



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCE RESEARCH, IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS IN TECHNOLOGY

ISSN: 2454-132X

Impact factor: 4.295

(Volume 4, Issue 1)

Available online at www.ijariit.com

Confucianism and Changing Gender Roles

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ABSTRACT

Confucianism in South Korea instills the concept of male superiority over women. Although the laws in South Korea establish women's rights, the practice and norms of society still engender male domination. Korean family norms promote the unity of the family while placing women in a subservient position, the traditional culture requires obedience to a father and then to a husband and sons. Family norms also place the power of family decisions with husbands. Men keep contact politically and socially at village meetings and exchange use of resources and production. As women take on greater productive roles and earn income, their involvement in decision-making increases. Female power within the family has increased also due to increased women's education. Over that last three decades, these traditional views on gender roles influenced by Confucianism have changed drastically, although it is still looked down upon for women to work outside the house, it is slowly being accepted and almost 54% of the female population in South Korea is actively participating the workforce. On the other hand, the male domination over the woman of the house has eased out, and many men do help out with household chores and looking after children while the woman works. Although this is a very small percentage of the population, much lesser than would be desired, it is still a change from the Confucianist principles where the male remains dominant and authoritative.

The expectation is that modernization will bring about its empowerment of women and a balance between men and women in both family and society. In the 21st century, we try to understand how the roles of men and women have changed in this country that has deeply rooted beliefs of Confucius in their society. Confucianism in South Korea instills the concept of male superiority over women. Although the laws in South Korea establish women's rights, the practice and norms of society still engender male domination. Korean family norms promote the unity of the family while placing women in a subservient position, the traditional culture requires obedience to a father and then to a husband and sons. Family norms also place the power of family decisions with husbands. Men keep contact politically and socially at village meetings and exchange use of resources and production. As women take on greater productive roles and earn income, their involvement in decision making increases. Female power within the family has increased also due to increased women's education. Over that last three decades, these traditional views on gender roles influenced by Confucianism have changed drastically, although it is still looked down upon for women to work outside the house, it is slowly being accepted and almost 54% of the female population in South Korea is actively participating the workforce. On the other hand, the male domination over the woman of the house has eased out, and many men do help out with household chores and looking after children while the woman works. Although this is a very small percentage of the population, much lesser than would be desired, it is still a change from the Confucianist principles where the male remains dominant and authoritative. Although there are instances to prove that South Korea is coming out of its traditional views on gender roles, they are still far behind on gender equality when compared to globally desirable standards.

The expectation is that modernization will bring about its empowerment of women and a balance between men and women in both family and society. In the 21st century, we try to understand how the roles of men and women have changed in this country that has deeply rooted beliefs of Confucius in their society.

Keywords: South Korea, Confucianism, Gender Roles, Religious Influence, Work life balance, Glass Ceiling.

1. INTRODUCTION

South Korea an East Asian nation also one of the four Asian dragons with the 4th largest economy in the world, but stands at 118th in terms of gender equality in a world economic forum. Over the years in the South Korean history, one thing that still stands strong and continues to influence the lives of the people and society at large are the deeply rooted principals of the Chinese philosopher Confucius. The teachings of Chinese philosopher Confucius have had a deep influence on South Korea. So much so, that the country is sometimes referred to as the most Confucian society on earth. His teachings about family, personal betterment, and respect for elders continue to feature highly in Korean life.

According to Confucianism men and women have specific roles that they need to fulfill in order to live a balanced life, this role have been taught to both the genders for centuries now and have been embedded in their way of life.

Through this paper, we try to understand what these roles are and how they have changed in the 21st century and with modernization, how women today in South Korea are breaking the glass ceiling that was set thousands of years ago.

This research paper covers different aspects of the Korean society, how they are influenced by the old philosophies of Confucius and how young Korean men and women are challenging these standards.

2. SCOPE OF STUDY

This study focuses on the gender roles and the changes in them that we have observed in the 21st century. South Korea has a deeply rooted Confucian philosophy and our scope is limited to how this philosophy defines the role of men and women of the country, in comparison with the changes due to modernization.

3. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

- 3.1. To understand the traditional roles of men and women according to Confucianism, in South Korea.
- 3.2. To study and understand the changes that have taken place after modernization.
- 3.3. To understand the changes between traditional and contemporary roles of the genders.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an existing mindset in South Korea that by empowering women, men will be suppressed. They also believe that women are meant for housework, and taking care of children. There are statistics to prove that countries where women participate in the economy, birthrates and economic growth rates tend also to be higher.

The government is promoting maternity leave, daycare centres and a system for childcare leave but many people don't use these services because they believe they are hassling their colleagues. There are also certifications like "Best Family Friendly Management" for companies wherein they get incentives for being family friendly towards both men and women. The government is also providing financial support for companies who have to find alternative personnel to pitch in for people who are on child care leave. Secondly, they give 100% pay instead of 40% when both the mother and father have to take leave for childcare.

The Ministry of Gender Equality has launched Women's Resources Academy, which aims to increase the number of female managers by recognizing their areas of expertise, improvement, and training. It also launched Women's Resources Database where women upload their qualifications and skills and are recommended as candidates for government positions. This aims to fill at least 100,00 job opportunities. (Jung, 2015)

Removal of the South Korean President –Park Geun-hye in Seoul showed signs of a misogynistic motive. She was the first woman to reach such a high position in the country, Park was accused of selling sensitive government information to a friend Choi Soon-sil, who already had blackmailing and bribery against her name. The National Assembly voted her impeachment and she was jailed for the same. Her sexuality and were also questioned post her trial and the fact that her government did not aim to fight for gender equality was a major motivating factor.

In June 2017 South Korea was number 118th in terms of the number of seats taken by women in Congress. Confucianism has played a role in keeping women away from holding positions in politics because before being seen as an individual, a woman is first seen as a mother and wife. Patriarchalism saw to it until 2008 that a woman uses her Husband's family name rather than her own. The new President Moon Jae-in aimed to create a gender-balanced cabinet. (Lopes, 2017)

A South Korean online community "Arang" discussed that Kyunghyang Shinmun, a daily was discriminating against women for positions in entry-level reporting. This case is a typical example of the gender discrimination prevalent in South Korea. An annual gender gap report by World Economic Forum has ranked South Korea at 117th out of 142 nations. The Economist reported that South Korea has the strongest glass ceiling in all of the OECD nations.

Working towards gender equality, they believe that creating a diverse pool of talent is important for social development- utilizing women is important as they make close to half the population of any country.

When South Korea elected it's first female president in 2012, they hoped that her campaigns would help bridge the gap in the widespread discrimination prevalent in the country. About 1000 member of organizations like Korean Women's Association United catered for a march on International Women's Day to try to improve female rights in South Korea. (Kang, 2015)

Women's participation in the South Korean labour force has been climbing in the near past, from 39.3% of the total working population in 1992 to 41.6% in 2014 to 53.1% in 2017. Decline in population due to ageing and declining birthrate will lead to a shortage of workers who will play a major role in sustaining and growing the economy if 50% of the population refrains from working. The problem is not that they are unable to find jobs, but that many are not even seeking a job.

In spite of getting a 2-year head start from their male counterparts, as they are expected to serve in the military for a minimum of 2 years, women have surpassed men in university entrances. However, women still find it hard to enter elite fields. Women only comprise 19.4% lawyers, 23.9% Doctors, 23% University professors in South Korea.

The Wall Street Journal reports that of 1787 companies, only 13 are headed by women CEO's. Although 46% of those who passed the civil services exam were women, women hold only 8.8% of senior civil service positions. The M-shape of the women employment curve suggests that women employed rise significantly in their 20's, decreases in their 30's due to marriage and child birth, increases again in their 40's when their children are grown and they are ready to work again. (Draudt, 2016)

The twentieth century has seen growing participation of women in the political field. The women in South Korea have been underrepresented, traditionally. This is observed due to only a few women holding leadership positions in South Korea. The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of Gender, in all fields, but women representation has to grow, seeing the average representation of 2 percent. In 1997, Kim Dae Jung was elected as chief executive, and this was seen as an important part of women empowerment. The belief behind giving women attention during elections was that the women decision would follow the husband's idea. In 2000 elections in South Korea, the number of women elected was very less. Traditionally, in the Confucianism religion, women participation is expected in domestic shores, mostly. During Kim Dae Jung's direction there were phenomenal changes in the welfare of women. Though there were changes in the welfare of women, the role of women in the political field has yet to increase. This will be an important component in women progress. (Resos, 2014)

This article covers the murder news, stating that young women had been stabbed to death in a bar restroom in Seoul. This killing was motioned as an act of misogyny, but the men dismissed this motion. Men in South Korea are not ready to acknowledge the patriarchy and toxic gender relations. To take care of this, an anti-discrimination bill is in action in the National Assembly. It has been under process for a decade. This article suggests that even though we see improvements on the surface, the position of women remains weak. Women are involved in 86% of violent crimes in 2013, domestic violence cases have also increased. According to the World Economic Forum, this country ranks 115 out of 145 in gender equality. After this killing, the men in South Korea have been saying that women are overreacting, showing how misogyny is there. They posted on social media suggesting that women have overreacted. This article suggests that passing of the antidiscrimination bill can solve many problems and reduce misogyny, but it has failed 3 times because of many objections. (Koo, 2016)

This article focuses on reducing inequality that discourages women from working. (Kim & Cho, 2017) A weak point in the South Korean economy is the difference between the labour force participation of men and women. One drawback mentioned in the article is that female participation reduces after they get married and have children and only a very few return back to employment. Even though there are efforts being made, the corporate world is still male dominant and the ratio of women is very low. The men have an important part in promoting gender equality, and to start equality, they also have to take a step.

This article talks about certain instances where several middle school girls were repeatedly raped and called 'embarrassing their hometown'. (Volodzko, 2014) Even though South Korea has made certain rights for women, also they have a female president, but a lot has to be done yet, to make sure there is equality. The songs, Gangnam Style, Bean paste girls joke, are symbols of the old idea that women in South Korea are shallow. When we observe economically, South Korea has improved. Women's unemployment rate is comparatively lower than men. Even though women in South Korea have achieved high education levels and health equality, but the economic equality is not enough and political equality is very poor. There have been improvements in the position of women in the society, they have been more empowered than before, but the signs of improvement are unclear, they are not a proper indicator, suggesting that there is a long way to go for gender equality.

This article talks about the role of Confucianism in South Korea today, the teaching of the Chinese philosopher Confucius have had a profound influence on South Korea. His teachings about family, personal betterment, and respect for elders continue to feature highly in Korean life. When we talk about the 1997 financial crisis we saw huge spectacles of people lining up to give up their gold because they thought their country was going under, we really cannot explain this type of behavior without Confucianism, where the sense of economic nationalism comes from. But Confucianism has its critics, which includes views on women and its reinforcement of hierarchies. Confucianism was made for an agricultural society and economy. Confucianism also emphasizes on harmony and importance of family, but in many Asian countries, rape and abuse by uncles are not reported because of the shame factor. This has led to widespread cynicism in society. (Powe, 2012)

Korean women once enjoyed nearly equal status with men, but that changed especially when Confucianism gained strength, during the same period they were not supposed to be seen outside, the only time they were allowed to go out was briefly in the evening, clocked from head to toe. Today Korean laws give equal opportunities and equal status to women. Majority of women go to universities, however even if they graduate with higher grades they are unlikely to be hired at a higher pay or same job as their male colleagues.

Companies prefer to hire less qualified males than invest in women who will leave once they get married or get pregnant, as she has more responsibilities than. The glass ceiling is low in Korea. According to statistics, in 2011, only 9.1% or 272 executives out of 2,993 state-run institutions were women. Only 16 of 288 public institutions had female chief executive officers, and 149 had no female executives. The Financial Services Commission had only 1 female executive out of 109, less than 1%.

In case of divorce, custody is often granted on the father especially in case of sons, the law grants fathers automatic custody. (Gender roles, 2015)

In the traditional Korean society, the role of women was confined to her house, they were always taught the virtue of subordination and endurance for their role as mothers or wife. The situation began to change in the late 19th century, during this time modern schools were some of these schools were started with the goal of only educating women and then these educated women started to engage in arts, teaching religious works and enlightening other women. With the establishment of the republic of Korea in 1984, women achieved constitutional rights for equal opportunities.

So as the economic development increased so did the living conditions of Koreans and the education attainment of women also increased. With increasing women entering the workforce the government passed “equal employment act” in 1987 to prevent discriminatory practices against female employees. The new ministry set up 20 specific tasks to be achieved in six basic areas. (services, 2016)

Confucianism is deeply rooted in the South Korean society. Patriarchy is a common theme where in gender has its own role in the family. The society works like a big family in which they recognize their rankings by age. And each gender has its own social role formed by the society’s expectations. All though this culture has gone under changes as South Korea continues to grow and develop in the modern world the mentality of gender role of continues to stay the same, it turns out that in South Korea males receive more lenient judgment than females. Many rape cases were dropped simply because the prosecution was dominated by men. Other than this there is gender discrimination in job recruitment. Men as judged less hard in seeking employment as compared to women, because of the Confucius ideology that women are supposed to just take care of their family; employees are more reluctant about hiring them. Many men even today respect their wives decision to stay home after giving birth, as many share the idea that women should stay home for childcare. The entertainment industry also exaggerates these different gender roles. Changing the foundation of the Korean culture will be hard but as the society develops, hopefully, women can be seen as equal to men in terms of ability. (Chan, 2016)

In all patriarchal society, the mother looks after the child while the father works and South Korea is no exception to this responsibility, but what role does man play in the family and in child’s life? Korean fathers are mostly absent from the child’s life and play a minor role in their lives. This can be because of the Korean busy lifestyle as a typical day involves waking up early and working in the office late. Sometimes men don’t live in the same house due to work or other commitments. Some fathers who are not chained down by their work are simply ineffective father figures, who rarely use the time to bond with their kids. The entertainment industry has made the active and loving father a trendy image, because of which fathers are now required to play a bigger part in their child’s life. As awareness of the father’s valuable role is growing many young Korean men have changed their attitude about their future family.

(Kim N. , 2016)

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Being an economically developed country, South Korea faces inequality when it comes to the genders, their roles, and liberty. With only 54% of the female population participating actively in the workforce, as against 75% male population, a shrinking population due to both ageing and a declining birthrate—the absence of nearly 62% from the workforce means the economy will very soon face a severe shortage of workers who could play a vital role in sustaining and growing the economy. There are also perceptions of what is defined as a women’s job and a man’s job. Staying at home, taking care of the children and cooking are women’s jobs while working outside the house is a man’s job. This creates an issue when women actually are ready to go out and work, it is unacceptable in society as well as in the family, in the same way, it is also unacceptable for a man to be a stay-at-home father while the woman works. Although South Korea is an active and successful participant in the world economic market, these perceptions have it ranking at 117th out of 142 countries.

5.2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This paper uses a qualitative approach as we are trying to study the roles of men and women, the impact that culture has on the defining of those roles and how these roles have changed over time. How these roles were under the influence of Confucianism, and the contemporary roles after modernisation and globalisation.

5.3. RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

This paper is based completely on secondary data collection. We have used literature in the form of:

- 5.3.1. Journal articles
- 5.3.2. Newspaper Articles
- 5.3.3. Websites
- 5.3.4. Blogs

6. ANALYSIS

6.1. TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES UNDER CONFUCIANISM

The values under Confucianism are believed to be a reason for the gender inequality in South Korea. Traditionally, the women are supposed to be taking responsibility for their houses and their children, and men are supposed to be working outside to earn bread for the family. The men are given more rights than the women. The (Richey) women are expected to be respectful and obedient. The men can divorce a woman if she has a disease if she is barren, or even if she talks too much. But women, on the other hand, have no such rights.

Confucius was a Chinese Philosopher, educator, and a political figure. His teachings described the principles of humanity, loyalty, and morality. He stated human interaction in his philosophy of 'Five Relations'. (Lin, 2011) The women had been staying at a disadvantaged position.

In the traditional Korean business culture, which has long working hours and a top down structure which require the employees to be obedient and encouraged to spend time with their bosses, outside their workplaces. Here, the women are at a disadvantage, especially married women. Women become a subject of obscene conversation and stigmatization. (Jin, 2016) They have a social stigma which states that certain jobs are above the capabilities of the women. Confucianism is believed to be the evil that has let it breed. According to Confucianism, the traditional roles of the man include, protecting his family and make it prosper, and the women's role is to take care of her husband and her children and educate her children. It is against their religion for men to fight with, or abuse the women. It has prompted the women to develop valiant as well as tender characteristics.

According to the traditional Confucian hierarchy, women were at the bottom. They are expected to offer obedience without any complaints. According to custom, men and women lived separately; where men had many wives, and women were not allowed to see other men, except their close relatives and masters. In an ideal Confucian religion, women are supposed to show obedience at every stage of life. They are supposed to obey their fathers (as daughters), husbands (as wives) sons (as widows). At no point in a woman's life, can she expect to be autonomous, being free from male control? Several hundred years back, women have had a higher degree of freedom. They have had prominent roles as Confucian thinkers.

According to Confucianism, social relationships referred to those between inferiors and superiors. (Richey)

6.2. CONTEMPORARY ROLES OF MEN AND WOMEN IN SOUTH KOREA

Although South Korea holds a steady share in the world market, only 54% (Draudt, 2016) of their female population participates in the workforce, as against 75% of the male population. It is surprising that the country with the 11th largest GDP in the world has a gap of 21% between the genders participation in the workforce.

In the last 3 decade alone there have been almost 2000 legal acts (Lindberg, 2017) including 30% quota for women candidates in electoral districts, 50% in the National Assembly and a Ministry created specifically for Gender Equality (Jung, 2015). However, the prevalence of traditional values from the Confucian ideals still exercise a fixed gender binary sphere. This was evident when in 2017, South Korea removed their first female President, Park Geun-hye, from the office which has been viewed as a misogynistic move. Once she came to power, there was no shortage of the number of people who were coming up with reasons as to why she shouldn't continue in office.

The unemployment rate for women is lower than men, at 3.2%, (Draudt, 2016) which means that there is a demand for women in the workforce but not many of them are seeking a job. Mandatory male Conscription, which is compulsory enlistment of people in a national service, most often a military service, in South Korea has existed since 1957 and is practiced till today. Men are expected to serve two years in the military between the ages of 18 and 35. Although it is not mandatory for women, they may voluntarily enlist themselves. This gives women a 2 year head start while applying for jobs, and get 2 years of experience more than their male counterparts. In spite of this, many women are not seeking jobs due to cultural and family restrictions.

The Corporate culture is also a restricting factor for women because the majority of female to male employees is very slow which makes the female employees an easy target for bullying and misogyny. In one instance, during a late-night part in a mid-size South Korean Conglomerate, when a female colleague refused drinks, it was assumed that she was pregnant. This became a topic of conversation for everyone and they began to tell her how her pregnancy has become a burden to the company because her colleagues will now have to bear her workload. Even human resources had the same response and she eventually had to quit her job and her boss told human resources that they should employ more male employees instead. (The Economist)

Employees are also required to strengthen relationships with their bosses outside of the work place. This causes complications for married women, mothers and females in general in the traditional Confucian society in South Korea. The work-life balance is unsteady and the emphasis towards personal life for women puts a strain on their work.

In a country where women are already suppressed, and very few of them are willing and able to work, these factors act as an additional burden keeping them from working. (Kim & Cho, 2017)

A reality show in South Korea called "The return of the superman" which shows celebrity husbands and fathers taking care of their children. This has been instrumental in changing the mentality and mindset of the people, and they have become more open towards stay-at-home dads. (Park, 2015)

Although there has been a lot of change in the mindset of the people towards the roles of men and women, and there is a lot more flexibility in defining these roles, South Korea is still a backward country in terms of gender equality.

6.3. RESULTS

The traditional roles of the people in South Korea are based on their religion, Confucianism. Modernization has brought in many changes to these traditional roles. Under Confucianism, the roles defined for the women were to stay at home, take care of the children and the husband, and, that of the men was to be sole bread earner of the family. The changes that have been observed in their roles are seen by the increase in a number of working women in South Korea, that is 54% of the women in South Korea have been actively been a part of the working population. Also, the men have started to share the household chores with the women, with women helping men to earn for the family, the men have started to take responsibility of the children and have been helping the women in managing households.

Even though the working population of women has increased, South Korea is far behind in Gender equality, from the world perspective. Despite the fact that women have started working outside, they still do not get as many opportunities as men do, and are still being suppressed in their workplaces. Women have responsibilities outside the house as well as inside. This is an obstacle for the improvement of gender equality in the country.

A few articles suggest, that men in South Korea believe that issues raised by women are of lower importance. Confucianism has been believed to be the evil, breeding this gender inequality. Although there are instances to prove that South Korea is coming out of its traditional views on gender roles, they are still far behind on gender equality when compared to globally desirable standards.

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