



Research Title: Policy Suggestions for Improving the Work-Life Balance of Single-Parent Households
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Challenges and Policy Recommendations for Work-Life Balance Among Single- Parent Household Heads

Abstract

- ◎ Until now, work-life balance policies have predominantly been designed with dual-parent households as the standard, revealing a limitation in that the concept of work-life balance has been defined too narrowly.
- ◎ Therefore, this study aims to reassess the structure of policies designed based on dual-parent households from the perspective of single-parent households and explore policy measures to improve work-life imbalance among single-parent families.
- ◎ To conduct this study, research methods such as literature reviews and in-depth interviews were utilized. The key findings from the in-depth interviews are summarized as follows:
 - First, single-parent household heads living in a society that demands long working hours experience severe time poverty while fulfilling their job responsibilities. Due to fluctuating work hours dictated by workplace conditions, they had to repeatedly search for alternative childcare resources. When stress reached a critical level, they were often forced to leave their jobs.
 - Second, while single-parent household heads also aspire to professional advancement, they inevitably spend more time and energy on childcare and child-rearing compared to dual-parent household heads, causing investment in themselves to be deprioritized.
 - Third, the most critical criterion for job selection when children are young was whether it allowed for a balance with caregiving. However, such jobs were difficult to find, often forcing single parents into temporary employment. Consequently, their accumulated professional career disappeared, making it challenging to return to their previous occupational status.
 - Fourth, if public childcare services could not resolve childcare issues, single parents had to rely on family support or external resources such as domestic helpers. However, these resources were not accessible to all single parents.
- ◎ Based on these research findings, policy recommendations were provided by distinguishing between employed and unemployed single parents.

- **South Korea's work-life balance situation is known to be significantly poorer than that of other countries. However, work-life balance is a crucial factor that profoundly impacts various aspects of life, including career management, lifetime earnings, and children's fundamental rights. A study by Noh(2023), which quantified and analyzed the level of guaranteed time for work-life balance across 31 OECD countries, classified South Korea alongside Greece, the United States, and Italy as countries with low levels of both work hours and family time security.**
 - ▶ Various factors hinder the work-life balance of working parents in South Korea. Among them, the excessively competitive atmosphere and the strong societal emphasis on individual achievement stand out as key sociocultural characteristics. Additionally, the increasingly rigid dual labor market structure forces many workers in the secondary labor market to endure poor working conditions, which represents a critical structural issue.
 - ▶ Unlike employed individuals, unemployed individuals struggle with excessive burdens related to education and training, caregiving, and household responsibilities. This leaves them with little time to consider other aspects of life, leading to an overall sense of imbalance (Byoun et al., 2022).

- **Due to the prolonged issue of low birth rates, there has been growing policy interest in improving individuals' quality of life and work-life balance.**
 - ▶ The first policy objective of the Fourth Basic Plan on Low Fertility and Aging Society is to 'Create a Society Where Work and Care Are Shared.' This reflects the government's commitment to actively considering individuals' work-life balance at the national level (Government of South Korea, 2021).

- **However, policy attention has been limited to certain groups, raising concerns about the effectiveness of these measures.**
 - ▶ Specific policy measures aimed at improving work-life balance, such as increasing the income replacement rate for parental leave and providing additional incentives for men who take parental leave, have primarily benefited stable workers who have access to parental leave. Consequently, these benefits remain restricted to those in secure employment.

- **This study aims to take a broader perspective on the concept of work-life balance. Rather than focusing solely on a select group of workers, it emphasizes the need for work-life balance policies that support all individuals who juggle work and caregiving responsibilities, regardless of their employment type.**
 - ▶ While there have been limited prior studies examining work-life balance in a broad sense, this study reflects ongoing social transformations by exploring both broad and narrow definitions of work-life balance. The broad definition includes challenges such as difficulties entering appropriate employment due to caregiving burdens or health-related obstacles, as well as struggles to maintain work-life balance under poor working conditions. The narrow definition focuses on the appropriate distribution of working hours and personal time for parents in stable employment.

- ▶ There are various resources individuals can utilize to maintain work-life balance, and the ways in which people achieve this balance differ depending on their household environment. Among the groups most vulnerable to work-life balance challenges are single-parent households. Compared to dual-parent households, single parents have fewer resources and more limited conditions for raising children.
 - ▶ Until now, work-life balance policies have been primarily designed with dual-parent households as the standard, leading to the limitation of defining work-life balance too narrowly. Additionally, there has been a lack of detailed and proactive policy considerations for certain vulnerable groups raising children in challenging environments. Policies and research related to single-parent households have largely focused on poverty, revealing a limitation in addressing broader institutional support necessary for balancing work and life beyond economic hardship.
- Therefore, this study aims to reassess the structure of policies originally designed for dual-parent households from the perspective of single-parent families, in order to propose policy measures that can improve the imbalance in work-life conditions experienced by single parents. To conduct this study, research methods such as literature reviews and in-depth interviews were employed.

In-Depth Interview Results

- This study conducted in-depth interviews with single-parent household heads to examine their diverse experiences and interactions with support policies. By analyzing their experiences from a work-life balance perspective and reviewing their utilization of related policies, the study aimed to develop policy alternatives with high practical applicability and acceptance.
- ▶ The in-depth interviews were conducted in two formats: individual interviews and focus group interviews(FGI). The individual interviews, conducted in a one-on-one setting between the researcher and interviewee, focused on capturing the varied contexts of work and life experienced by single-parent household heads. The focus group interviews involved selecting participants with extensive experience using relevant policies, facilitated through contacts with organizations related to single-parent support. Three focus groups were organized for this purpose.
 - ▶ The in-depth interview questions were structured into three main sections: basic information, work-life experiences, and policy utilization experiences. The basic information section included demographic details such as gender, age, household composition, income, and characteristics of the single-parent household. The work-life experience section required participants to record their daily and weekend time use in a pre-survey time log, which then served as the basis for detailed questions regarding their work and life experiences. The policy utilization experience section included questions about past and current policy usage, perceived shortcomings, and additional support needs.

<Table 1> Interview Methods and Participant Numbers

Category	Interview Method	Number of Participants
Individual Interviews	One-on-one sessions between researcher and participant	17 people
Focus Group Interviews	Conducted with 2-3 participants per group, totaling 3 groups	7 people

<Table 2> Interview Questions

Category	Content
Basic Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal and household demographic details (gender, age, education level, employment status) - Reason for becoming a single parent, duration, and custody arrangements - Household income types and amounts, eligibility for National Basic Livelihood Security System, issuance of single-parent family certification, and receipt of child support benefits
Work-Life Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experience with weekday and weekend time use: morning routine, preparing children for school/daycare - Work hours, dinner preparation, bedtime routines, and time spent with others - Degree of work-life balance, changes in childcare responsibilities and working conditions - Work-family conflict experiences: clashes between childcare and career, perspectives on financial support and parenting responsibilities - Most challenging work-life balance experiences as a single parent
Policy Utilization Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experience with employment support programs: current and past job search experiences, employment challenges specific to single parents - Experience with childcare services: current and past applications and usage of childcare services - Experience with flexible work arrangements and leave policies: past and present usage of flexible work and leave policies, challenges in utilizing these as a single parent - Perceived shortcomings of existing policies and additional support needed to improve work-life balance for single-parent families

● The key findings from in-depth interviews conducted with single-parent household heads are as follows.

- ▶ Achieving a balance between work and life is essential for everyone. However, for single parents living in a society that demands intense, long working hours, maintaining this balance is particularly challenging. Many experience extreme time poverty, often waking up early and reducing sleep to complete their workload. Due to unpredictable work schedules, they must repeatedly find alternative childcare solutions, and when stress reaches a critical threshold, they are often forced to leave their jobs.
- ▶ Single parents also have aspirations for career growth, but they inevitably spend more time and energy on childcare compared to dual-parent households, pushing personal investments and professional development aside. As they are solely responsible for raising their children while working, they are perceived as vulnerable in a capitalist society, frequently experiencing stress and anxiety about being easily replaced or marginalized in the workplace.

- ▶ The younger the children, the more crucial it is for single parents to find jobs that allow them to balance work and caregiving. However, such jobs are scarce, forcing many to opt for temporary positions that provide flexibility in case of emergencies. This, in turn, results in career discontinuity, making it difficult for them to return to previous professional positions. Those in relatively stable jobs often attribute their employment to luck rather than systematic support. In a rigid labor market, single parents often rely on social tolerance and goodwill rather than institutional assistance to secure stable employment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, while public childcare became unstable, remote work provided some single parents with an opportunity to balance work and caregiving more effectively.
- ▶ Single parents urgently need public childcare support, but supply is insufficient compared to demand, and accessibility remains a major issue. Despite the presence of various childcare support systems such as daycare centers, after-school programs, and regional children's centers, there is often a gap between official operation plans and actual implementation. Even when these programs function well, they fall short of fully addressing childcare gaps, leaving many single parents struggling to meet their caregiving needs.
- ▶ The current childcare support system, which prioritizes eligibility based on income, poses significant barriers for some single parents. Those whose income exceeds 60% of the median income, who live in a house above a certain price threshold, or who own a vehicle often find themselves ineligible for single-parent certification. As a result, they are deprioritized in receiving public childcare support. Ensuring that childcare gaps do not occur is crucial for single parents raising children alone, yet in practice, 'those without certification' are often treated as 'wealthy single parents' and consequently excluded from support. Policies should be designed to reflect the societal necessity of childcare rather than income-based criteria, and the current public childcare policies that impose income-based differentiation within single-parent households urgently need reform.
- ▶ When public childcare support is insufficient, single parents must rely on family members or external services such as domestic helpers, but these resources are not accessible to everyone. In some cases, single parents are forced to lower their employment status to accommodate their childcare responsibilities. This is often an unavoidable choice for parents of young children, requiring them to forgo income, career progression, and stable employment status in favor of temporary or informal work arrangements. Although they strive to fill the gaps in childcare through personal sacrifices, the most critical moments arise when their children fall ill, and they often experience deep guilt when their children are not given priority.
- ▶ Many single parents also experience severe emotional distress. The loss and trauma associated with divorce, bereavement, or becoming an unwed parent have significant psychological effects, requiring substantial time and effort to return to a sense of normalcy. The psychological burden of having to make all major household decisions alone, and bearing the consequences independently, is a common experience among single parents. Without someone to consult or share responsibilities with, they face numerous difficult decisions on their own. The fear of making a wrong decision that could negatively impact their children is a constant source of anxiety. Due to this overwhelming burden and responsibility, many single parents frequently experience exhaustion. Raising children while managing everyday life requires much more effort than simply compensating for the absence of a former spouse—it often feels exponentially more demanding.

● Policy Improvements for Work-Life Balance of All Single-Parent Households

● Enhancing Public Childcare Services

- ▶ A comprehensive childcare service system is essential to support the work-life balance of single parents. One of the biggest challenges they face is the ability to respond to emergencies. Since single parents often lack private resources, public childcare systems — including daycare centers, after-school programs, and Kiwoom Centers — must be expanded and strengthened in both quality and capacity to provide stable support.
- ▶ Daycare centers are the most reliable public childcare service for preschool-aged children. According to in-depth interviews, some single parents utilized evening daycare services to extend their working hours. However, this opportunity is not equally available to all. The availability of extended daycare hours directly affects the employment opportunities of single parents. Therefore, extended daycare services must be sufficiently provided nationwide to ensure equal access for all single parents.
- ▶ Educational disparities based on parental circumstances tend to widen from upper elementary school years onward. Therefore, it is crucial to develop public childcare and educational support services that extend beyond early childhood education, providing continuous support throughout the child's educational journey.

● Establishing a Prioritization System for Childcare Services

- ▶ A recurring issue identified in in-depth interviews is the prioritization system within public childcare services. Single parents who attempt to become self-sufficient by working often lose access to previously available public support. Rather than limiting priority access to low-income single parents, childcare services should be made accessible to all single-parent families. The current childcare support system must be redesigned to incorporate reasonable income and household-type criteria.

● Improving Working Conditions for All Employees

- ▶ The most significant factor disrupting work-life balance for single-parent households is long working hours and the unpredictability of work schedules. To address this, working conditions must be improved. Work-life balance policies should not be confined to specific occupational groups but should instead encompass all job categories and employment statuses.

● Introducing Mobility Support Services

- ▶ To facilitate the efficient use of childcare services, the introduction of mobility support services should also be considered. Gaps between different childcare services must be addressed by implementing public

services that fill these time gaps. For instance, if a parent needs to transport their child from Institution A to Institution B, they may be restricted to jobs with highly fragmented working hours. Mobility support services should be implemented to integrate different childcare options seamlessly and alleviate time pressures on parents.

● **Strengthening Community-Based Human Networks and Support Systems**

- ▶ When unexpected situations arise — such as a child falling ill or an unplanned extension of work hours — the public childcare system often proves inadequate. To address this, family centers or community centers currently running various programs for single parents should implement a system that matches single-parent households with local helpers in their vicinity. This initiative would provide an emergency support system, ensuring that single parents have a reliable safety net during critical moments.

● **Policy Improvements for Work-Life Balance in Working Single-Parent Households**

● **Expanding Work-Life Balance Policies**

- ▶ Recent efforts to enhance parental leave policies for single parents have included increasing the upper limit of parental leave benefits. However, single-parent household heads are currently entitled to only half the leave period and benefits that two-parent households receive. To ensure that at least two adults can share childcare responsibilities for a child, the duration and amount of parental leave benefits should be doubled. These two benefit recipients could either be fully utilized by the single parent or distributed to relatives or close caregivers who are actively involved in childcare. This approach would reflect the growing diversity of family structures in legal and policy frameworks.

● **Enhancing Household Support Services**

- ▶ To secure quality time between single parents and their children, it is essential to reduce the time spent on household chores. Implementing household support service programs would enable single parents to allocate more time to meaningful interactions with their children, such as conversation and physical activities.

● **Developing a Community-Based Meal Program**

- ▶ To protect the fundamental right to health for children of single-parent families, a locally integrated dinner meal program should be introduced. While preschool-aged children can receive balanced meals through extended daycare services, elementary school students often lose access to dinner support after enrollment, frequently resorting to convenience foods. After enduring high-intensity workdays, many single parents struggle to prepare proper meals for their children in the evenings. Establishing a nutritious dinner meal service within safe community spaces would not only ensure children's dietary well-being but also allow single parents to secure valuable evening hours.

● Policy Improvements for Work-Life Balance in Unemployed Single-Parent Households

● Enhancing Employment Support Services

- ▶ To promote work-life balance among single parents, tailored employment support services are essential. Many single parents struggle with employment and job-seeking due to caregiving responsibilities. In-depth interviews revealed that single parents on the threshold of welfare benefits often face challenges in achieving financial independence due to the lack of suitable job opportunities and the risk of losing welfare benefits upon employment. Therefore, to support single parents in transitioning from welfare dependence to self-sufficiency and achieving a broader work-life balance, more specific and realistic employment assistance programs are required. For example, personalized career counseling and job-matching services should be implemented to align with single parents' career aspirations while also considering their caregiving responsibilities. Although the National Employment Support System currently provides such services, it lacks specific considerations for caregiving responsibilities and does not have a fully developed support framework tailored to single parents. Improvements are necessary to address these gaps. For example, exemptions should be introduced for single parents undergoing mandatory steps in vocational training or employment-linked programs when emergencies such as childcare crises arise. Detailed regulations should also be established to allow for family care leave due to a child's illness or participation in school events.

● Expanding Quality Short-Term Employment Opportunities

- ▶ Given the work patterns of single parents, sustaining high-intensity employment, which is characteristic of work culture in Korea, is extremely challenging. However, remaining unemployed is not a desirable option either, as it can lead to long-term financial hardship and intergenerational poverty. For single parents with young children, suitable jobs should allow for short working hours with flexibility for emergency adjustments. However, the labor market currently offers few jobs that meet these criteria, with most falling into the category of short-term, low-paying, unstable positions. Just as the National Employment Support System provides job experience programs for young people, a similar program should be developed to offer quality short-term employment opportunities for single parents. Cooperative businesses, social enterprises, and other third-sector organizations could play a role in providing such employment opportunities.
- ▶ At the same time, care must be taken to ensure that jobs designed specifically for single parents do not contribute to their further social exclusion. These employment opportunities should serve as transitional jobs, enabling single parents to gradually integrate into the primary labor market once their caregiving burden is reduced. Long-term support systems should be implemented to facilitate this transition and foster career progression.

References

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Relevant Ministry : Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, Family Support Division

Supervising Ministries : Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, Family Support Division; Ministry of Health and Welfare, Division of Childcare Policy; Ministry of Health and Welfare, Division of Self-Sufficiency Policy; Ministry of Employment and Labor, Women's Employment Policy Division; Ministry of Employment and Labor, Wages and Working Hours Policy Division; Ministry of Employment and Labor, National Employment Support Planning Team