy rhetoric that is more central to voter concerns is likely to have a higher policy dependency than that with lower political saliency. This means that a new policy idea that is not relevant to a citizen's voting choice is unlikely to be chosen by policy makers in the government (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016). In fact, President Roh pledged a strong commitment to the issue of childcare during his election campaign, which reflected society's deep concern about the low fertility rate (S-H Lee, 2013). This presidential promise was directly connected to the concept of childcare as a national undertaking and demonstrates the intention to share responsibility for childcare between the family and the state.

The key aspects of the impact of GM on the issue of childcare, which I highlight in my analytical framework, are clearly articulated by Schmidt. She argues that there are two political spheres, namely content and processes, which must work together to shape and change institutions. 'Content' refers to the nature of discourses, whilst 'processes' pertain to the front of mind capacity to communicate ideas by framing them in a particular fashion (Schmidt, 2010: 4, cited in Grube, 2016). As Schmidt explains, the approach to discursive

Table 1 The analytical framework for the study

Discourse as content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What did the initial policy discourse aim to achieve?</li> <li>• What factors were influential?</li> <li>• Who proposed the policy discourse?</li> <li>• What were the most relevant issues and why?</li> </ul>
Discourse as processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who was involved and what were their policy interests?</li> <li>• How was the policy discourse interpreted differently?</li> <li>• How did the policy options reinforce or challenge existing ideas?</li> </ul>

institutionalism demonstrates how ‘discursive interactions enable actors to overcome constraints which explanations in terms of interests, path dependence, and/or culture present as overwhelming impediments to action’ (Schmidt, 2010: 4, cited in Grube, 2016). This explanatory approach offers insights into how policy actors reshape ideas in order to change institutions and why these actors are often limited in their capacity to make a compelling case when advocating for change. In the context of childcare policy development in South Korea, this article thus addresses not only how the discourse on GM was interpreted and formulated, but also how it was constrained by existing factors. Table 1 sets out an analytical framework, displaying two aspects of GM discourse as ‘content’ and as ‘processes’, with specific discussion points for each.

### Research methodology and techniques applied

As with institutional approaches, including that of Schmidt (2010), a constructionist view of the social world is taken, referring to an epistemological perspective that considers social phenomena to be constructed by people or their actions. This resonates with the stance adopted for the current research, which involves probing how concept and/or theory are generated to interpret social phenomena. However, there are extensive debates as to whether a researcher can be objective and produce objectivity in a study (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Nevertheless, given my selected epistemological foundation of constructivism, that largely lies within the qualitative paradigm, conducting in-depth interviews with relevant key policy actors was deemed appropriate in order to capture their emotions and other subjective aspects associated with their policy interests (Becker and Bryman, 2004; Berg, 2007; Finlayson, 2007; Flick, 2009; Silverman, 2011).

I have used excerpts from sixteen in-depth interviews for this study, participants of which being recruited through purposive sampling and those who responded to semi-structured questionnaires. The interviewees include six policy makers, two government researchers, two academics and three civil organisation leaders who were strongly involved with the transfer period, being interviewed in person from September to December 2011. I conducted three more interviews with a policy maker, an academic and a government researcher through Skype after returning from my fieldwork in South Korea. All the interviews, which had the requisite ethical clearance through the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Bath, were recorded using a digital audio-recording device as well as a Skype recorder software programme. Whilst the study draws on data

collected eight years ago, the examination of the inter-ministerial transition of childcare provision is still relevant to the current childcare policy development in South Korea today and hence deserves interrogation. I also should point out that each interviewee played an important role as a key policy actor during the period of interest. Over time, many of them held different positions within the policy making arena and hence were deemed well equipped to provide insights regarding the transfer of the duty of childcare from the MHW to MGE. A similar retrospective approach to data analysis can be found in other research, one particular example being Hogan and O'Rourke's discursive institutionalism study examining how an economic crisis (a policy discourse) impacted on the policy reform change in Ireland and Mexico in the 1980s. By employing policy documents released around the time period of 1980s, the authors were able to demonstrate how a new policy agenda was re/defined and set up at that time and hence explain the subsequent series of events that resonate to this day. In sum, discursive institutionalism studies, focusing on the exchanging ideas and the internal agents generated, can facilitate understanding historical policy narratives that can shed light on the narrative of contemporary debates, as is the case of this study on the subject of GM.

In addition to the interviews, a thorough analysis of relevant policy documents, such as presidential statements, government reports published by the MHW and MGE as well as non-governmental organisation (NGO) press release documents was undertaken in order to understand the policy environment and to provide context to the in-depth interviews. Yanow (2000) claimed that document analysis can provide background information for conversational interviews with key actors. Hence, the relevant policy documents were intended to serve as the principal artefacts from which I could understand how, according to the documentary records, a policy issue was conceptualised and evaluated (Scott, 1990; Freeman and Maybin, 2011). In the following section, how the GM discourse was formulated in South Korea and its resulting impact on the issue of childcare and Korea's current childcare policy are explored.

### **Gender mainstreaming discourse as 'content'**

#### *Aiming for changes in political climate through greater representation of female politicians*

As 'content', the discourse of GM in South Korea has led to change in the national mood owing to the appointment of a higher number of female politicians within the cabinet, which helped the Roh government to become more open-minded towards gender matters as compared to previous administrations. An interview I held with the former minister of the MGE demonstrates that this increase in female politicians contributed to an active public discussion of diverse gender issues, and in so doing, helped to bring these issues to the centre of the policy agenda.

*I was quite lucky to be with other female politicians in my ministerial period. There were some female members in the Cabinet as well, who had feminist perspectives. That was not all. In the National Assembly too, you know. I reckon there were a fair number of female members in the Congress. I think these environments worked with me very well, especially to bring the issue of childcare into the public arena. They were actually willing to discuss this and never asked why it was important, which is a surprise, as male politicians often do.  
(Interviewee 6, the first minister of MGE)*



In fact, during the Roh government, four key female politicians were appointed, including Mrs. Myeong-Sook Han as Prime Minister. This appointment can be seen as a critical turning point, whereby the Korean government actively started to appoint femocrats within the government. Mrs. Han had previously worked for women's empowerment and rights, especially for marginalised women, in feminist activist groups such as the 'Korean Womenlink' and 'Korean Women Association United' (KWAU). Following her appointment, Mrs. Kum-Sil Kang was elected to serve as Minister of Justice. Prior to this, she had worked as an NGO lawyer protecting basic human rights and advocating social justice for minority groups. During this time, most daily newspapers described her appointment as a 'sensational and ground-breaking initiation', since she was the first female minister in the Ministry of Justice and the youngest to date (J Kim, 2011). Under Minister Mrs. Hwa-jung Kim in the MHW, there were a number of female chairpersons of committees appointed, including Professor Hye-kyoung Lee to the Presidential Committee on Social Inclusion, one of the presidential advisory bodies. This study demonstrates that, as one of the key strategies which the GM discourse emphasises, the strategy of increasing women's representation in politics has enabled the Korean government to operate with a heightened awareness of gender issues throughout all policy agenda implementation (Y-o Kim, 2004; Squires, 2007).

#### *Why childcare? - Bringing the issue of childcare with gender perspectives*

This changing political climate drew more attention to gender-related issues, such as the economic and political empowerment of women, women's health and violence against women, and emphasised the need to address these issues at a national level. However, among those issues, political concerns regarding childcare were more significant, paying special attention to the position of women in the labour market, followed by the socioeconomic changes since the late 1990s (Huh, 2005; Ma, 2005). Furthermore, women's roles in political and economic activities increased, because of the rapid progress in political democratisation and the economic growth experienced in the 1980s and 1990s (C-b Park, 2005). I argue that these changed conditions created a strong enough impact to draw political attention to issues of caregiving, including childcare, which up until that point had been accepted as being solely the responsibility of women. In addition to this, South Korea was eager to catch up with western countries, not only in terms of economic affluence and political freedoms, but also in terms of matching their western counterparts in their level of social development (T-h Kim, 2011).

With this newfound recognition of childcare related to women's changing socioeconomic conditions, the decision to transfer the duty of childcare from the MHW to the MGE should be considered one of the critical points at which the government started to understand how the issue of childcare connected to issues of gender equality, as the name of MGE (Ministry of Gender Equality) suggests. In fact, the Presidential Counsel of Policy Planning Committee clarified the basis of the decision by stating that 'the view of childcare needed to be approached by taking into account the woman's perspective' (PCPPC, 2007).

This transfer decision was also influenced by the criticism that while the MHW held the responsibility for childcare policy, it had been implemented without much attention given to gender issues. Interviewee 3, an academic consultant, confirmed that within the MHW there had been little discussion on the reasons why the issue of gender played a role in childcare and how to improve the quality of childcare services. The proportion of the

Ministry's total budget available for childcare had historically been fairly small compared to its other welfare spending allocations. Moreover, childcare provision was only available to low income families without sufficient resources to look after their own children whilst the parents were working (Yoo, 1999). This service was, therefore, not universal, and childcare was not seen as a priority within the MHW. According to interviewee 4, the Ministry also had to manage major social security systems, such as those for national pensions, health insurance, and employment.

From developments such as the transfer of childcare duty from MHW to MGE, it appeared that President Roh strongly believed that the issue of childcare should be resolved in ways that considered both women's career demands and their responsibilities as caregivers. One respondent, a senior civil servant, gave testimony that Mr. Roh studied the diverse debates around care and gender. Another respondent, a minister, said that he had been willing to consider arguments made by feminists and progressive advocates (interviewees 7 and 6). Likewise, one of the senior governmental researchers revealed at interview that 'President Roh was strongly convinced that the issue of childcare needed to be categorised as a women's issue'. As soon as he came into power, he publicly announced that childcare should be seen as the most urgent and significant issue for working mothers (PCPPC, 2007).

To sum up, as policy content, the GM movement in South Korea initially aimed to raise awareness of gender issues and as a result, promote gender equality particularly that related to women's issues. Childcare was considered one of the significant areas where the government could help improve women's socioeconomic status by expanding the availability of childcare support services. These political changes were radically driven by the strong determination of the President as well as the increased representation of key female politicians, which together brought about transferring the duty of childcare from the MHW to the MGE. I, therefore, argue that the policy discourse of GM managed to be interpreted as 'content' to raise the substantive awareness of childcare and women's issues and brought the matter of childcare onto the policy agenda.

### **Gender mainstreaming discourse as 'processes'**

What about the processes? Here, I discuss how the policy discourse of GM was communicated while the policy decision over the transfer was still being debated. In order to do so, I explore the varying policy interests of different policy actors relating to the transfer decision including who proposed the transfer, what the policy interests were, and how the policy options reinforced or challenged existing ideas. There were two types of factions with policy interests around the transfer decision. The first group, comprising civil organisations, displayed different policy interests, namely, the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) and the Korea Women's Association United (KWAU). The second group, which comprised childcare centres' associations also held opposing views and included The Korea EduCare Association (KECA) for the public childcare facilities and the Korean Private Nursery Education Association (KPNEA) for the private ones.

#### *Differences in policy interest between PSPD and KWAU*

The issue of the transfer of childcare away from the MHW was of concern to one particular civil organisation, the PSPD. To date, they had been working on promoting people's



participation in governmental decision-making processes and socioeconomic reforms, as well as on strengthening social security and securing minimum living standards. This civil organisation advocated on behalf of the social welfare professionals and those scholars who were opposed to the transfer (interviewee 10, academic consultant and NGO group leader). The PSPD's subcommittee, the 'Social Welfare Committee', which dealt with general affairs of social welfare, had been working in support of social workers in the field and most of the committee members were professors in relevant university departments.

Thus, the transfer decision was arduous owing to bitter opposition from social welfare professionals, including practitioners in social welfare and scholars from the academic community. They organised protests in front of the national assembly, objecting to the transfer of childcare responsibility from the MHW to the MGE (interviewees 7 and 10, senior civil servant and NGO group leader, respectively). The senior civil servant described the situation at the time as 'being surrounded by enemies on all sides'. In fact, the responses of social welfare professionals were not surprising, considering that, up until that point, their primary domain of work, including childcare, had been handled by the MHW and they did not want it to be handed over to the MGE. The social welfare interest group contended that childcare policy needed to be approached with children's well-being and development as the priority, rather than women and gender matters being put to the fore (interviewee 10, NGO group leader). He added that 'there was no matter of gender in understanding childcare, even in the civil organisation PSPD, which was representing the professionals at that time'.

It might, therefore, be fair to assume that this civil organisation would take up the fight on behalf of social welfare workers and scholars, given the PSPD's background and its membership. However, it appears that ultimately their position regarding the transfer was rather unclear. On the wider matter of childcare, the PSPD had been working with the KWAU, which was in favour of the governmental decision to transfer responsibility from the MHW to the MGE. Often, both these organisations tended to share opinions regarding childcare policy directions, making similar public statements. However, around the time of the governmental decision, as the KWAU's statements advocating the transfer were made public, the group leader of the PSPD admitted that 'the name of the PSPD was dropped from the list of its supporters'.

On the other hand, the KWAU had been a long-standing representative of women's rights and empowerment NGOs in South Korea. They constantly argued that the issue of childcare should not be separated from issues of the family since caregiving work is mainly undertaken by women in the home (interviewee 4, women's group organisation leader). This interviewee additionally explained that 'the KWAU aims to stand for women's working rights so that the socialisation of care could not be more important than from this point of view'. Even when the MGE was first established under Kim Dae-jung's government in 2001, the KWAU had argued that the duty of childcare should be given to the MGE. When the issue of the transfer became a public debate during the Roh government, they reiterated that the policy setting for childcare matters was closely related to women's situation in the labour market and increased gender equality. In fact, one of their main points of contention was that the MHW focused only on the suppliers providing childcare services in the marketplace, instead of focusing on the broader needs of service users (Namyoon, 2005).

Ironically, as mentioned earlier, the PSPD and KWAU tended to share similar opinions on government actions, especially regarding childcare issues. However, it seems that regarding the transfer decision, the former had struggled to solidify its position.

The interviewee from the PSPD revealed that they decided to have their name dropped from the KWAU statement on the issue of transfer, but then complained that the decision had been taken by the government unilaterally. They expressed their anger regarding this unilateral action, and even towards the minister of the MHW, who carried it out. The following statement by the PSPD reflects their anger:

*We are unclear about what the transfer of the childcare duty from the MHW to the MGE will contribute to the current affairs on the childcare issue we have at this time. We also must ask the government why the decision had to be taken unilaterally without enough discussion to gather social consensus.*

*(Statements by the PSPD, 1st Apr 2003)*

This demonstrates that the government's transfer decision eventually drove a split between these two civil organisations; the PSPD that advocated social welfare profession, and the KWAU that represented women. There is room for debate as to whether the transfer decision should have emphasised the perspective of children's well-being and development or that of women's issues. I strongly agree that the issue of childcare should have been approached with a wider and more comprehensive perspective, considering not only women's issues, but also children's well-being and development, as advocated by the PSPD. However, I argue that while the substantive awareness of gender equality related to childcare was raised through the top down approach, the original intention of the transfer with the influence of GM was neglected due to the different policy interests between these two civil organisations, i.e. the PSPD and KWAU. Moreover, the political actors involved in this process failed to incorporate gender issues into the perspectives of children's well-being and development as well as women's issues. I strongly argue that, due to the differing policy interests between these two civil organisations, the original meaning of GM over the transfer was overlooked. This is supported by Caglar (2013), who contended that the success of GM can be subject to 'the politics of meaning-making', for in the current study the idea of GM could not be incorporated into the operationalisation of specific policy solutions and programmes as an 'interactive' process given the present agendas of two ministries that drowned out any GM perspective.

#### *Differences in policy interest between KECA and KPNEA*

On the other hand, the government's decision to transfer the duty of childcare from the MHW to the MGE also resulted in a serious conflict between KECA and KPNEA. Previously, when childcare was managed by the MHW, KECA members, the public sector providers, were supported by central and local governmental subsidies that were used to cover their operational costs, including paying for care workers' salaries. In contrast, there had been little money given to the KPNEA members, the private providers, since the MHW followed a certain policy that prohibited subsidies and central government support was only for public and national facilities (S-H Lee, 2013). However, the MHW did announce that, in special circumstances, they would support some private day-care centres, but only if the private centres accommodated children from families that were below a minimum income threshold (MHW, 2004). This served to reduce the waiting lists of poorer families, who were often left waiting while trying to register their children at the more popular public facilities. Obviously, this additional clause did not

provide any comfort to those private owners who were excluded from receiving governmental aid. Moreover, children from low-income families were prioritised when applying to attend public facilities and, in fact, these families, as well as many others not classified as low-income, preferred that their children attend publicly run centres, as they offered a better quality service at a lower cost (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2006).

As indicated by one of the interviewees, resolving this unequal treatment by the government regarding subsidies meant KPNEA was very keen on being placed under the MGE when the transfer was up for discussion within the government (interviewee 7, senior civil servant). She explained that the reason for this was because 'KPNEA was poorly treated by the MHW while they were under the MHW'. She then described the conflict between KPNEA and the MHW during the period when it was responsible for childcare:

*When the government needed to build childcare facilities in the late 1980s, it encouraged the private association (KPNEA) to build and the government borrowed the money from the National Pension Fund. Then, the number of childcare facilities dramatically increased and the private providers were over the moon, imagining that they would get golden eggs within a short time. However, they must have felt that they were then abandoned by the MHW and must have been quite upset about the governmental unfairness in the way they were treated. (Interviewee 7, senior civil servant)*

In contrast, the public association KECA was against the transfer decision proposed by the Roh government. They were worried about the potential loss of government subsidies for public childcare centres, because 'the size of the pie they get to share from the MHW will be reduced' (interviewee 7, senior civil servant). Hence, the government's decision about the transfer brought about conflict between it and KECA and possibly worsened relations between the public association (KECA) and the private one (KPNEA). According to the senior civil servant who was interviewed, these two childcare facilities' associations could be described as the 'prominent range of mountains in the Korean care market, being staked out against each other as competitors wanting to have more children registered. The root cause of this competitive relationship started from the differentiated governmental subsidy, which was only given to the public ones'.

#### *Policy path dependency on rhetoric*

As policy interests clashed among the various policy agencies, the discourse on GM itself was merely political rhetoric with an ambiguous meaning (Y-o Kim and Ma, 2004). Following the Beijing World Conference on Women in 1995, the terminologies of gender and GM had been used without any exact explanation. In fact, these terms were widely used among civil servants and lawmakers without ever being clearly defined, even by governmental researchers (Ma, 2007; E-s Kim, 2008; Han *et al.*, 2008). An interview with a government researcher suggests that the notion of GM was not fully accepted and endorsed by civil servants and politicians.

*It is doubtful whether we reached compliance with the gender mainstreaming discourse in the policy making process. It might have been too early to have those gender perspectives in our society, particularly when some male governmental bureaucrats were still not aware of gender sensitive policies. (Interviewee 2, senior governmental researcher)*

This lack of understanding about gender can be seen in the several name changes of the Ministry of Gender Equality over the years. The name changed four times after it was first established in 2001 as the Ministry of Gender Equality, which in Korean was simply called the Ministry of Women. The name was changed to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2005, but in Korean was called the Ministry of Women and Family, with the duties of family and childcare having been transferred to it in June 2004 from the MHW. In 2008, it changed to the Ministry of Gender Equality only to be changed back to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2010.

The fluctuations in the Ministry's name suggests that the Korean translation of the phrase 'gender equality' may not have been a comfortable one even for policy makers to use, whereas the term 'women's policy' may have been seen as more acceptable. This policy path dependency on rhetoric around the term 'gender equality' can be argued with two key points to be made. Firstly, the understanding of gender equality might have been limited to being solely a women's issue, rather than being comprehensively approached so as to integrate the role of men. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, when the transfer decision was made, it was with the underlying assumption that childcare still remained a woman's duty, following the traditional Confucian path, rather than bringing the responsibility of men into childcare discussions.

## Conclusion and discussion

In the context of childcare policy development in South Korea, this article has addressed not only how the discourse of GM was interpreted, but also how it was constrained by existing factors during the inter-ministerial transfer.

Drawing upon the theoretical and analytical stance of discursive institutionalism has been useful in two respects: firstly, it has enabled me to understand how the institutions (the government and the MGE) were concerned with the idea of GM, alongside pursuing their interests, values, and institutional performance regarding the issue of childcare. It has allowed me to explain how a policy discourse can lead to policy actors considering new ideas and overcoming entrenched policy interests, institutional obstacles, and cultural impediments to change (Radaelli and Schmidt, 2004). Secondly, it has provided insights into the way that the idea of GM was communicated within an interactive political process in relation to existing ideas around gender roles in childcare, later referred to as the 'policy path dependency on rhetoric' in this study. It places a deeper emphasis on ideas and the interactive processes of conveying these, as compared to other approaches, such as the historical and rational choice forms of institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008; Béland, 2009; Bacchi and Rönnblom, 2014).

Through the lens of discursive institutionalism, the event of the transfer can be considered a turning point as it brought forward the issue of childcare, along with the awareness of its relationship to gender as well as the state's responsibility for this provision. However, behind the scenes during the decision-making process over the transfer, competing policy interests emerged among different agencies, such as KWAU, PSPD, KECA, and KPNEA. With such conflicting policy ideas, it is clear that the initial idea of GM remained confined to political rhetoric, rather than bringing any practical influence or tangible impact on the existing institutions and policy actors' attitudes towards the transfer decision.

I would conclude that there were two key reasons why GM failed to take centre stage when the issue of childcare responsibilities of women in South Korea was on the agenda in

2003. First, the initial idea of the integration of care and gender failed to materialise amongst the different policy agent groups, who were primarily concerned with protecting their policy interests, which resulted in much conflict that detracted from any GM focus.

Secondly, the discourse of GM failed to challenge the prevailing gender ideology around women's childcare in South Korea. For example, as discussed earlier, the name of the Ministry of Gender Equality is called 'the Ministry of Women' in Korean. Thus, the decision to transfer from the MHW to the MGE still shows the dominant gender role view of women as primary caregivers. Moving the duty of childcare to the 'Ministry of Women' was consistent with the stereotypical view regarding the role of women as caregivers in South Korea. I, therefore, argue that whilst political efforts were made to bring gender awareness into the policy making process, especially in the area of childcare, the terminology of 'gender mainstreaming' and 'gender equality' remained as mere political rhetoric rather than being explicitly deployed to transform the strong gender ideology prevalent around childcare in South Korea.

The understanding of 'gender mainstreaming' with respect to undertaking childcare should not only refer to the issue of women's roles as caregivers, but also, must include the dimension of gender relations. That is, there needs to be comprehension of the different structural limitations that men and women experience in employing childcare services as well as their participation in the labour market (Lewis, 1992; Millar, 2006). This is because gender relations significantly matter, especially when the position of women in the labour market is marginalised. Korean women will very often have dual roles, as worker and housewife, but principally they are defined as caregivers in the home (Y-o Kim and Ma, 2004; Huh, 2005; Ma, 2005; An, 2008; Peng, 2009). As a result, the decision regarding whether to employ childcare services or to do the childcare work themselves as well as whether a woman should undertake part-time, full-time employment, or not work at all is considered to be a female responsibility, with there being no question that the man's circumstances should be taken into account.

The historical milestone of the transfer of childcare responsibility to the MGE had important policy implications for the current childcare policy development. As discussed earlier, the Korean government has provided universal free childcare (called '*Moosang-boyuk*' in Korea) since 2013 and there is no doubt that the initial political momentum was driven by the critical event of the transfer with the substantive awareness of childcare and gender equality. Adopting the approach of 'ideas matter' under the lens of discursive institutionalism has demonstrated how a policy idea can change or reinforce existing institutions and policy actors' behaviour. Hence, incorporating gender into politics through GM in the context of childcare could have become a reality, if the various stakeholders had been willing to acknowledge that both men and women have a role to play in this regard. However, they were unable to convert their rhetoric into a gender sensitive perspective.

In order to make it more applicable and practical in the childcare policy area, I argue that the policy discussion around gender relations relating to childcare work should explicitly acknowledge and tackle the fundamental barriers that obstruct gender equality (Lewis, 1992). As mentioned earlier, the duty of childcare was given back to the MHW in 2008 and it is no longer a matter of which ministry is to be responsible for it. What should matter is whether the issue of gender relations for both of women and men is addressed and integrated within the policy setting. Whilst free childcare is available today in South Korea, some studies recently found that this provision has had little impact on women's

work participation, has failed to reduce childcare costs and has done little to alleviate the informal care burden (Yun, 2015; Y-W Lee, 2016; Kang, 2019). Accordingly, it would be worthwhile exploring how gender relations are rooted in institutional designs, for instance, Korean women's work participation is mainly hourly paid, part time and predominantly in the service sector, whilst men generally work for much longer hours (Y-m Kim, 2015). As a consequence, the burden of childcare has been institutionalised as being the responsibility of the woman of the household (S-H Lee, 2016).

In order to deliver universal childcare provision and not be heavily reliant on the private sector, thereby giving more women greater flexibility in terms of work life balance, the issue of GM needs to be reintroduced into the current policy debates (S-H Lee and Baek, 2018). Moreover, the policy setting in relation to providing universal childcare should deliver more accessible and equitable choices for all children and parents, with a good service quality standard not being simply available to those who can afford it. In sum, I believe that this can be achieved through bringing the awareness of gender relations in childcare into the politics as well as the institutional policy design in the Korean context.

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### Note

- 1 Since 2010, the name has changed to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF).

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