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# Gender Inequality in Multicultural Families: Reality and Policy Implications

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# Gender Inequality in Multicultural Families: Reality and Policy Implications

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## I. Summary of study

The gender structure that defines different roles and attitudes and endows different duties and authority by gender is one of the core elements in the formation of the order among family members. Given that such an order plays a defining role in the establishment of the relationship and status among family members also in multicultural families, including internationally married couples, a serious consideration of the gender regime or gender-based order is required to understand the overall lives of multicultural families and address the problems they are faced with in family life and the aspects of conflicts stemming from different expectations and demands among family members. However, although social interest in the family lives of internationally married couples has grown since the mid 2000s, the study on the gender-based order or gender regime in family life has been greatly restricted. The approach to even basic elements that have to be dealt with regarding the gender order in family lives, such as sharing of household chores and care, possession of the authority over decision making, balance in

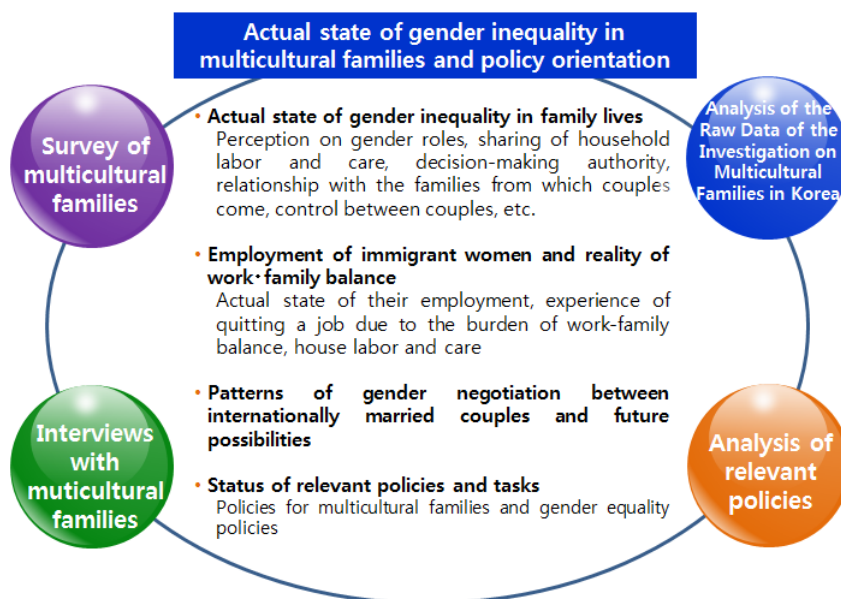
the relationship with the families couples come from, has not been properly made.

Even the policies for multicultural families, which have been formed and developed focusing on the problems internationally married couples face domestically, have overlooked the problem of gender inequality in family life. Criticism has been raised that the existing policies for multicultural families are failing to discard the approach that limits female immigrants by marriage to the domestic realm, including house labor and child care, etc. But policy responses to such claims have not been vitalizing. With the expanding employment of female immigrants by marriage and their increasing activities, demands for changes in gender-based roles and authority among family members are emerging, and the possibility of family conflicts concerning them is rising. Notwithstanding such a reality, no specific policy tasks concerning the gender inequality in multicultural families have been determined.

The failure in making a serious approach to gender inequality in multicultural families deserves a critical consideration from the perspective of the practice of gender equality in the society at large, exceeding the dimension of problems that matter only to individuals or families concerned. In Western countries, Japan, etc., which experienced the problems of immigrant families earlier than Koreans, issues of gender inequality in such families were dealt with, restricting them to damages done by serious violence. This allowed the notion that female immigrants and local women were in extremely different positions to take root. Observations were then made that such a tendency has become an impediment to the formation of common agenda against problems of gender inequality that women in general face in a relevant society. Given the situation, as long as no changes are made about the situation where

gender inequality in multicultural families is not handled with relevant policies, there is a concern that multicultural families will remain in a blind spot of the practice for resolving gender inequality issues.

In this context, this paper identified actual conditions of gender inequality in multicultural families and related aspects of conflicts among the family members, grasped the patterns of negotiations between persons concerned to solve the gender inequality problems, and addressed the relationship between gender negotiations and the practice of gender equality in the society at large. Based on the findings from such an endeavor, we sought for the policy orientation that enables a full-scale approach to the problems of gender inequality in multicultural families.



[Figure 1] Content and method of study

Of all sorts of multicultural families, we focused on those multicultural families which are composed of a wife from a foreign country and a

husband from Korea. A survey of 500 wives who are from Vietnam, the Philippines and China (excluding Korean Chinese) and 257 of their husband who are from Korea, along with interviews of 22 wives from foreign countries and five husbands from Korea were conducted and the results were analyzed. In addition, the raw data of the National Survey of Multicultural Families was reanalyzed, and relevant policy data and the results of interviews with experts in actual sites were analyzed.

## II . Major results of study

- Status of female immigrants within families: Concentrated burden of household labor and care, limited decision-making rights, and marginalized in children's education

As a result of the survey of 500 wives from Vietnam, Philippines and China, a serious level of gender inequality is revealed in the families composed of a wife from a foreign country and a husband from Korea, where a conservative gender regime, including separation of roles between genders, has a strong hold. While the burden of household life, including household labor and care is concentrated on women, their authority is much restricted. In the case of the education of children, where women take the burden and wield the authority in general, female immigrants by marriage are in a more or less peripheral position, taking less burden and less authority in that children's education is related to the world outside households, including schools, etc.

During the interviews with female immigrants by marriage, it was confirmed that they had a high level of awareness of the problem of the labor of house chores and care being concentrated on women. In

terms of decision making on economic life of families, the interviewees who had contributed to the household economy through sustained employment that was recognized by their family members are exercising their rights in a considerable measure, but those who did not have a greatly limited measure of authority.

The husbands who responded to the interviews are clearly aware of the sense of problem their wives have about their unequal household lives. However, they remain lukewarm about the changes, citing such reasons as they are busy, going to trouble to earn money 'outside,' they earn more money, it is difficult to change the long-held lifestyle, or they do not want their parents to see them doing household chores, etc. Although some husbands 'help more than the past,' this is just intermittent and involuntary actions 'in the manner of being done when requested and not done when not requested,' failing to reach the level that can be felt as changes in the gender-based order that has taken root in everyday life.

Insufficient as they are to be felt satisfactory by persons concerned, some changes are actually happening in the sharing of the burden of household labor and child care. In terms of sharing the control of purse strings, however, no room for change is on the horizon. On the part of husbands, the holding of the purse strings is not just a matter of wives' request or their own attitude, and they make it clear their current control of economic matters is due to the 'lack of capabilities' on the part of their wives who are from foreign countries.' Wives' 'lacking capabilities' is regarded as a problem in terms of education of children as well as economic matters. The husbands think they need to take more load to complement the lacking capabilities of their wives who are foreigners. The abovementioned 'peripheral position of mothers from foreign

countries in terms of education of children' is closely linked with the low evaluation of the capabilities of the wives from foreign countries made by their husbands. In this context, the wives from foreign countries are in an unequal position where they take the burden of household life alone, while having no authority over major affairs. More than that, they are faced with a rather complex problem where the cause of inequality they suffer from is attributed to their lack of capabilities as well.

○ The reality of employment and work-life balance of female immigrants & social perception of their parents' home

The gender-based order is not fixed but variable according to the changes happening in the circumstances surrounding the persons concerned. Women's finding jobs, in particular, is recognized as the most important factor causing changes in gender relationship at the scene of family lives. However, in this study it is confirmed that while women's employment seem to be able to somewhat effect a positive improvement in unequal relationship in terms of women's authority, it fails to bring about notable changes in terms of the roles in households. That is, regardless of employment status, the premise that 'household chores and care are to be done by women' persists.

With the pressure of 'having to be faithful to household chores and child care on the one side and the necessity to get a job on the other, women delay employment during the time when child care necessity is intense and find a job when they see even a small possibility of doing both. But such measures of managing both household work and having a job without dealing with fundamental causes cannot enable lasting work-care balance. Such a dual-burden system established delicately by women on their own is vulnerable to cracks. Such cracks are vividly

revealed in the reality where 'working moms' are stressed by the lack of time to care for children, the absence of a person who takes care of household labor, husbands' demand for putting priority on child care, etc. It is revealed that whereas full-time workers and residents in large cities, of 'working moms,' have a greater burden of work-family reconciliation, and the burden born by them lessens more with higher satisfaction with the division of household labor. The working moms whose parents-in-law decide to give a hand in child care or those who can get help from their own parents under the permission of their husband and parents-in-law can pass the peak of work-care reconciliation, but those who cannot get such help are forced to leave their job. As much as 36.7%, or 403 persons, of wives from foreign countries with the experience of employment in Korea have the experience of quitting the job due to the burden of household labor and care, which suggests a considerable number of female immigrants by marriage have to stop working under the dual burden.

The fact that the issue of gender inequality affects the relationship with families from which couples come as well is noteworthy. The social perception of couples in an international marriage includes the strong tendency to believe that 'parental homes of wives' are provided with economic help in a considerable measure. But this survey could not confirm such a fact. Rather, the husband's parental homes that are in the same house or very near tend to get more help. With 'parental homes of wives,' a kind of reciprocal relationship is revealed to be formed, where a partial economic assistance is provided to the parental homes of wives and they offer a hand in household labor and child care in return. In this sense, the relationship of couples in an international marriage with their parents' homes are more or less imbalanced, showing

that the roles of women in household labor and care tend to be extended to their parental homes located in foreign countries. Therefore, the prevailing tendency to perceive ‘wives’ parental homes’ only as beneficiaries of help demonstrates a side of multi-layered inequality where a remarkably more negative value is endowed to the families wives come from, thereby they are further negatively positioned.

- Trial of negotiations for the change in gender-based order, and the barrier called ‘Korean style’

This current condition of inequality, in which the whole burden of family life is put on women, while not granting them any authority, does not originate from female immigrants’ failure to recognize the problem or their endurance of it. In reality, the female immigrants who responded to the interviews of this survey are found to be clearly aware of the unfairness that exists in the reality they are confronted with and acutely feel the need for change. Moreover, their sense of the problem and demand for change can be more strengthened with their confidence in the fairness of the culture they are from.

Comparing the expectations they had in their societies of origin with their reality where the burden of household labor and care are only born by them and authority over major parts of life, such as economic life or driving, etc., are not endowed, most interviewees had a sense of the problem and experienced entering into negotiations to demand their husbands to participate in household labor and child care and to reorganize the gender regime. However, their demands are to be faced with the indifference, outright refusal, or tepid noncooperation of their husbands. In addition to this, with the appearance of parents-in-law emphasizing that the regime they raise the problem against is the ‘Korean

style’ and demanding them to obey it, the trial aimed at a gender negotiation between couples is switched to a state of teaching of daughters-in-law by parents-in-law. In the situation where an unequal family life that saddles them with the load of household chores, which is wrapped in the name of ‘Korean style,’ forcing them to take it as they take Korean culture to live in Korea, gender negotiations intended for changes in gender regime tend to be blocked without making much progress.

Considering the physical proximity to and economic dependence on their parents-in-law on top of the indifference to the cultures they are from and the pressure of learning ‘Korean style,’ both the restriction on women in the name of ‘Korean style’ and a strong pressure for assimilation of foreigners are simultaneously in operation. Despite their strong sense of problem about inequality in family life, it is hard for them to find any factors supporting it. In the situation where it is not easy for them to find support from their parental homes, either, they tend to withdraw their demands for ‘peace of the family’ and become frustrated without finding a clue for equal family life.

#### ○ Gender inequality and family conflicts

A course of gender negotiation, in which they break away from the existing frame comprising everyday lives of family members and search for a new order of relationships is never smooth. In that course the persons concerned could confront serious confusion and conflicts. Particularly, if the negotiation is stopped without discussing the basic direction while there exists a big gap in viewpoints and understanding among persons concerned, conflicts can do nothing but be amplified.

As a result of reanalysis of the raw data of the National Survey of

Multicultural Families, it is revealed that the difference in the perception of gender-based order between couples grow bigger with lengthening period of marriage rather than decreasing with the growing possibility of becoming conflicts. This difference in perception between couples is revealed to be bigger in the cases where wives have a job or the experience of social activities. At the time when the demands for changes in the division of household labor and care, and decision-making rights emerge, if the difference in the view of gender roles among the persons concerned grows, the possibility of smooth adjustment lessens and the possibility of conflicts between family members can do nothing but grow as well. The results of this study show that women who have a great burden of household labor and care have experienced many conflicts with their partners, while the results of the reanalysis of the raw data of the National Survey of Multicultural Families confirmed that in the cases where a wife from a foreign country has a comparatively flexible idea of gender roles and the Korean husband has a conservative idea, the level of satisfaction with family relationship is low and the rate of experiencing conflicts between couples is high. These results seem to reflect the current situation where the burden of household life is wholly put on wives from foreign countries who have a big expectation of and demands for a gender-equal family relationship, which causes conflicts among family members. Furthermore, in this study we identified this tendency that with full-scale employment of women their dual burden becomes more serious, and if no progress can be made in the division of household labor and care at this juncture, differences in opinion between couples become extremely obvious, which results in deepening of family conflicts.

○ Possibility of changes in the gender structure of multicultural family

Amid rising demands for changes in unequal gender-based order, the progress of change is not smooth for multicultural families. The order of family life surrounding the existing gender structure that has taken root in everyday life remains firm without faltering even when overall changes take place in the lives of persons concerned, including employment of wives and unemployment of husbands. Still, however, the possibility of changes in gender order, which has seemed so sturdy, is starting to grow.

The strong influence of husbands' parents who emphasize the acceptance of the unequal order of family life, calling it 'Korean style,' starts to decrease a great deal with couples' moving out or aging of husbands' parents. Simultaneous with this weakening of the big barrier of gender negotiation, husbands who have refused changes or have shown tepid responses start revealing signs of changes. As the current structure, in which they consistently insist 'women should be faithful to household affairs,' or 'wives with insufficient capabilities to have the share of purse strings,' obviously will not see the relationship through possible crises in the future, the recognition of the necessity to restructure overall gender order, which includes redefinition of their roles and that of their wives, and re-evaluation of the capabilities of their wives, is becoming widespread among husbands. Some of them start to reestablish their relationship with their wives, while enlarging their roles as fathers. If education of fathers or gatherings of fathers on the basis of guaranteeing gender equality become widespread, movements of husbands who have been quite lukewarm compared to their wives could pick up speed unusually, leading to the fast progress of gender negotiations.

On the other hand, a serious change is happening among women who are frustrated after the suggestion of their requests in gender negotiations, surrounded by factors inhibiting their demands. To those who confirmed that they cannot withdraw their demands for changes in the current gender order which presses them with dual burden, 'my supporter' has appeared for the first time, which totally agrees with their ideas and supports their demands for change. Although the support of the network of immigrant women in their gender negotiation is focused on the emotional side for now, if the movement to identify the common sense of the problem and seek ways of positive practice picks up steam with participants in organizations of female immigrants and workers of female immigrants supporting agencies at the center, there is ample possibility to exercise a great deal of supporting power in other aspects for women who are entering into a gender negotiation.

○ Gender negotiations in multicultural families and practice of gender equality in the society at large

Among female immigrants who participated in the interview, those with the idea that they and 'Korean' women could be in a similar situation in terms of the burden of household labor, care, and share of authority, etc. even though they have different backgrounds are hard to find. To women who do not have any specific relationship with 'Korean' women other than their mother-in-law or sister-in-law, the life of Korean women they discover through limited opportunities just seems different from their lives. They have a strong tendency to believe that 'Korean' women who are in a superior position in terms of economic competence of husbands, age gap between couples, support from their parental homes, ability to mobilize social resources, etc. are living freer from the

burden of household labor and care, enjoying more leisure and authority. On the other hand, they think ‘Korean’ women internalize and reinforce the ‘Korean style’ gender-based order. Accordingly, it is hard for them to expect such ‘Korean’ women would understand their problems with ‘Korean style’ gender-based order and participate together with them in the practices for change.

Under the circumstances where multi-layered pressure is put on ‘foreign wives’ and the distance between women groups with different backgrounds is not narrowing, there is only a meager possibility that both groups would identify common interests regarding gender inequality problems of women living in the reality of Korean society. Such a condition suggests that Korea is not an exception in the problem of occurrence of blind spots in the practice of gender equality, which has emerged as a real issue in the West, Japan, etc. In this context, the issue of occurrence of blind pots in the practice of gender equality needs to be adopted as a policy agenda, and measures for its prevention should be prepared urgently.

### III. Status of approach of current policies to gender inequality in multicultural families, and limitations

- Level of the approach to gender inequality problems in multicultural families made by the Multicultural Families Support Act and the master plan for policies on multicultural families

Since the Multicultural Families Support Act, the legal basis of the current policies concerning multicultural families, stipulates measures for

maintenance of equality in family relationship (Article 7 (measures for maintenance of equality in family relationship)) (Searched on Oct. 22, 2018 at the site of the National Law Information Center), it seems as if gender-equal family life has been adopted as a policy agenda. However, no content suggesting the policy orientation, including the meaning of ‘democratic and gender-equal family relationship,’ the types of relevant problems and the direction of countermeasures, etc., is included. Furthermore, the 3<sup>rd</sup> master plan for policies on multicultural families (2018-2022), which actually functions as the guideline for policy promotion, merely emphasizes ‘maintenance of a stable family life’ instead of ‘democratic and gender-equal family relationship.’

Despite the fact that gender inequality is an issue that has to be dealt with as a core part of multicultural family policies decisively affecting family relationship and future family life, current policies fail to concretize this as an agenda, leaving relevant policies in a state of limbo. Regarding the issue of gender inequality, only family violence perpetrated on female immigrants by marriage is set as a task under the basic plan. This demonstrates the fact that the approach to the gender structure by the existing multicultural family policies sticks around the level of ‘Mail Order Bride,’ focusing on the issue of violence against female immigrants.

#### ○ Limitations of the project related to Multicultural Family Support Center

The only measure taken by the government concerning gender inequality in multicultural families is the implementation of ‘programs in the realm of gender equality’ as a basic project of the Multicultural Family Support Center (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, Korean

Institute for Healthy Family Mar. 2017). But this project in the realm of ‘gender equality’ remains in a peripheral position among other projects of the center, and its content remains at a level of formality. The purpose of the current realm of ‘gender equality’ is set at a general level, and its orientation has not been specified. So, implementation in actual sites of programs having a consistent orientation and content is hard to expect. Currently, specific direction and quality of programs depend upon the personal interests and understanding of staff at the site, including the persons in charge of the Center, or instructors, etc. However, the staff at actual sites do not have the opportunities to be equipped with the sense of gender equality and gender sensitivity in the sufficient level to develop and promote programs in the realm of gender equality. With the complex operation of the lack of understanding of center staff, restrictions in utilizing instructors, and difficulty in recruitment of subjects, there are even cases where programs far from the ‘enhancement of the sense of gender equality’ in nature are implemented.

For the Multicultural Family Support Centers to make an approach that is effective enough to contribute to the improvement of gender inequality in multicultural families and enhancement of gender-equal family relationship, its major services and overall education, including Korean language education, visiting education, counseling, case management, etc., should be based on the sense of problem concerning gender inequality and composed aiming for gender equality. For the present, however, it is concerned that with the absence of a mechanism guaranteeing such points, gender-blinded education or counseling can be provided through the current Korean language education, visiting education, counseling, etc., and there exists the risk of delivering conflicting messages against gender equal family life. For example, the

content of Korean language text used in the Multicultural Family Support Centers limits the roles and range of activities of women to such in-house roles as household chores and care, and naturally presents an unequal relationship with the husband's parental home, which deserves criticism.

○ Status of female immigrants and multicultural families under the current gender equality policies

In the Framework Act on Gender Equality of which the purpose is to implement the principle of gender equality under the Constitution and realize a de-facto gender-equal society specifies that the subjects of the obligations of the State and local governments are citizens, and prescribes that only 'citizens' are entitled to the rights and duties regarding gender equality. In the reality where the number of persons who do not have the rights and duties concerning gender-equal life for the reason that they are not citizens of Korean society increase, a serious doubt over the adequacy of this article is raised. Especially, in the case of such families of which some members are Korean citizens and others are not, the relationship between the right to enjoy gender-equal life and the duty to make efforts for gender-equal life is ambiguous. Also, the accessibility to the condition wives from foreign countries are faced with, where gender inequality against 'women' and discrimination against 'foreigners' occur complexly, can do nothing but be restricted.

According to the results of this study, multicultural families display more serious problems of gender inequality in family life than the society in general: Members of multicultural families not only have a strong sense of gender roles, but women in such families have greatly restricted authority over major decision-making rights, including the control of purse strings. Therefore, the current law that grants the rights and duties

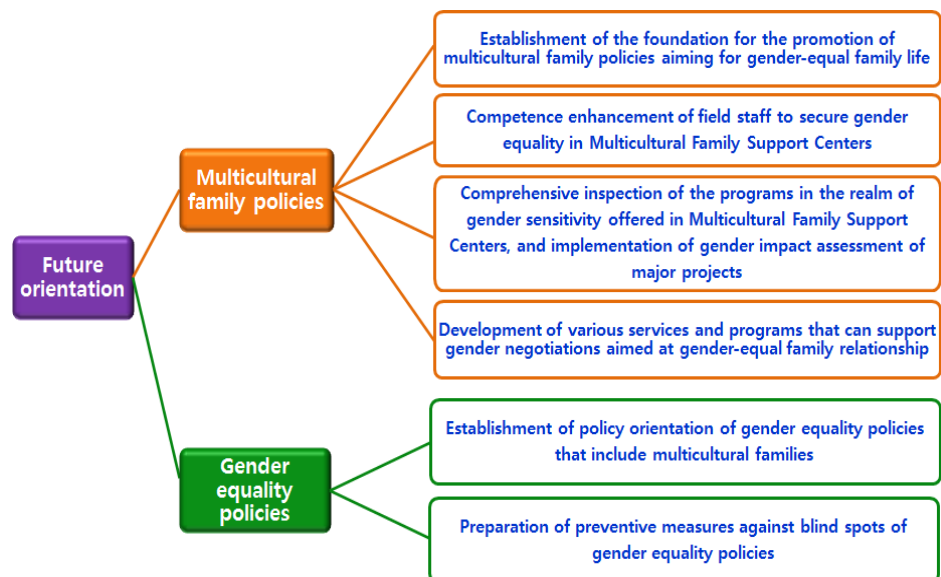
of gender equality only to citizens restrict a full-scale access to the gender inequality in multicultural families, and the gap in the practice of gender equality between groups.

The master plan for gender equality policies established and implemented under the Framework Act on Gender Equality also display such limitations. As in the case of the master plan for policies on multicultural families, the current 2<sup>nd</sup> master plan for gender equality policies (2018-2022) raises issues and suggests policy measures for female immigrants concerning only serious violence, sexual violence, sex trafficking, and human trafficking, without any expression of the sense of problems concerning unequal family life and relevant policy measures. In this sense, the master plan for gender equality policies as well as the master plan for policies on multicultural families fails to break away the typical ‘Mail Order Bride’ approach that deals with the problems of female immigrants and gender inequality within the restricted category of serious damage on human rights.

Such ‘Mail Order Bride’-type approach both the current master plan for policies on multicultural families and the master plan for gender equality policies are making has meaning in drawing social attention to female immigrants and developing measures for protection of victims of human rights violation. However, they display obvious limitations in terms of practicing gender equality in the society at large. It is urgent to assure that female immigrants are not left in blind spots of the practice of gender equality through specific measures that induce multicultural families to enjoy gender-equal family life in their everyday lives, and enhancement of the possibility to form common gender agendas between groups living in Korea, although they are from different backgrounds. However, this is not even considered as a policy agenda. Furthermore,

awareness of female immigrants, including female immigrants by marriage, as well as all immigrants in general, of gender equality policies should be considered to be a matter of importance. Information of gender equality policies are known only to a limited population as manifested by the result of this study, which shows that 60% of female immigrants by marriage are not aware of the existence of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family. Under the circumstances, multilateral measures need to be urgently prepared to prevent occurrence of blind spots of gender equality policies.

#### IV. Future policy orientation



[Figure 2] Future policy orientation

- ☐ Future orientation of multicultural family policies
- Establishment of the foundation for the promotion of multicultural family policies aiming for gender-equal family life
  - Establishment of practical policy orientation through the revision of the Multicultural Families Support Act
  - Inclusion of policy tasks and detailed measures concerning resolution of gender inequality in multicultural families and enhancement of gender-equal family relationship in the master plan for policies on multicultural families
- Competence enhancement of field staff to secure gender equality in Multicultural Family Support Centers
  - Development and implementation of mandatory education course for staff in Multicultural Family Support Centers and Healthy Family·Multicultural Family Support Centers to enhance their sense of gender equality, gender sensitivity, and competence to plan and operate gender equality programs
  - Preparation of training opportunities for core staff in charge of message delivery, including Korean language instructors and counselors, to enhance their sense of gender equality and gender sensitivity
- Comprehensive inspection of the programs in the realm of gender sensitivity offered in Multicultural Family Support Centers, and implementation of gender impact assessment of major projects
  - Establishment of basic direction of the programs in the realm of ‘gender equality’ and overall improvement to secure superior quality

- Examination of gender equality of entire projects and programs of Multicultural Family Support Centers, and Preparation of improvement measures
- Development of various services and programs that can support gender negotiations aimed at gender-equal family relationship
  - Expansion of supporting competences of the network of immigrant women
  - Vitalization of the programs for husbands/fathers to enhance gender-equal family relationship
  - Creation of programs participated by couples aiming for gender-equal family relationship
- Future orientation of gender equality policies
- Establishment of policy orientation of gender equality policies that include multicultural families
  - Revision of the Framework Act on Gender Equality to endow multicultural family members with the rights and duties of gender equality
  - Adoption as a policy agenda of the problem of discrimination in multi aspects-inequality against ‘women’ and discrimination against ‘foreigners’
  - Dissemination of social awareness of the duty of citizens to achieve a gender-equal society
- Preparation of preventive measures against blind spots of gender equality policies

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- Inclusion in general gender agendas of the problems of female immigrants, including gender inequality in family life, dual burden, etc., in addition to violence against them
  - Awareness enhancement of female immigrants concerning gender equality policies
  - Provision of opportunities for communication and solidarity concerning gender agendas among women from various backgrounds



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