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# Research on Policy Measures to Redress Patriarchal Family Ritual Systems: Focus on Funeral Culture

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Korean Women's Development Institute

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Focus on Funeral Culture**

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## I . Introduction

### 1. Background and purpose

Among family rites, funeral celebration in the Korean society is usually performed by decisions of patriarchs. This is because family members do not talk about their beloved one's death in advance and thus fail to prepare funeral procedures beforehand. Also, female family members find it difficult to raise an issue on their peripheral role under gender discrimination circumstances.

Although funeral service has played as a mechanism that sustains and reinforces gender inequality within the family system, it has been overlooked; policy steps and institutions did not pay proper attention. Rather, they supported passively for various reasons, including tradition, customs, and privacy. Now is time to ponder, on the perspective of

gender, if the service lives up to gender equality value and goes well with changing family structure. Also, it seems necessary to explore the practices performed in the funeral trade and the legal frame and context of funeral law for seeking a better way of performing a life celebration.

With that being said, this study is to shed light on funeral celebration from the view point of gender and changing family structure to explore and come up with policy and institutional measures.

## 2. Details and methodology

### 1) Details

- This investigation looked into legal institutions and policies in relation to funeral culture and examines them on the gender perspective. It also inquired into relevant cases of overseas countries, including Taiwan and Japan, that sit in Northeast Asia.
- The examination conducted focus group investigation to assess Korean funeral culture, to hear voices about alternative options, and to come up with questions with regard to perception, before analyzing them.
- This research carried out an online survey to identify the idea of Korean people not only on the current Korean funeral culture but its alternative and policies.
- This study investigated potential actions that can solve patriarchal, gender-unequal funeral celebration at a time of family type changing and provided alternative options and future direction in accordance with such change.

## 2) Methodology

- Literature analysis: Review on domestic and international literature, materials, and legislations, among others.
- FGI
  - Interview period: Five rounds for five groups (one per each), 2-hour duration (from 7:30 PM) from June 25, 2019 to July 1, 2019.
  - Interviewee: Those aged 20 to 50 who participated in family member's or a relative's funeral service over the past 3 to 5 years (a total of 30 in five different groups, both males and females)
  - Major topics: Ideas on a true meaning of funeral celebration, evaluations on their experience from the perspective of gender equality and changing family structure, types of funeral celebration the they want for themselves and their family member.
- Survey
  - Period: August 20, 2019 through August 30, (nine days, except weekends)
  - Region: 17 cities and provinces nationwide.
  - Method: Online questionnaire
  - Respondent: Those aged 20 to 50 who held funeral service over the past 5 years (August 2014 through July 2019). A total of around 1,300 took part in it. (To be exact, 1,312 persons consisted of the effective sample)
  - Topics: State of Korean funeral culture, type of funeral celebration that they want, and perception on policies with regard to funeral culture.

- Advisory: Advisory of experts from related fields was reflected into this study. Also, reviews of the staff of relevant departments and agencies as well as professionals on the beginning, interim and final development were mirrored into it.

## II . Law and policy related to funeral culture

### 1. Law and policy in relation to Korean funeral culture

The Korean government has enacted Act on Funeral Services, etc. and has put in place relevant institutions, while supervising certificate of funeral directors and running funeral service support centers. Yet those measures have so far failed to properly adopt gender-equality consciousness, family diversification, and personalized social change, not succeeding in suggesting alternatives. Regulations have been run very strictly in dealing with unclaimed death. In most cases, people of civil marriage or relatives could handle the type of death. The application of rules was effectively inflexible that those who have unconventional relationship with the deceased lost opportunities to pay condolences.

In 2008, National Health Insurance Act abolished funeral expense payment. Since then, funeral service support and emergent funeral expense payment policies have been in place for those who live below the poverty line.

Increasing numbers of one-person family and changing family type have made it a reality that an individual has to prepare for his/her death and funeral.

It can be said that Act on Family Rite Establishment and Related Assistance and General Standards for Sound Family Rites do not function

in effect. Those rules and guidelines carry patriarchal and gender-unequal details with regard to funeral services, failing to secure constitutional values of individual's dignity and gender equality in marriage and family life.

## **2. Law and policy in relation to funeral culture in foreign countries: focusing on Japan and Taiwan**

Japan's traditional family system and related values have changed into individualized ones, driven by nuclear family and urbanization as well as low birth rate and aging society. Funeral service has been simplified, so more Japanese people are holding funerals only for family members, or colleagues, just for a day. The Japanese government has coped with issues of old people through continued process from care-giving to funeral to memorial. Efforts of the private sector, distinctively NPOs, have been active.

Japan has implemented programs, such as burial expense aided by health insurance act, funeral expense payment and compensation by national health insurance act, and funeral service support by living security act. In Taiwan, payment for surviving family members under national pension system includes funeral service payment. As seen here, funerals do not fall unto the shoulders of bereaved families only; public assistance is provided to them.

### III. Funeral culture through the lens of the FGI

The focus group interview revealed that patriarchal, gender-unequal funeral culture is in place in Korea. For example, women were frequently overlooked, or excluded from men-centered rites and procedures; maternal relatives were discriminated against paternal partners; in particular, irrational gender-biased role was evident in those processes. In addition, commercial service operators tended to provide package deals, so grieved families could not choose the processes they wanted during the celebration.

In Korea, a three-day long funeral at a funeral home, operated by commercial service operators/funeral directors, is common. This practice reinforced itself to become a commercialized funeral culture where bereaved families do not plan and perform the process and procedure they wish but purchase the celebration service. Under this situation, commemoration and condolence are losing their ground, and the deceased and his/her surviving families are getting neglected.

Another evident trait is that current funeral practice centers on a traditional family type that is based on biological relation and patriarchal order, both of which are very strictly in place. Thus, diverse types of family, including one-person, single parent, non-marriage live-together family, and de-facto marriage, are not properly considered, let alone changes in within typical families.

Against this backdrop, people raised the need for improving funeral culture in ways that reflect changing values and family.

## IV. Survey on perception on Korean funeral culture

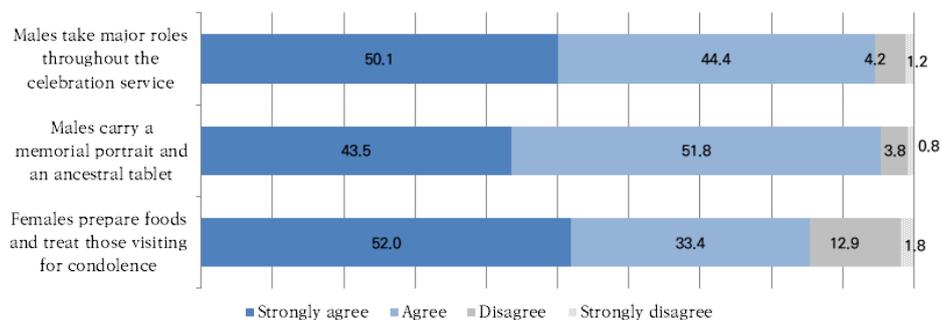
### 1. Practice of Korean funeral culture

#### 1) Perception and attitude towards gender inequality

Looking into perception and attitude towards Korean funeral culture uncovered that it was still male-centered.

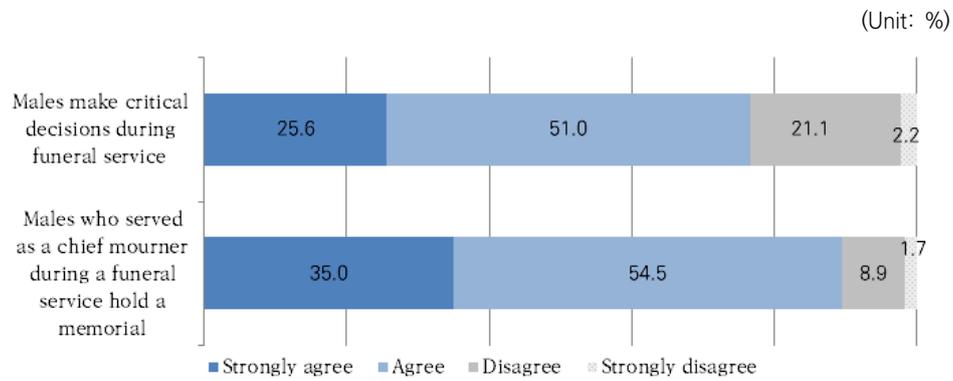
Overwhelming numbers of the respondents said that males took major roles throughout the celebration service, for instance, carrying a memorial portrait and an ancestral tablet as well as making decisions during and after funerals. Particularly, around 95% of them said that males played a role of chief mourner and bearer of the memorial picture.

(Unit: %)



[Figure 1] Perception on gender inequality ①

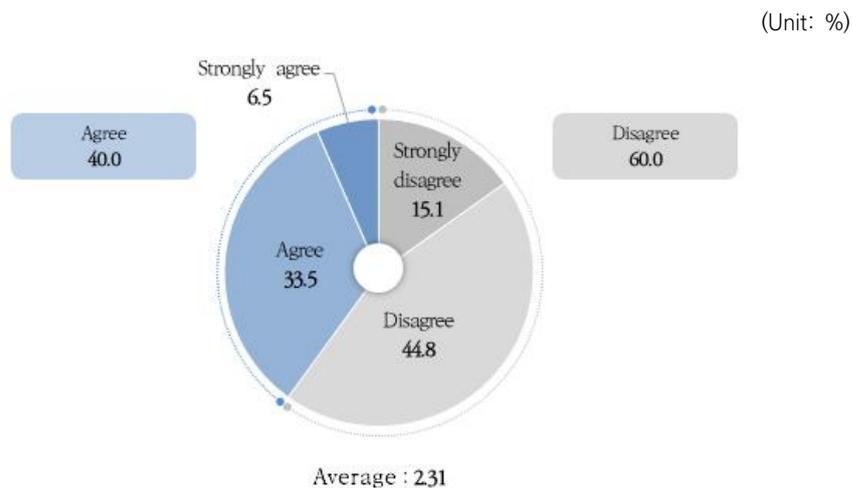
To the question, 'Males make critical decisions during funeral service,' 76.6% of the respondents said in the affirmative. 89.5% agreed to 'Males who served as a chief mourner during a funeral service hold a memorial.' In other words, they thought that males would decide on important issues during funeral and memorial services.



[Figure 2] Perception on gender inequality ②

In the meantime, a majority of the respondents said that they did not agree to each of the current gender roles in the funeral service. Thus, there was a stark difference between perception and attitude.

For example, 60.0% did not agree to 'Males should be a chief mourner during funeral service,' while 40% agreeing. This is a sharp contrast to the answer to 'Males make critical decisions in funeral service,' which was supported by 94.5% of them.

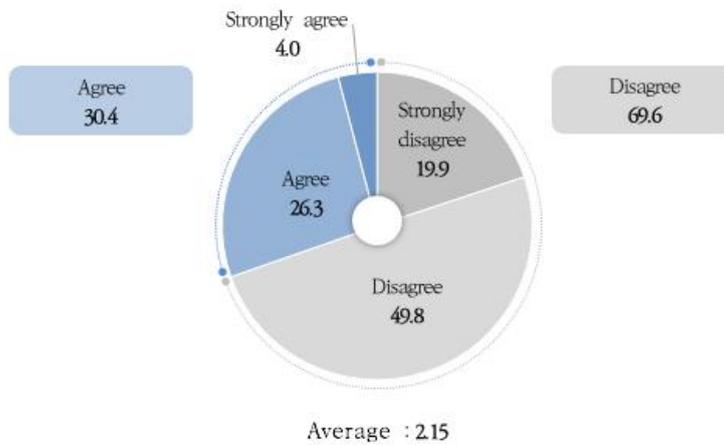


[Figure 3] Attitude on gender inequality:

① Males should be a chief mourner during funeral service

To question 'Females should prepare foods and treat those visiting for condolence,' 69.6% said they did not agree. This markedly contrasts with perception question 'It is women who prepare foods and treat visitors,' which was supported by 85.3%.

(Unit: %)

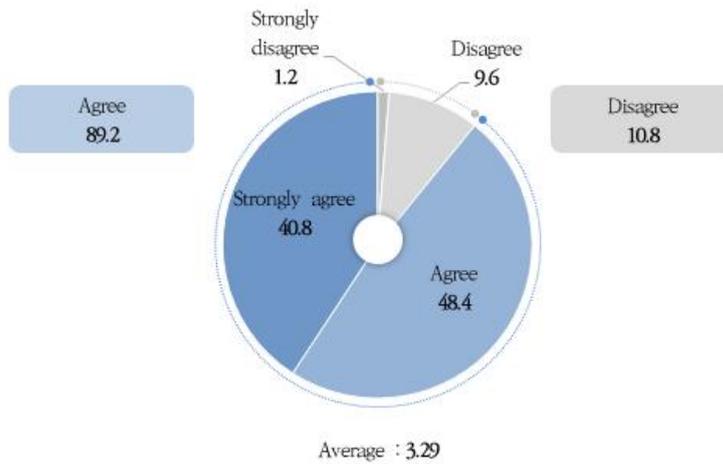


[Figure 4] Attitude on gender inequality:

② Females should prepare foods and treat those visiting for condolence

68.7% did not agree to 'Males who served as a chief mourner during funeral service should hold memorial service.' Almost 90% agreed to 'Memorial service culture that defines roles depending on gender and discriminates against gender should be changed.'

(Unit: %)

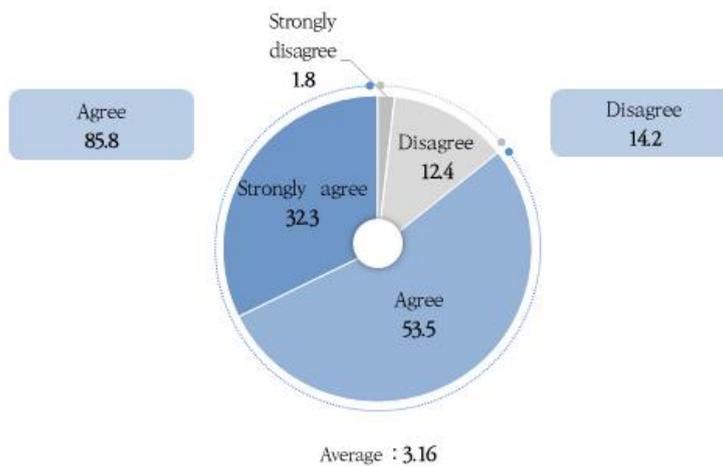


[Figure 5] Attitude on gender inequality:

- ④ Memorial service culture that defines roles depending on gender and discriminates against gender should be changed.

As high as 85.8% agreed to 'Traditional funeral service does not fit into changing family type, including increases in one-person family and non-marriage family.'

(Unit: %)



[Figure 6] Attitude on gender inequality:

- ⑤ Traditional funeral service does not fit into changing family type, including increases in one-person family and non-marriage family

All these attitude questions with regard to gender-inequality show significant differences between genders, implying that women more than men want change.

## 2) Perception and attitude on formality and procedure

Regarding formality of funeral service, 87.7% of the respondents agreed to 'Codes and procedures are complicating and inconvenient,' and 69.5% said 'Yes' to 'They serve as a barrier to condolence and memorial.' In relation to death, a whopping number of 83.3% agreed to 'Preparing for death and funeral is difficult in the Korean society.' Put different, it can be said that the procedure of Korean funerals consists of empty formalities and vanity, failing to provide the essence of the family rite.

Almost all respondents, at a rate of 97.0%, agreed to 'Items, including coffin and shroud, and procedures cost much,' viewing funeral expense issues very serious. Regarding holding funeral service, 68.5% said 'There is no way to hold funeral service without service providers.' Also, 90.7% replied 'I have just a limited amount of information for holding funeral service.' These responses can be interpreted that there are problems of funeral commercialization, private operators' monopoly, and information asymmetry.

Negative response to the possibility of alternative options to be in place and accepted by Koreans was very common among the respondents; so commonplace that they seem not to think of other way. 90.8% said 'Other options than is currently practiced are not practically available,' and 89.2% responded in the affirmative that 'Difficulties ensue if I choose a different option from what others commonly do.'

Concerning perceptions on funeral formality and procedure, outcomes were as follow: 81.6% disagreed to 'Funeral service should be held extravagantly in spite of expense'; 71.5% agreed to 'It is better to wear simple and comfortable mourning dresses that I like'; 76.9% said negatively to 'The more wreaths, the better'. Slightly more people, 51.6%, did not agree to 'Funeral service should be held at least for three days,' while the remaining 48.4% agreeing to it. 53.0% negatively responded to 'There should be many visitors to funeral homes,' while the rest, 47.0%, positively.

In all, as the respondents largely found that funeral practices were held in empty formalities and vanity, many of them agreed to simplifying formalities and procedures and discouraging funeral services with high price tag. Significant differences came out depending on gender; women were more supportive to simplified funerals with proper expenses than men were.

## 2. Alternative funeral culture and policy

### 1) Perception and attitude on gender inequality

This section sheds light on alternative funeral culture, focusing on the necessity of a chief mourner, whom to be one, and decision-making at a funeral home.

63.9% agreed to ' A chief mourner is needed for holding a funeral service of a beloved member,' while the rest 36.1%, a relatively high rate, disagreeing.

Among those who agreed to the previous question, 36.9% answered eldest son/grandson to 'Who do you think should be a chief mourner during a funeral service of a beloved member.' 36.0% responded that

family members should decide on it; 10.0%, the closest person to the deceased; 6.8%, to the order of age. All of these different responses demonstrate that they reconsider the current practice where men assume a chief mourner and think of diverse alternatives.

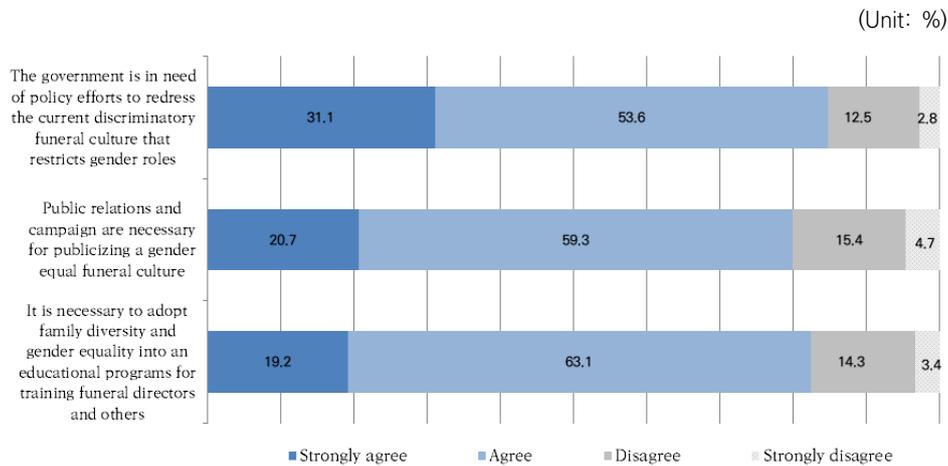
To ‘Who do you think should make a critical decision with regard to funeral service of a beloved member,’ close to half of the respondents, 48.0%, chose ‘All family members, be it from paternal, or maternal, regardless of gender, should discuss it.’ 22.6% said ‘Select a chief mourner and make him/her determine.’

This study asked questions about support programs or policy improvement of the government in relation to perception and attitude on gender inequality in Korean funeral culture.

84.7% of the respondents replied positively to ‘The government is in need of policy efforts to redress the current discriminatory funeral culture that restricts gender roles.’

To the question that asked types of funeral culture improvement policy, 80.0% replied in the affirmative to ‘Public relations and campaign are necessary for publicizing a gender equal funeral culture.’ 82.3% said ‘It is necessary to adopt family diversity and gender equality into an educational programs for training funeral directors and others.’

Overall, survey participants find that policy efforts are in high demand for gender-equal funeral culture.



**[Figure 7] Policy to improve funeral culture: with regard to gender-equal funeral culture**

Most questions of this section showed significant difference depending on gender. Women were more proactive than men to a brand new funeral culture. Yet, both men and women displayed different perspectives from the existing funeral culture, making diversified requests. This can be construed that a sense of problem is emerging; as they think the existing funeral culture is not on an equal basis they seem to believe a new culture is needed. Also, as the FGI outcomes uncovered, gender equal, diverse perspectives are required for currently changing situations, rather than sticking to traditional norms and customs.

## 2) Alternative funerals and related policies

Regarding the purpose of funeral service, 32.7% of the survey participants said 'To provide an opportunity for those close to a deceased person to say farewell'; 20.7%, 'To commemorate a deceased person'; 17.3%, 'To reserve the dignity of a deceased person at the end of his/her life.'

To the question that asked the type of funeral service that a person wanted for his or her own one, more than half of the respondents, 52.3%, chose ‘Whatever way that I want, regardless of funeral codes, for example, in music concert hall, or in exhibition hall.’ Only around a quarter of them, 23.6%, agreed to ‘In a conventional way, like for a three-day one.’ 22.8% replied with ‘In a way of farewell party with family and friends, while I am still alive.’ In all, about 75% wanted free and novel ways of funeral other than traditional ones.

Regarding an alternative that a person prefers, 93.1% agreed to ‘Small scale funeral service where close people to a deceased person visit for condolence’; 88.6%, ‘In a way that considers a deceased person's will or preference, regardless of funeral codes’; 74.1%, ‘In a way that does not hold a celebration, or minimizes celebration days at a funeral home’; 72.4%, ‘In a way of farewell party with family and friends, while one is still alive’. As shown here, the most responses were for simplistic funeral services among those with close relationship. The request for diversity, away from typical funeral formality, was also on high demand.

This study also asked of policies that could address the issues of funeral formality and procedure which were discussed thus far.

91.7% of the survey participants chose ‘Policy reinforcement, including of releasing more information on funeral items and simpler funerals, to improve on Korean funeral service that incurs big expenses,’ reflecting their perception on commercialized funeral celebration with high price tag.

90.6% of them chose ‘Reforms on public funeral facilities located in national or city hospitals,’ and 86.7% answered ‘Support to social enterprises and co-ops to change the commercially monopolistic or oligopolistic funeral trade.’

As a policy to make a change to the fixed funeral culture, 89.9% found it necessary to provide ‘Support of physical spaces for diverse types of funeral service,’ and 86.5% answered ‘Provision of programs and education for a funeral service that an individual or family wishes to hold.’

Survey questions about alternative funerals unveiled that there was a gap between Korea’s current funeral culture and what Koreans practically want. Put different, the participants strongly wanted a funeral culture which considers intimacy and preference as well as gender equality and simplicity. Seemingly demonstrating this difference, an overwhelming majority of them agreed to the necessity of relevant policies.

## V. Policy proposal

### 1. Proposal for a funeral culture free of gender hierarchy and segregation

Patriarchal, gender unequal funeral culture that is a far cry from what people of these days want is in urgent need of change. The Korean government abolished Patriarchal Family Registry System more than a decade ago, but its effects still linger. For example, the deep-rooted patriarchal family system, in combination with the funeral service trade, forces Korean people to choose the formalized funeral practices. To tackle this, policy and institutional efforts should be made in consideration of the following:

- Curricula that can enhance gender sensitivity and understanding of diverse family types in funeral director programs, for example,

revision on standard course and provision of standard education materials that reflect changing trends.

- Research on addressing gender-unequal funeral culture and developing alternative options.
- Revision of legislations that are related to unconstitutional, patriarchal, and gender-unequal funeral culture.
- PRs and campaigns to promote gender-equal funeral culture.

## 2. Proposal for a funeral culture where members of diverse family types can hold memorial and pay condolence under the patriarchal, bloodline based family system

- Provision of an opportunity in which any member of diverse-family types can participate

As more of care-giving is being carried unto the shoulders of government and society, it is time for them to think about starting to provide, at least partly, funeral service, the last phase of care-giving to a person.

- Expansion of family according to change in family relation

It is bloodline family that matters in the current Korean funeral practice. As this standard has failed to respond to recently changing situations, including of family type, composition and relation, it is requested to revise relevant laws and institutions.

Funeral-related laws and regulations that are centered on bloodline and civil law are in need of improvement.

Subparagraph 16 of the Article 2 of the Act on Funeral Services, etc. should be streamlined because the provision confusingly lists the order of priority in taking custody of dead body. The stipulation thus should be changed so that those who want to hold a funeral celebration can do so. For a deceased person's partner whose relationship is other than marriage to get death certificate or other medical certificates, it is suggested that the scope of family that currently includes a spouse and relatives should be expanded to cover those whom 'a patient (the person himself/herself) designates.'(Article 17 of the Medical Service Act)

- Institutional complement for guaranteeing post-death self-control on oneself

Institutional convenience should be made so that a person who leads an atypical way of living, including of non-marriage, one-person family, and others, that is not formally protected can prepare his/her own funeral. Currently, voluntary guardianship terminates when a person under guardianship dies, so this legal system should be changed in a way that secures self-control on oneself even after death. For example, policy-makers should use the system of wills and the trust system more than before, prepare institutional complement for a guardian to handle administrative jobs after the death of a person under guardianship, and lessen the burden of guardianship expenses so that people may find it affordable.

### 3. Proposal for a funeral culture based on the code and procedure-centered system to turn into one with memorial and condolence

#### ○ Improvement of funeral culture incurring big expenses

Simplifying funeral process and addressing expensive funeral celebration are critical factors in seeking alternatives to commercialized, formalized funeral practices. To improve funeral services with high price, it is proposed for policies to promote simplistic funerals, release price lists of items, offer facilities that can accommodate different types of funerals, and publicize the information of proper service providers. In addition, it is necessary to provide venues for diverse types of funerals in combination with public facilities, including medical institutions and citizens' hall.

#### ○ Formation of a social atmosphere and culture that supports the preparation of death and funeral in daily life.

In order to improve the current funeral culture, people have to think about their own funeral in advance and plan what to do at a time of losing a beloved one. By doing so, they can stop themselves from opting a commercial service provider and following typical funeral codes. For that to happen, it is suggested that policy cooperations, including with Healthy Family Support Center, should prepare and provide programs that help people plan a funeral service they want. Attention and support should be directed to activities that people perform at later stages of life, including drafting an intended funeral service and notes in advance. Institutional complements and improvements are in need, including about the system of wills, trust, and administrative processing.





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