

1 Background and Issues

- ▶ Recent public discourse — particularly among younger generations — has brought questions of ‘fairness’ and ‘gender equality’ to the forefront of Korean society. At the same time, the rapid decline in fertility has come to be widely recognized as a national crisis, prompting greater attention to work-life balance and increasing the uptake of related policies. As these policies become more commonly used within firms, conflicts surrounding their implementation have intensified in workplace settings.
- ▶ Amid shifting social values and the entry of a new generation into the labor market, it is increasingly important to move beyond the prevailing notion that ‘fairness equals meritocracy’ or that ‘gender equality policies are inherently unfair.’ This requires renewed theoretical and practical approaches capable of clarifying the rationale, legitimacy, and methodological foundations for advancing gender equality.
- ▶ In this context, it is crucial to examine how the discourse on ‘fairness’ and ‘gender equality’ has evolved, how these concepts interact — often contentiously — within corporate HRM systems that shape compensation, and how employees perceive the connections between fairness, gender equality, and the use of work-life balance policies. Such understanding is essential for developing strategies that can effectively address and mitigate the conflicts arising from these dynamics.

2 Research Findings and Analysis

◉ Social Big Data Analysis of Corporate Reviews

* Using employee-generated reviews and evaluation posts on JobPlanet from January 1, 2020 to April 3, 2024, the study analyzed posts containing keywords related to ‘fairness’, ‘gender equality’, and ‘work-family balance’. Topic modeling, word-cloud analysis, and semantic network analysis were conducted.

- ▶ ‘Fairness’ is strongly associated with ‘compensation’, particularly salary and promotion, both of which are perceived to be determined primarily by ‘performance evaluations’. This suggests that evaluation systems are viewed as the central mechanism shaping most HR outcomes. These patterns were especially pronounced in organizations with relatively high wage levels and hierarchical structures, such as those in finance and construction.
- ▶ The keyword ‘work-family balance’ was predominantly associated with negative expressions, whereas ‘work-life balance’ was linked to positive terminology. Negative expressions were frequently connected to marriage, childbirth, and childcare, indicating that work-family balance is often construed as a gendered responsibility borne mainly by women. In contrast, positive references to work-life balance typically emphasized flexible work arrangements and the ability to leave work on time.

Word-Cloud Analysis of Keywords Associated with 'Work-Life Balance' (Group 5)



Source: JobPlanet Review Data (January 2020 - April 2024)

Note: Blue indicates positive expressions; red indicates negative expressions.

- ▶ Although explicit mentions of direct gender discrimination were relatively limited, references to unfair or unequal treatment increased sharply when posts addressed work-family balance policies.

Employee Perception Survey Results

* A perception survey was administered to 2,000 employees using quota sampling based on gender, age, occupation, firm size, parental status, and so on. The survey assessed employees' perceptions of fairness and gender equality within their organizations, as well as their views on the standards and principles of fair and gender-equal HRM.

- ▶ The largest gender gap appeared in perceptions of gender discrimination in the labor market. Women demonstrated significantly higher awareness of the gender wage gap than men.
- ▶ Flexible work arrangements were broadly viewed in a positive light and widely accepted. In contrast, perceptions of parental leave varied according to individual circumstances. Although employees generally recognized the necessity and value of parental leave, negative views emerged when respondents believed that taking leave could directly affect their own HR outcomes.
- ▶ Perceptions of 'fairness in HRM' were strongly shaped by individual value orientations and organizational culture.
- ▶ Employees regarded policies as fairer when eligibility was broad and inclusive. Conversely, when policies targeted only a small subset of workers — such as those related to pregnancy or childbirth — negative perceptions increased. Ultimately, employees were more likely to consider a policy 'fair' when its benefits were widely accessible.

Case Study Analysis on HRM Practices Supporting Work-Life Balance

* A multiple-case study was conducted with ten firms selected to reflect diversity in organizational type, industry, and size. The analysis reviewed corporate characteristics, workforce gender composition, gender-equal HRM practices, implementation of work-life balance policies, conflicts arising from policy use and related resolution processes, and policy needs identified by each firm.

- ▶ ‘Performance evaluation’ emerged as the core source of conflict related to fairness, gender equality, and work-life balance. Firms with well-designed evaluation systems—those that measure job-related outputs and ensure objectivity through active communication—tended to exhibit minimal gender disparities and higher levels of work-life balance.
- ▶ Although explicit gender disparities in promotion, evaluation, or pay were not prominent in most organizations, gender-based occupational segregation — especially through job assignment — remained severe. In manufacturing firms, particularly those with production-centered worksites, labor unions were largely composed of middle-aged male production workers. Their perspectives tended to dominate workplace norms, resulting in limited interest in work-life balance and low utilization of related policies.
- ▶ Work-life balance policies were more readily adopted, and associated conflicts decreased, when eligibility was broad. In such organizations, men made more active use of work-life balance programs, significantly reducing gender gaps and minimizing conflicts linked to policy use.
- ▶ The CEO’s management philosophy and organizational culture had a notable impact on the level of gender equality and work-life balance within firms.
- ▶ Requirements for Advancing Fairness, Gender Equality, and Work-Life Balance in HRM:
 - When top management treats work-life balance initiatives as part of a broader management strategy, uptake and effectiveness increase substantially.
 - Effective implementation requires identifying and addressing factors that hinder employees’ work-life balance, rather than merely introducing new policies.
 - Policy design should account for diversity in job characteristics and work arrangements. Compatibility with existing HRM systems — such as evaluation, promotion, and compensation — must be thoroughly assessed.
 - Employee participation in the design of new HRM policies enhances legitimacy and supports stable implementation.
 - Firms should strengthen predictability in workforce planning, creating an environment where employees can request and use policies without hesitation.
 - Clear internal guidelines are essential to prevent disadvantages in evaluation or promotion for employees who take parental leave or use similar policies. This is especially important in organizations using relative performance evaluations, where fairness perceptions among non-users must be managed carefully.
 - All processes should be grounded in communication and trust between labor and management. Labor unions and labor-management councils therefore play a critical role in ensuring equitable policy implementation.

Key Findings and Policy Implications

	Key Research Findings	Policy Implications
Theoretical Review	<p>Ideal Worker Norm + Traditional Gender Role Segregation</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p>HRM Systems Structured Around the Ideal Worker Model + Expansion of Work-Life Balance Policies</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p>Reinforcement of Gender Gaps in the Labor Market</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The persistence of traditional gender-role expectations has led to gender-asymmetric use of work-family balance policies within organizations. These dynamics, in turn, reproduce and reinforce gender disparities in the labor market. To address these structural inequalities, HRM systems and labor-market practices rooted in the ideal worker norm and traditional gender-role segregation must be fundamentally reformed.
Social Big Data Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For younger workers, fairness is primarily associated with compensation — namely salary and promotion — both of which are viewed as outcomes fundamentally determined by performance evaluations. Authoritarian or hierarchical organizational cultures create perceptions of unequal access to opportunities, which ultimately manifest as experiences of discrimination. The term ‘work-family balance’ is closely linked to marriage, childbirth, and childcare, and is therefore used as a negative, gendered expression that applies predominantly to women. In contrast, ‘work-life balance’ is associated with flexible work arrangements and the ability to leave work on time, and is used with overwhelmingly positive connotations, particularly in hybrid-work environments. The term ‘work-family balance’ has largely disappeared from workplace discourse, replaced by the broader concept of ‘work-life balance’. Although most language in corporate reviews tends to be negative overall, ‘work-life balance’ is the only term consistently framed in positive terms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In corporate HRM systems, perceptions of ‘fairness’ originate from the ‘evaluation’ process. Fairness in ‘opportunities’ is viewed as essential. In organizations with a high concentration of women, employees frequently reference discriminatory treatment or unequal access to opportunities. Although direct mentions of ‘gender discrimination’ are rare, the substance of these concerns suggests that women remain the primary group affected by perceived unfairness. While overt gender discrimination has declined in many firms, the persistent association of “women as primary caregivers” continues to shape workplace experiences. This gives rise to indirect discrimination against women who balance work and care responsibilities and fuels ongoing debates about fairness when these employees use work-life balance or parental-leave policies.
Employee Perception Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although acceptance of the parental leave system was high, many respondents stated that employees who take such leave should be excluded from promotion review, revealing a persistent negative perception. Flexible work arrangements are positively evaluated and widely accepted. Women report a significantly higher awareness of gender discrimination in the labor market compared to men. Furthermore, those who exhibit stronger perceptions of gender-based discrimination tend to show more inclusive attitudes not only toward women but also toward other vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities and young workers. While parental leave is easier to use than flexible work arrangements, the level of managerial support for it remains low. There is a strong demand for the legal institutionalization of flexible work arrangements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The broader the eligibility scope of a policy, the more positively it was perceived, whereas policies targeting a narrow subset of employees — such as those related to pregnancy or childcare — were viewed more negatively. Ultimately, policies were regarded as ‘fair’ only when their applicability was sufficiently broad. The findings indicate that individuals’ personal value orientations and organizational culture significantly shape perceptions of ‘fair HRM’. Accordingly, when introducing policies that target a minority group, it is essential to design the system and create an organizational environment that can be perceived as ensuring fair implementation. Work-life balance policies are no longer understood as welfare or accommodative benefits for individual employees, but increasingly recognized as an integral component of career management.

	Key Research Findings	Policy Implications
In-depth Corporate Case Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The activation of work-life balance policies becomes more feasible when top management adopts and promotes such policies as part of the firm's overall management strategy. • Rather than focusing solely on whether a policy is formally implemented, organizations must first identify the substantive factors that hinder employees' work-life balance. • Policy design and implementation should be tailored to account for diversity in job types and work arrangements across occupational groups within the firm. In addition, careful consideration is required to ensure alignment (fit) between new policies and existing HRM systems such as performance evaluation, promotion, and compensation. • When employees directly participate in the introduction of new HRM policies, and when their feedback is actively incorporated into policy design, more stable and effective implementation can be expected. • Firms should establish mechanisms that enhance predictability in workforce planning, while also ensuring that employees can utilize policies without fear of negative judgment or informal penalties. • To prevent disadvantages in performance evaluation and promotion for users of parental leave and other work-life balance policies, firms should develop explicit internal guidelines. • To avoid creating the impression that existing employees are disadvantaged — for example, through lowered performance ratings — firms should ensure that policy use does not negatively impact colleagues. Further, if the colleagues who help cover the workload during an employee's leave have greater opportunities to receive positive evaluations, this can support broader uptake and acceptance of the policies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many employees view equity and fairness as equivalent concepts; thus, if someone else's use of a policy is perceived to impose a relative disadvantage on them, they are likely to see the situation as unfair. • Firms require HRM systems that enhance predictability for employers while minimizing employees' perceptions of relative loss. • While formal policies matter, communication and trust between employees and management are even more critical, as they enhance predictability and stability in HRM operations. • Developing fair and gender-equal HRM practices is essential, and the responsible actors should include firms (HR managers, department heads, and CEOs), employees, labor unions, and labor inspectors, each according to their respective roles. • Gender-based occupational segregation continues to hinder fair HRM practices, yet both firms and workers generally exhibit low awareness of this issue. The importance of job assignment ('placement') must therefore be emphasized within HRM. • Labor unions need to recalibrate their stance and strategic approach toward policies that target a minority of workers.

3 Policy Recommendations

Policy Directions

- ▶ HRM standards and practices must move beyond the traditional 'ideal worker' model toward approaches that recognize employees as individuals who combine work, life, and care responsibilities.
- ▶ While direct gender discrimination has diminished in Korea, indirect, implicit, and intersectional forms of discrimination have become more prominent. This makes it essential to develop clear, evidence-based criteria for identifying the root causes of gender gaps and diagnosing discriminatory practices in the labor market.

- ▶ Conflicts related to fairness and gender equality within HRM are becoming increasingly complex, in part because work-life balance policies continue to be used disproportionately by women. To ensure that rising societal expectations around fairness, gender equality, and work-life balance are reflected in HRM practices, organizations must adopt strategies that reduce perceptions of relative disadvantage among employees.
- ▶ Because predictability is critical for firms and fairness in performance evaluation is essential for employees, HRM measures should be designed around these two foundational principles.
- ▶ Perceptions of fair HRM vary across individuals and organizational contexts. Thus, it is important to articulate and disseminate shared principles and directional guidelines that can be applied consistently.
- ▶ Policy measures are required to increase corporate acceptance of HRM systems that simultaneously advance fairness, gender equality, and work-life balance.

◉ Corporate Directions for Gender-Equal HRM

- ▶ Embed gender-equality principles within corporate management strategies and all core HRM processes.
- ▶ Publicly commit to the activation of gender-equal work-life balance supports, signaling leadership-level endorsement.

◉ Measures for Fair and Gender-Equal HRM

- ▶ Criteria for a Paradigm Shift in HRM Practice

Paradigm Shift in HRM Approaches	
Current HRM Model	Future HRM Model
Ideal worker norm	Worker who integrates work, care, and life responsibilities
Work-life balance	Work-life integration: a complementary model
Continuous operations with insufficient staffing	Securing surplus personnel to prepare for temporary absences
Low predictability of staffing gaps	High predictability of staffing gaps
Evaluation based on working hours	Evaluation based on job performance and outputs
Confrontational labor-management relations	Communication and trust between labor and management

- ▶ Develop HRM systems that ensure fair and gender-equal treatment when employees use work-life balance policies.
- ▶ Introduce diversified utilization mechanisms.

◉ Improvements to Existing Programs

- ▶ Utilize corporate disclosure systems to strengthen gender-disaggregated monitoring and indicator management across HRM processes.
- ▶ Develop Korea-specific programs aimed at raising awareness of gender equality.
- ▶ Incorporate a 'gender-equality' perspective into all relevant policies and programs.

◉ Corporate Support Measures for Gender-Equal Work-Life Balance

- ▶ Consolidate and strengthen employer support programs.
- ▶ Provide HRM support based on the Human Resources Business Partner (HRBP) model.

* HRBP: A strategic HR role responsible for recruitment, talent deployment, and talent development aligned with organizational strategy.

- ▶ Support workforce gap management through improvements to temporary staffing programs.

◉ Legal and Institutional Reform Measures

- ▶ Strengthen the roles of labor unions and labor-management councils.
- ▶ Establish clear criteria to prevent disadvantageous treatment of employees.
- ▶ Legislate flexible work arrangements.
- ▶ Introduce greater flexibility in reduced working hours for employees with childcare responsibilities.
- ▶ Codify the use of leave on an hourly basis.

References	JobPlanet Employee Survey Data (2024) JobPlanet Review Data (January 2020 – April 2024) “In-depth Corporate Case Study Report,” commissioned to the Labor Consulting Firm Happy Work Institute
Supervising ministries	Women’s Employment Policy Division, Ministry of Employment and Labor Women’s Human Resources Development Division, Ministry of Gender Equality and Family
Related ministries	Employment Culture Improvement Division, Ministry of Employment and Labor Work–Family Balance Promotion Task Force, Ministry of Employment and Labor