

In South Korea, childcare burden derails women's careers ^[1]

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Ahn Ji-sun was looking forward to going back to work after she had her second child. But she had no one to babysit the kids.

Guilt made her stay home and give up a flourishing career as an event supervisor in Seoul. Three years later, the 38-year-old is still torn between the demands of home and unfulfilled ambition, and may have to switch careers to find a suitable job.

"If there had been some place where my children could have been taken care of ... I would still be working," she said.

A shortage of dependable childcare is derailing the careers of hundreds of thousands of women in South Korea, where management ranks are dominated by men and a patriarchal society idealizes stay-at-home moms.

The low rate of female participation in the workforce - just 56 percent of working-age women as of 2013 - is an increasingly urgent problem in the world's fastest-aging developed country, where working-age population is set to decline from next year.

Government data as of April last year shows 22.4 percent of all married women aged 15 to 54 in South Korea quit their jobs due to marriage, childbirth or childcare.

"We have succeeded in recruiting women to the workforce, but retaining them is difficult," Kim Hee-jung, minister of family and gender equality, said in an interview.

Lower wages give women less incentive to join or return to the workforce. Women in South Korea earned only 65 percent of what men did in 2012, a gap that has been nearly unchanged since the mid-1990s and is the widest among the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development group of wealthy countries.

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