



**Research Title:** A Study on the Reorganization of Social Care from a Gender Perspective (II): Seeking a Strategy for Raising the Quality of Childcare  
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# Gender- and Class-Based Inequality in Childcare Responsibilities and Strategies for Enhancing the Quality of Social Childcare Services

## Abstract

- Despite the expansion of socialized childcare, service shortages, limited accessibility, low service quality, and inequality in service distribution prevent childcare services from fully addressing families' childcare needs from the perspective of service users. These issues perpetuate gender imbalances in childcare responsibilities within families, while insufficient public service provision and quality concerns further exacerbate class disparities in access to childcare services.
- Based on a survey examining the gender- and class-based distribution of childcare responsibilities for infants, toddlers, and elementary school-aged children, as well as demand for improved service quality, this study proposes strategies for enhancing the quality of social childcare services.

Project	Content
Securing a High-Quality Childcare Workforce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>① Standardizing the training process for childcare personnel</li><li>② Establishing uniform qualification standards and standardizing job titles for childcare workers</li><li>③ Addressing disparities in working conditions and ensuring employment stability for childcare teachers</li><li>④ Improving compensation and benefits for childcare teachers</li><li>⑤ Establishing a rank-based employment structure based on job position</li></ul>
Establishing Quality Standards and Universal Application of High-Quality Childcare Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>① Standardizing facility requirements and ensuring universal implementation</li><li>② Unifying and standardizing regulations for operating hours</li><li>③ Developing and implementing comprehensive childcare programs</li><li>④ Enhancing the professionalism of after-school childcare programs for elementary school students</li></ul>

## Research Background and Objectives


### Research Background

- ▶ Despite the expansion of socialized childcare, from the perspective of service users, issues such as insufficient service supply, limited accessibility, low service quality, and disparities in service distribution prevent childcare services from fully addressing family childcare needs. These problems perpetuate gender imbalances in childcare responsibilities within families while exacerbating class disparities in access to public childcare services due to the lack of sufficient public service provision and concerns regarding service quality.
- ▶ In terms of infant and toddler care, although the overall supply of childcare services has improved, gaps in service quality among institutions remain. The training processes and qualification standards for infant and toddler care teachers vary by institution, leading to differences in working hours and workload intensity. Additionally, beyond regular teachers, there are assistant teachers and substitute teachers who have similar qualification requirements but face different employment conditions in the field.
- ▶ After-school childcare for elementary school students, in contrast to infant and toddler care, remains significantly underprovided in the public sector. Although childcare personnel generally meet similar qualification requirements and perform nearly identical tasks, their titles differ, and there are discrepancies in wage scales, working hours, and employment stability.
- ▶ This study highlights how the expansion of social childcare services has not sufficiently addressed gender inequalities in childcare responsibilities or class-based disparities in access to public childcare services. It aims to propose restructuring strategies for a universal and high-quality social childcare system to ensure equitable childcare distribution and improved service quality.

## Survey and Analysis of Childcare Practices and Demand for Quality Childcare

### ■ Analysis of childcare methods and time allocation by care type for infants, toddlers, and elementary school children

⇒ Confirms gender inequalities in childcare responsibilities and class disparities in childcare access.

-  An analysis of childcare time allocation over a 24-hour period indicates that institutional childcare is used primarily during daytime hours, while mothers serve as the primary caregivers during non-institutional hours. Fathers rarely assume primary childcare responsibilities, even in dual-income households.

- A closer examination of daytime institutional childcare hours reveals that public childcare services often end before standard working hours, exacerbating the childcare burden on working mothers. For infants and toddlers, most daycare centers close by 4:30 PM, while elementary school students rely on after-school programs such as after-school care classrooms and extracurricular programs, which typically end between 3:30 PM and 4:30 PM. After these hours, childcare is primarily handled by grandparents or through private childcare arrangements. In cases where such support is unavailable, mothers assume the primary caregiving role.
- To alleviate the gendered burden of childcare on women, it is essential to improve accessibility by extending operational hours and enhancing service quality. By ensuring high-quality, reliable childcare services, public childcare utilization can be encouraged, reducing the disproportionate caregiving burden on women.

<Table 1> Childcare Hours by Primary Caregiver for Infants and Toddlers

(Unit: Number of Respondents, Hours)

Category		Mother		Father		Grandparents		Institution (Daycare + Kindergarten)	
		N	Average Hours (Standard Deviation)	N	Average Hours (Standard Deviation)	N	Average Hours (Standard Deviation)	N	Average Hours (Standard Deviation)
Child's Age	Infants	(1,514)	14.83 (6.23)	(1,087)	4.93 (4.11)	(408)	4.68 (3.99)	(808)	7.55 (1.76)
	Toddlers	(3,904)	12.43 (4.58)	(2,692)	4.68 (4.08)	(1,218)	3.63 (3.28)	(3,654)	7.55 (1.62)
Household Income	7 million KRW or more	(1,892)	11.51 (5.08)	(1,397)	5.11 (4.06)	(794)	3.87 (3.33)	(1,608)	7.65 (1.72)
	3–6.99 million KRW	(3,127)	13.84 (5.04)	(2,138)	4.40 (3.92)	(742)	3.85 (3.39)	(2,551)	7.53 (1.58)
	2.99 million KRW or less	(398)	14.84 (5.28)	(244)	5.80 (5.14)	(90)	4.52 (5.29)	(303)	7.25 (1.70)
Dual-Income Status	Dual-Income	(3,481)	11.69 (4.73)	(2,594)	4.71 (3.93)	(1,312)	3.87 (3.30)	(3,049)	7.76 (1.68)
	Single-Income	(1,937)	15.63 (5.08)	(1,184)	4.85 (4.40)	(314)	4.01 (4.21)	(1,413)	7.10 (1.47)
Region Size	Metropolitan City	(2,197)	12.51 (5.24)	(1,645)	4.93 (4.10)	(804)	4.10 (3.79)	(1,776)	7.45 (1.78)
	Small/Medium City	(2,586)	13.40 (5.22)	(1,744)	4.72 (4.10)	(672)	3.71 (3.01)	(2,156)	7.61 (1.57)
	Rural Area	(635)	13.94 (4.80)	(390)	4.14 (3.89)	(149)	3.66 (3.81)	(530)	7.63 (1.44)

<Table 2> Childcare Hours by Primary Caregiver and Activity for Elementary School Children

(Unit: Number of Respondents, Hours)

Category		Mother			Father			Grandparents			Elementary School Care Class			After-School Programs			Academy (Academic)			Academy (Arts & Physical Education)			Alone		
		N	Average Hours	Standard Deviation	N	Average Hours	Standard Deviation	N	Average Hours	Standard Deviation	N	Average Hours	Standard Deviation	N	Average Hours	Standard Deviation	N	Average Hours	Standard Deviation	N	Average Hours	Standard Deviation	N	Average Hours	Standard Deviation
Child's Grade	1st-2nd Grade	(1,592)	11.93	4.83	(1,007)	4.74	4.18	(441)	3.25	2.57	(472)	1.72	0.88	(488)	1.19	0.58	(605)	1.54	0.91	(829)	1.38	0.68	(197)	1.44	1.07
	3rd-4th Grade	(1,479)	11.32	4.74	(985)	4.67	4.14	(369)	3.08	2.40	(154)	1.35	0.80	(415)	1.19	0.62	(852)	1.74	0.92	(746)	1.27	0.66	(353)	1.74	1.13
	5th-6th Grade	(1,423)	11.30	4.61	(851)	4.75	4.25	(287)	3.10	2.62	(112)	1.29	0.61	(317)	1.12	0.54	(894)	2.04	1.06	(502)	1.23	0.69	(437)	1.71	1.10
Household Income	7 million KRW or more	(1,777)	10.53	4.65	(1,247)	4.88	4.05	(583)	3.25	2.62	(313)	1.51	0.85	(432)	1.13	0.59	(1,022)	1.93	1.07	(824)	1.32	0.72	(420)	1.60	1.05
	3-6.99 million KRW	(2,453)	12.09	4.69	(1,479)	4.48	4.18	(462)	2.99	2.44	(387)	1.63	0.86	(704)	1.18	0.58	(1,236)	1.71	0.92	(1,141)	1.29	0.63	(515)	1.69	1.11
	2.99 million KRW or less	(264)	12.97	4.51	(118)	5.93	5.32	(53)	3.50	2.10	(38)	1.60	0.72	(86)	1.28	0.59	(93)	1.56	0.90	(112)	1.38	0.82	(53)	1.97	1.52
Dual-Income Status	Dual-Income	(3,133)	10.66	4.64	(2,193)	4.51	3.97	(900)	3.08	2.39	(589)	1.62	0.87	(842)	1.18	0.59	(1,707)	1.81	0.99	(1,460)	1.29	0.66	(876)	1.63	1.04
	Single-Income	(1,362)	13.53	4.35	(650)	5.40	4.77	(197)	3.46	3.08	(149)	1.41	0.77	(379)	1.15	0.57	(643)	1.78	1.00	(617)	1.34	0.71	(111)	1.96	1.51
Region Size	Metropolitan City	(1,796)	10.87	4.76	(1,267)	4.87	4.18	(573)	3.19	2.65	(337)	1.55	0.89	(493)	1.21	0.60	(942)	1.81	1.02	(765)	1.26	0.67	(314)	1.70	1.18
	Small/Medium City	(2,131)	11.97	4.69	(1,260)	4.68	4.23	(425)	3.13	2.34	(310)	1.61	0.81	(544)	1.14	0.57	(1,139)	1.82	1.00	(1,056)	1.33	0.69	(508)	1.66	1.06
	Rural Area	(567)	11.98	4.64	(316)	4.28	3.99	(99)	3.00	2.61	(90)	1.58	0.84	(184)	1.17	0.60	(269)	1.68	0.90	(256)	1.31	0.62	(166)	1.61	1.14

It was confirmed that income-based disparities in childcare access persist. In low-income households, the proportion of private childcare options, which require financial costs, was lower, while family-based childcare was more dominant. This trend was even more pronounced in low-income dual-income households. Lower-income families primarily relied on family-based care, followed by public childcare, whereas higher-income families utilized a broader range of resources, including grandparents, private academies, private tutoring, and commercial childcare services.

- ▶ In low-income households, particularly in low-income dual-income families, public childcare dependence was significantly higher when family-based childcare was unavailable. This highlights the urgent need to enhance the quality of public childcare, ensuring that all children can grow and develop equitably, regardless of socioeconomic background.
- ▶ However, for infants, lower-income families tended to rely more on family-based care and had lower public childcare utilization rates. This may be influenced by cash support programs such as childcare allowances. Given OECD trends in early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies, public childcare should play a crucial role in supporting infant development. Therefore, the current cash support system for non-institutionalized children should be reconsidered.

- Another critical issue is elementary school-aged children being left alone at home. Among households with an income of 2.99 million KRW or less, children across all grade levels spent more time alone. This issue was even more severe for low-income dual-income households, reaffirming that childcare gaps are more likely to occur in low-income working families.
- Additionally, a survey on the availability of family childcare assistance showed that low-income households and rural communities had a higher proportion of families without caregivers, further confirming that childcare resources are more limited in these groups.

## ■ Demand Analysis of Childcare Quality and Policy Implications

- In assessing five key components of childcare quality, both infant/toddler and elementary school-age groups identified ‘childcare teachers’ as the most critical factor. This finding aligns with OECD countries’ emphasis on workforce quality as the primary determinant of childcare service quality.
  - ▶ Following ‘childcare teachers,’ the rankings differed by age group: For infants and toddlers, the order was ‘accessibility’ → ‘facility environment’ → ‘health and nutrition management’ → ‘childcare programs’. For elementary school students, the order was ‘facility environment’ → ‘accessibility’ → ‘childcare programs’ → ‘health and nutrition management’.
  - ▶ The results indicate that younger children prioritize accessibility, while older children value the quality of facilities more than accessibility.
- A detailed breakdown of key components showed that in the ‘childcare teachers’ category, ‘personal qualities’ were rated as more important than ‘professional expertise’. This trend was consistent across both infants/toddlers and elementary school students.
- The implications derived from the demand analysis results are as follows.
  - ▶ Given that ‘childcare teachers’ — especially their personal qualities — were the most valued factor, policies should prioritize improving overall working conditions for infant, toddler, and after-school childcare staff.
  - ▶ Regarding facility environments, it is necessary to standardize regulations so that all institutions can maintain a uniformly high-quality setting, eliminating disparities between institutions.
  - ▶ In terms of accessibility, the high importance placed on travel distance suggests that for infants and toddlers, childcare services should be as close to home as possible. For elementary school students, services should be integrated into schools or located nearby to minimize commuting distances. In rural areas, the emphasis on transportation support for commuting to and from school highlights the need for improved school transportation services. However, long commutes on school transport vehicles could place additional stress on children, which should be taken into account.

- ▶ Regarding program content, early childhood education should prioritize social and emotional development over academic learning, in line with parental demand and developmental needs. For elementary school programs, a balanced approach should be taken, incorporating both social development programs and academic activities while considering the differences in program demand by household income level.

## Policy Tasks for Enhancing the Quality of Social Childcare Services for Children

### ■ Securing a High-Quality Childcare Workforce

- In Korea, the training process, qualification requirements, and working conditions for childcare personnel vary depending on the institution they work for, even though their primary duties — including childcare and administrative tasks related to institutional operations — are largely similar. Given this, it is necessary to establish a unified training process, standardized qualifications, and consistent working conditions for all childcare personnel performing similar roles.

#### ① Standardizing the Training Process for Childcare Personnel

- ▶ (Infants and Toddlers) Unify the educational institutions and training duration for daycare teachers and kindergarten teachers.
- ▶ (Elementary School Children) Standardize the qualification requirements for after-school childcare personnel across different ministries and ensure that training programs include after-school childcare and education content.

#### ② Establishing Uniform Qualification Standards and Standardized Job Titles

- ▶ (Infants and Toddlers) Standardize qualification requirements and unify job titles.
- ▶ (Elementary School Children) Harmonize inconsistent qualification criteria across ministries and institutions and adopt a single job title.

#### ③ Addressing Employment Condition Disparities and Ensuring Job Stability for Childcare Teachers

- ▶ Standardize the salary structure, unify working hour policies, and establish a career-based promotion system.

#### ④ Improving Working Conditions for Childcare Teachers

- ▶ Increase wages, ensure designated break times separate from childcare responsibilities, enforce compliance with legal labor standards for vacation and leave, expand the workforce accordingly, and guarantee training time for professional development.

### ⑤ Establishing a Rank-Based Employment Structure

- ▶ Develop a structured job ranking and promotion system, distinguishing between regular teachers, assistant teachers, and other support roles.

## ■ Establishing Childcare Quality Standards and Universal Implementation of High-Quality Programs

- It is essential to establish a "standard childcare service framework" applicable to both infant/toddler and elementary after-school childcare institutions, ensuring that services are provided uniformly across different government agencies, institutions, and regions.

### ① Standardizing Facility Requirements and Ensuring Universal Application

- ▶ Establish uniform facility environment standards applicable across all ministries and regions to eliminate disparities between different agencies, regions, and institutions (particularly in elementary after-school childcare institutions). Apply these standards to all early childhood education and after-school childcare institutions as part of the integration of early childhood care and education.
- ▶ (Precondition) Secure necessary budgets for facility standardization.

### ② Unifying and Standardizing Operating Hours

- ▶ (Infant/Toddler Childcare Institutions) Unify regular operating hours across all institutions to align them with standard early childhood education hours.
- ▶ (Elementary After-School Childcare Institutions) Standardize operating hours, especially closing times, and apply them consistently across all institutions to align with school schedules.
- ▶ (Preconditions) Implement strong work-hour reduction and parental leave policies to allow parents to rely on standard childcare hours. For non-standard work schedules and irregular childcare needs, consider institutionalizing support for individualized childcare services or subsidizing private childcare service costs.

### ③ Developing and Implementing an Integrated Childcare Program

- ▶ (Infants and Toddlers) Once the integration of early childhood care and education is implemented, childcare and education will be combined into a single system. A developmentally appropriate, integrated childcare education program should be created and applied uniformly across all institutions regardless of administrative jurisdiction.

### ④ Enhancing the Professionalism of After-School Childcare Programs for Elementary School Students

- ▶ (Mandatory Core After-School Childcare Programs) Many after-school childcare programs have already been developed, but institutions currently select programs individually at their discretion. Introducing a standardized core after-school childcare program will help eliminate disparities between institutions and ministries.

- ▶ (Quality Control for Program Instructors) After-school childcare institutions frequently rely on external instructors, but there is no unified system for recruitment, evaluation, or quality management. To improve the quality of after-school childcare programs, it is necessary to introduce qualification standards and evaluation systems for after-school instructors.

Relevant Ministry : Ministry of Education (Early Childhood Education Integration Task Force, After-School and Childcare Policy Division)

Supervising Ministry : Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (Family Policy Division, Family Culture Division)