

An Analysis of South Korean Women's Participation in the Labor Market Under Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Initiatives

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Abstract

This study investigates the participation of South Korean women in the economic labor market within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As global attention increasingly focuses on gender equality and women's economic empowerment, the South Korean government has recently introduced a series of policies under the SDGs framework aimed at enhancing both the quality and quantity of the female workforce to mitigate the challenges posed by labor shortages. South Korean women have achieved higher levels of educational attainment and are recognized for their professionalism, stability, and sense of responsibility in the workplace, thereby serving as a critical resource for addressing labor market imbalances.

Utilizing secondary data from 2013 to 2023, this study conducts a comprehensive analysis of the female labor market in South Korea. It examines the policies and strategies implemented by the government to boost female labor participation, including the provision of childcare support, the enforcement of gender equality regulations, and the promotion of flexible working arrangements. Furthermore, the study assesses the response of South Korean companies, which, supported by government subsidies, have actively pursued initiatives to enhance female employment, improve workplace conditions, and facilitate continuous career development for women. These measures collectively strengthen the economic contributions of the female workforce.

By critically reviewing South Korea's policy framework and corporate strategies concerning women's labor participation, this study aims to provide valuable insights and concrete recommendations for policymakers and stakeholders internationally. The findings are intended to assist other nations in advancing gender equality and fostering sustainable economic participation by women, in alignment with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), labor market, gender equality

1. Introduction

At the 2015 United Nations Development Summit, the United Nations introduced a set of global priorities, establishing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to address economic, social, and environmental dimensions in a balanced manner. These goals aim to ensure that by 2030, people can enjoy peaceful, prosperous, and stable lives, while ending poverty and protecting the planet. Countries worldwide have increasingly prioritized these goals, sparking waves of implementation, research, promotion, and application, making sustainability a prominent and popular topic globally.

In 2012, the World Bank released the 2012 World Development Report: Gender Equality and Development, concluding that "gender equality benefits not only women but also boosts economic growth and strengthens resilience to crises; without equal economic participation of men and women, no country can fully realize its potential" (World Bank, 2012). Gender equality contributes to economic growth, as increasing women's employment and educational opportunities can reduce

household poverty risks and positively impact family human capital and capabilities.

In recent years, many countries have focused on and actively promoted the economic empowerment of women. This includes supporting women's entry into the economic market, fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, and contributing to social stability and prosperity. Gender equality and women's economic empowerment are key to achieving sustainable economic development and inclusive growth. True sustainable development can only be realized when all individuals and groups, including women, micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, and others with untapped economic potential, are able to participate fully.

At the 2015 United Nations Development Summit, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were formally established to address global economic, social, and environmental challenges by 2030. This framework, comprising 17 goals, aims to achieve a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable future, with a particular emphasis on the importance of gender equality and inclusive economic growth. Among these, SDG 5: Gender Equality is dedicated to eliminating all forms of discrimination against women and girls and

driving change through specific targets. For instance, Target 5.5 calls for ensuring women's full and equal participation in decision-making at all levels, including leadership roles in political, economic, and public life; Target 5.4 focuses on recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work by providing public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies, while promoting shared responsibility within households. These targets reflect a global consensus on gender equality as a cornerstone of sustainable development. Concurrently, SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth emphasizes fostering inclusive and sustainable economic growth by creating high-quality employment opportunities, with a particular focus on the economic participation of marginalized groups such as women, youth, and small and medium-sized enterprises. Specifically, Target 8.5 mandates achieving full and productive employment by 2030, alongside decent work with equal pay for all workers, directly relating to the enhancement of women's labor participation and workplace equality.

These goals are particularly significant for South Korea, a rapidly modernizing economy grappling with multiple challenges. The country's labor market is severely impacted by a shortage of workers, partly due to its aging population structure—according to Statistics Korea (2023), individuals aged 65 and above accounted for 17.5% of the population in 2023, while the proportion of the working-age population continues to decline. Furthermore, the gender wage gap remains pronounced, with data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023) indicating that South Korean women earn approximately 31.2% less than men on average, marking the widest gap among OECD member states. This disparity not only highlights structural inequalities in the workplace but is also tied to deeply entrenched traditional gender roles that typically position women as primary caregivers within the family. Additionally, an exceptionally low fertility rate—only 0.78 births per woman in 2022, the lowest globally—further exacerbates the demographic crisis, making women's labor participation a critical factor in alleviating economic pressures. However, the educational achievements of South Korean women provide a foundation for addressing these challenges: over the past decade, female enrollment in higher education has risen significantly, accompanied by improvements in professional skills and workplace stability, positioning them as a vital resource to bridge labor market gaps.

Over the past ten years, the South Korean government has implemented a series of policies aligned with the SDGs to enhance women's economic participation and advance gender equality. For example, through revisions to the Gender Equality in Employment Act, the government has

strengthened prohibitions on workplace discrimination, provided childcare support, and promoted flexible working arrangements. Meanwhile, businesses, incentivized by government subsidies and tax benefits, have actively worked to improve workplace environments and increase female employment rates. These efforts have, to some extent, responded to the calls of SDG 5 and SDG 8; however, challenges persist, such as the underrepresentation of women in senior management positions and the ongoing gender wage gap.

The aim of this study is to examine the relevant laws, regulations, and measures in South Korea concerning women, through an analysis of secondary data. By analyzing South Korea's labor market data for women over the past decade, this study focuses on understanding women's labor market participation under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) initiative. The research seeks to provide insights into promoting gender equality and achieving sustainable development goals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Education Manual (Ministry of Education, 2020) emphasizes the urgency of addressing global environmental issues. To tackle these challenges, the concept of "sustainable development" was introduced, highlighting the need for a comprehensive analysis of major economic, social, and environmental issues faced by humanity in order to find effective solutions. The manual outlines 17 SDGs and 169 specific targets that are set to be achieved by 2030, as illustrated in Figure 2-1.



Figure 2-1: United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals

Source: United Nations. Sustainable Development Goals.

2.2 Women's Labor Market

Berniell et al. (2021) examined the impact of part-time employment opportunities on the labor market participation of parents in developing countries. The study found that after the birth of the first

child, the rate of part-time employment among women increases by 38%, as the more flexible working hours of part-time jobs allow women to balance work and family responsibilities.

Boehnke and Gay (2022) indicate that the scarcity of men, resulting from their deployment to war, led to an increase in female labor force participation, a shift that persisted throughout both World Wars. Data shows that the rise in female labor supply was the cause of this outcome. This was particularly evident among single women, who faced deteriorating conditions in the marriage market, and war widows, which encouraged their entry into the labor market post-war. In our country, economic development, changes in industrial structure, improvements in education, and rising gender equality awareness have similarly motivated more women to join the workforce, creating more employment opportunities and fostering economic growth.

Bamieh and Ziegler (2023) found that, generally, when men and women are simultaneously seeking employment, women tend to wait longer for job opportunities and are less likely to receive high-paying offers. This is attributed to the perception that young women are more likely than young men to request parental leave in the future.

Although Berniell et al. (2021) emphasize the impact of part-time work on labor force participation among mothers in developing countries,

Boehnke and Gay (2022) investigate the long-term changes in women's labor supply during wartime, and Bamieh and Ziegler (2023) analyze gender differences in the job search process, these studies primarily focus on specific social or economic contexts and do not fully cover the unique experiences of rapidly modernizing economies like South Korea within the SDG framework. In contrast, this study focuses on the policy evolution and corporate strategies in South Korea over the past decade, providing an integrated perspective that addresses the shortcomings in the existing literature regarding the long-term effects of gender equality policies in developed countries.

3. Analysis of the Current Status of South Korean Women's Labor Force Population

3.1 Age and Gender in South Korea

According to data from Statistics Korea and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the following is an overview of South Korea's population by gender and age from 2013 to 2023.

South Korea's gender ratio is relatively balanced, with slightly more males than females. However, as age increases, the proportion of females gradually rises, especially in the age group of 65 and above, where the female proportion is higher.

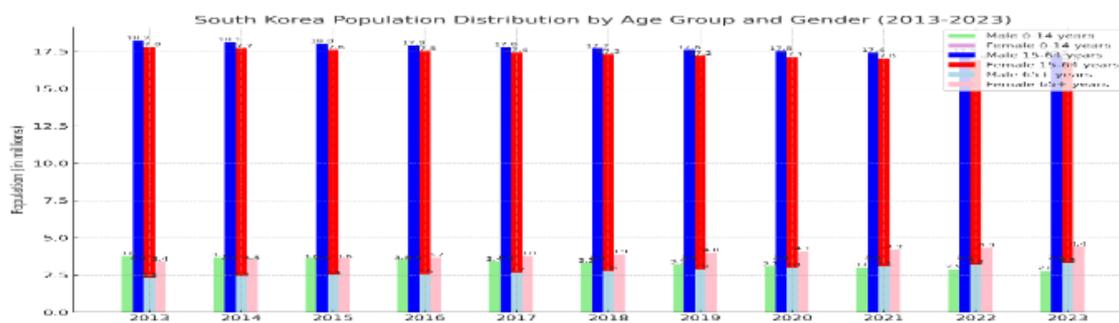


Figure 3-1: Age and Gender in South Korea

Source: Statistics Korea (2023) and OECD (2023), created by the author

Between 2013 and 2023, South Korea's demographic structure shifted significantly, with a growing elderly population, a declining working-age cohort, and a shrinking youth population, impacting labor markets and progress toward SDG Goals 5 (Gender Equality) and 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

The elderly population (65+) rose from 5.7 million (12.2% of 49.0 million) in 2013 to 7.7 million (15.9% of 48.4 million) in 2023, marking South Korea as a "super-aged society." Elderly males increased by 43.5% (2.3 to 3.3 million), and females by 29.4% (3.4 to 4.4 million), with females outnumbering males due to higher life expectancy (86 vs. 80 years).

The working-age population (15–64) fell by 5.5% for males (18.2 to 17.2 million) and 5.6% for females (17.8 to 16.8 million), driven by a fertility rate drop from 1.19 to 0.78, well below the 2.1 replacement level. The youth population (0–14) declined from 7.3 million (14.9%) to 6.3 million (13.0%), with male children decreasing by 26.3% (3.8 to 2.8 million) while female numbers held steady at 3.5 million.

The overall gender ratio remained stable (50.7% male in 2013; 50.5% in 2023). However, age-specific ratios varied: the youth male-to-female ratio shifted from 108:100 to 80:100, the working-age ratio stayed at 102:100, and the elderly ratio favored females (68:100 in 2013; 75:100 in 2023).

Labor force implications are notable. Despite a balanced working-age gender ratio, female labor participation was 54.0% in 2023, compared to 73% for males, due to childcare responsibilities and workplace barriers. These trends challenge labor productivity and economic growth.

In summary, South Korea’s aging population and shrinking workforce, alongside gender disparities in labor participation, hinder sustainable development. Policies promoting gender inclusion and work-life balance are critical for addressing these challenges and advancing SDG objectives.

3.2 South Korea's GDP

According to data from Statistics Korea and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the following is the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) data for South Korea from 2013 to 2023.



Figure 3-2: South Korea's GDP

Source: Statistics Korea (2023), created by the author

From 2013 to 2023, South Korea’s nominal GDP grew from KRW 1,429.5 trillion to KRW 2,400.0 trillion, a 67.9% increase with an average annual growth rate of 5.3%, aligning with SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Pre-COVID (2013–2019), nominal GDP rose at 5.8% annually, driven by exports (semiconductors, automobiles) and domestic demand, with female labor force participation increasing from 49.9% to 53.2%. In 2020, growth slowed to 1.0% due to the pandemic, and female employment dipped from 51.7% to 51.0%. Post-2020 recovery saw nominal GDP grow at 7.4% annually (2021–2023), with female participation reaching 54.0% by 2023, boosting consumption and services.

Real GDP grew steadily at 2.8–3.3% from 2013 to 2018 but slowed to 2.0% in 2019 amid global trade tensions, with female manufacturing employment falling from 15.0% to 13.8%. In 2020, real GDP contracted by 0.9%, with female unemployment rising from 3.4% to 4.0%, particularly in service sectors. Recovery followed, with 4.1% growth in 2021, supported by government measures like childcare subsidies, lifting female employment to 51.3%. Growth moderated to 2.6%

(2022) and 2.3% (2023), but inflation and a gender wage gap (31.2%) limited women’s contribution.

Inflation (5.1% in 2022) and Korean won depreciation (KRW 1,200 to 1,300 per USD, 2022–2023) outpaced real GDP growth, hitting women hardest in low-wage services (65% of female employment). Interest rate hikes (0.5% to 3.5%, 2021–2023) further pressured female-dominated sectors like retail. These trends challenge SDG 5 (Gender Equality), given women’s underrepresentation in senior roles (22.8%).

In summary, South Korea’s economy grew significantly, with rising female labor participation (54.0%) driving domestic demand. However, structural barriers—gender wage gaps, occupational segregation, and limited leadership roles—hinder progress toward SDGs 5 and 8. Reforms promoting pay equity, occupational diversity, and family support are essential for sustainable growth, particularly with an aging population. These insights contribute to global discussions on women’s economic empowerment.

3.3 Educational Attainment of South Korean Women

According to data from Statistics Korea, the following is the distribution of South Korean women across different educational attainment levels from 2013 to 2023.

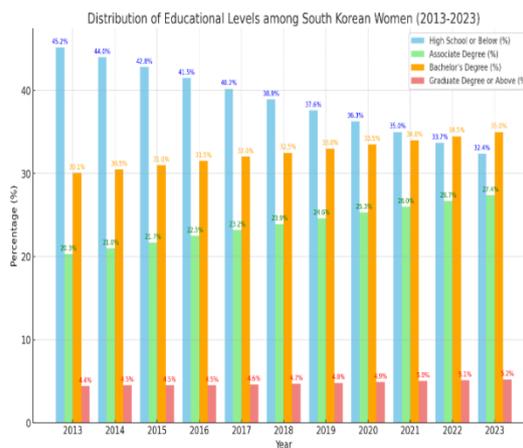


Figure 3-3: Educational Attainment of South Korean Women

Source: Statistics Korea (2023), created by the author

From 2013 to 2023, South Korea saw a significant rise in women’s educational attainment, with the proportion of women holding a university degree or higher increasing from 36.2% to 53.3%, a 47.2% rise (1.7 percentage points annually). This aligns with SDG Goal 4 (Quality Education). Conversely, women with high school education or less dropped from 63.8% to 46.7%, a 26.8% decline, reflecting a shift toward higher education. The university entrance rate reached 76.2% in 2023, and women’s average years of schooling rose from 11.8 to 12.8, nearing the OECD average of 13 years.

Women surpassed men in tertiary education, with 77% of women aged 25–34 holding a degree in 2023, compared to 63% of men. Women comprised 55.7% of master’s students, and by 2015, university-educated women (39.2%) outnumbered those with high school education or less (60.8%), supporting SDG Goal 5 (Gender Equality).

Higher education boosted women’s labor force participation from 49.9% to 54.0% by 2023. Among women aged 25–34, those with tertiary education had a 76% employment rate, compared to 44% for those with high school education or less. Educated women increasingly entered education (17.0%) and healthcare (12.0%), sectors driving 50% of GDP, aligning with SDG Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). This contributed to a 4.1% real GDP rebound in 2021, fueled by female-dominated services.

Despite progress, a 31.2% gender wage gap, low STEM participation (20%), and limited senior roles (22.8%) hinder economic returns, challenging SDG Goal 5. In an aging society, closing these gaps, expanding STEM access, and enhancing family support are critical to leveraging women’s education for sustainable growth.

These findings highlight education’s role in economic participation, offering insights for global discussions on inclusive development.

3.4 Labor Force Participation Rate of South Korean Women

According to data from the World Bank, the following is the labor force participation rate of South Korean women from 2013 to 2023.



Figure 3-4: Labor Force Participation Rate of South Korean Women

Source: World Bank, created by the author

From 2013 to 2023, South Korea’s female labor force participation rate rose from 49.9% to 54.0%, an 8.2% increase (0.8 points annually), aligning with SDG Goals 5 (Gender Equality) and 8 (Inclusive Economic Growth). Pre-COVID (2013–2019), participation grew to 52.9%, driven by higher education (university-educated women: 36.2% to 46.3%) and childcare subsidies. In 2020, it fell to 51.0% due to pandemic-related disruptions in female-dominated services (65% female employment) and non-regular jobs (58% low-skill), with unemployment rising from 3.4% to 4.0%.

Recovery from 2021 lifted participation to 54.0% by 2023, aided by reemployment initiatives.

The gender participation gap narrowed from 23.1 to 19.0 percentage points (17.7% reduction), advancing SDG Goal 5. Male participation stayed stable (71.9–73.6%, 73.0% in 2023), but women faced greater volatility, with higher unemployment (4.0% vs. 3.5% for males in 2020). Women’s roles grew in services (65%) and education (17.0%), supported by reforms like the 2023 Equal Employment Opportunity Act. Senior female representation rose from 15.2% to 22.8%.

However, challenges persist. The gender wage gap dropped from 36.6% to 31.2%, but exceeds the OECD’s 12.1%. Occupational segregation concentrates women in lower-paid services (65%) and limits high-tech roles (13% in semiconductors). These barriers curb economic returns, with private consumption growing only 1.6% in 2023, hindering SDG Goal 5.

Increased participation (54.0%) and education (53.3% tertiary-educated women) bolstered GDP growth (2.3% in 2023) and offset labor force decline (5.6%) from aging. Yet, wage gaps, low STEM participation (20%), and childcare-related dropouts (10%) restrict progress. Prioritizing pay equity, occupational diversity, family support, and female leadership is critical for sustainable growth.

These insights highlight women’s pivotal role in advancing the SDG agenda.

3.5 Employment Rate of South Korean Women

According to data from the World Bank, the following is an overview of the employment rate of South Korean women from 2013 to 2023.

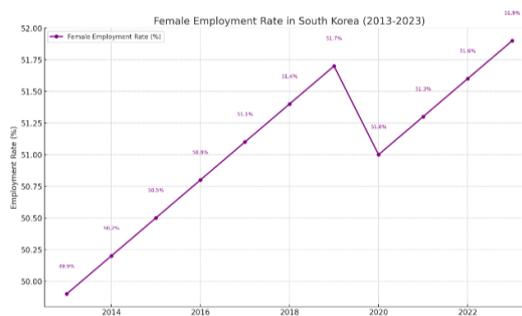


Figure 3-5: Employment Rate of South Korean Women

Source: World Bank, created by the author

From 2013 to 2023, South Korea’s female employment rate rose from 49.9% to 51.9%, a 4.0% increase (0.4 points annually), supporting SDG Goals 8 (Inclusive Economic Growth) and 5 (Gender Equality). From 2013 to 2019, it grew to 51.7%, driven by higher education (tertiary-educated women: 36.2% to 46.3%), childcare subsidies, and service sector expansion (48% to 50% of GDP). In 2020, it dropped to 51.0% due to COVID-19, with women in services (65% of female workers) and non-regular jobs (58%) facing

higher unemployment (3.4% to 4.0%). Recovery from 2021 lifted the rate to 51.9% by 2023, aided by a 4.1% GDP rebound and reemployment programs.

The gender employment gap narrowed from 20.3 to 18.1 percentage points (10.8% reduction), advancing SDG 5. Male employment stayed stable (68.8–70.8%, 70.0% in 2023), but the pandemic hit men harder (2.0-point drop vs. 0.7 for women), temporarily narrowing the gap to 17.8% in 2020. Women's roles grew in services (65%) and education (17%), supported by policies like the 2023 Equal Employment Opportunity Act and 90-day maternity leave.

By 2023, 53.3% of women held university degrees, boosting employment and GDP growth (2.3%), while offsetting a 5.6% labor force decline from aging. However, the gender wage gap, though reduced from 36.6% to 31.2%, exceeds the OECD's 12.1%. Women remain underrepresented in STEM (20%) and overrepresented in low-wage services, with 10% leaving due to childcare.

To meet SDGs, South Korea must address wage disparities, promote occupational diversity, strengthen family support, and foster female leadership. These findings contribute to global discussions on women's role in sustainable development.

3.6 Female Unemployment Rate in South Korea

According to data from the World Bank, the following is an overview of South Korea's female unemployment rate from 2013 to 2023.

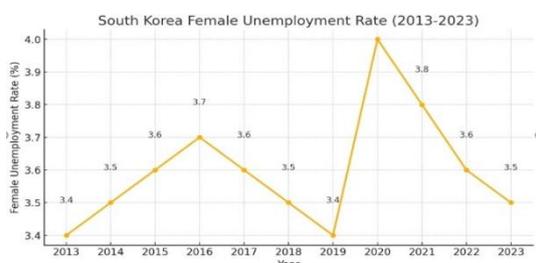


Figure 3-6: Female Unemployment Rate in South Korea

Source: World Bank, created by the author

From 2013 to 2023, South Korea's female unemployment rate fell from 3.4% to 2.7%, a 20.6% reduction (0.07 points annually), supporting SDG Goal 8 (Full Employment). Between 2013 and 2019, it fluctuated between 3.4% and 3.9%, slightly above men's (3.2%–3.7%), due to women's overrepresentation in services (65%) and non-regular jobs (58%). Stable GDP growth (2.8%–3.3%) maintained employment, but female unemployment showed little improvement.

In 2020, the rate rose to 4.0% amid COVID-19, with layoffs in retail and food services hitting women hardest, dropping the employment rate from 51.7% to 51.0%. From 2021, it fell to 2.7% by 2023, driven by a 4.1% GDP rebound,

employment subsidies, and service sector recovery, lifting the employment rate to 51.9%.

The gender unemployment gap held steady at 0.2–0.5 points, reaching 0.2 in 2023 (2.7% women vs. 2.5% men), showing no significant progress toward SDG Goal 5 (Gender Equality). Rising labor force participation (54.0%) and policies like the 2023 Equal Employment Opportunity Act reduced unemployment risks in female-dominated sectors.

Improved education (53.3% of women with tertiary degrees) and childcare subsidies supported these gains, sustaining GDP growth (2.3% in 2023) and offsetting a 5.6% labor force decline from aging. However, a 31.2% gender wage gap, low STEM representation (20%), and a 10% dropout rate due to caregiving persist, limiting women's potential.

To achieve SDGs, South Korea must tackle wage disparities, promote occupational diversity, enhance family support, and foster female leadership. These insights contribute to global discussions on inclusive labor markets.

3.7 The Proportion of Women in Managerial Positions in South Korea

According to data from Statistics Korea, the proportion of women in managerial positions in South Korea showed a year-on-year increasing trend from 2013 to 2023. Below is an overview of the annual percentages of women in managerial roles during this period:

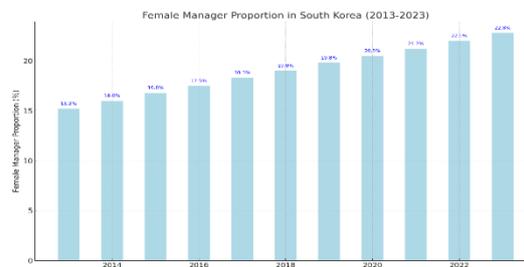


Figure 3-7: The Proportion of Women in Managerial Positions in South Korea

Source: Statistics Korea (2023), created by the author

From 2013 to 2023, the proportion of women in managerial positions in South Korea rose from 15.2% to 22.1%, a 45.4% increase (0.7 points annually), advancing SDG Goal 5 (Gender Equality). This growth was driven by higher education (53.3% of women with tertiary degrees by 2023) and policies like the 2006 Gender Equality Policy. From 2013 to 2019, the rate climbed to 20.0%, fueled by women's educational gains (36.2% to 46.3% with university degrees) and service sector expansion (48% to 50% of GDP).

In 2020, the rate reached 20.9%, but COVID-19 disrupted progress, with layoffs in services (65% female workers) and non-regular jobs (58%) hindering advancement. In 2021, it dropped to 16.3% (OECD data), possibly due to limited firm

coverage and a male managerial rebound (13.4% increase in 2022). However, broader data from the Korean Women’s Development Institute showed gains in small enterprises. By 2023, the rate hit 22.1%, supported by a 4.1% GDP rebound in 2021, reemployment initiatives, and corporate diversity goals, with young women’s employment (74.3% for ages 25–34) boosting the pipeline.

Despite progress, women held only 22.1% of managerial roles and 5.6% of board seats in 2023, reflecting a persistent "glass ceiling." Rising labor force participation (54.0%) and policies like the 2018 Gender Equality Act aided gains in services (65%) and education (17%), supporting GDP growth (2.3% in 2023) and offsetting a 5.6% labor force decline from aging.

However, a 31.2% gender wage gap, low STEM participation (20%), a 10% dropout rate due to caregiving, and executive underrepresentation limit potential. To meet SDGs, South Korea must reduce wage disparities, diversify occupations, enhance family support, and promote senior leadership. These insights contribute to global discussions on inclusive development.

3.8 Gender Pay Gap in South Korea

According to data from Statistics Korea, the gender pay gap in South Korea persisted and widened significantly between 2013 and 2023. The following are the gender pay gap data for each year:

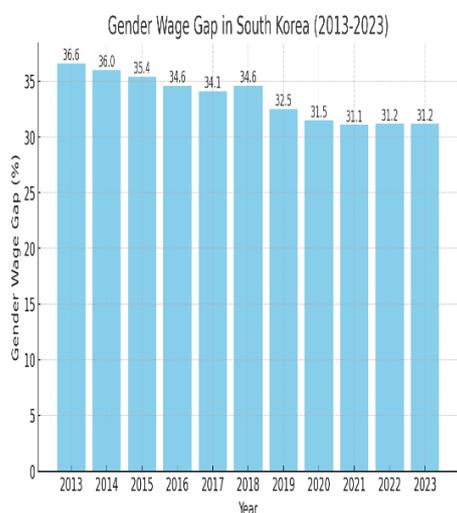


Figure 3-8: Gender Pay Gap in South Korea
Source: Statistics Korea (2023), created by the author

From 2013 to 2023, South Korea’s gender wage gap narrowed from 36.6% to 31.2%, a 14.8% reduction (0.54 points annually), aligning with SDG Goal 5 (Gender Equality) but exceeding the OECD average (11.4%). From 2013 to 2019, it fell to 33.9%, driven by women’s educational gains (tertiary degrees: 36.2% to 46.3%), rising labor force participation (49.9% to 52.9%), and Equal Employment Opportunity Act revisions. In 2020, it dropped to 31.5%, as COVID-19 hit female-

dominated services (65% workforce) harder than male-led manufacturing (exports down 5.4%). From 2021 to 2023, it stabilized at 31.1%–31.2%, with women’s monthly salary rising from KRW 2.631 million to KRW 2.783 million (71% of men’s).

In 2023, female managers earned KRW 8.8 million monthly vs. KRW 10.6 million for males (17% gap). Rising participation (54.0%) and managerial roles (22.1%) signal progress, aided by policies like the 2021 minimum wage hike (+5%) and gender discrimination reporting. Education advanced (53.3% tertiary-educated; schooling: 11.8 to 12.8 years), boosting women in healthcare (12.0%) and education (17.0%).

Women’s income grew from KRW 2.038 million to KRW 2.783 million, supporting service sectors (65% employment) and domestic demand (48% of GDP), driving 2.3% GDP growth in 2023 and offsetting a 5.6% labor force decline. However, the 31.2% wage gap, low STEM participation (20%), 10% caregiving dropouts, and seniority-based pay hinder potential.

To meet SDGs, South Korea must enhance pay transparency, expand STEM access, strengthen family support, and reform pay systems. These insights contribute to global discussions on inclusive economies.

3.9 Ratio of employed women to the number of workers in South Korea

According to Statistics Korea, here is an overview of how the proportion of employed women in South Korea in each industry will change between 2013 and 2023:

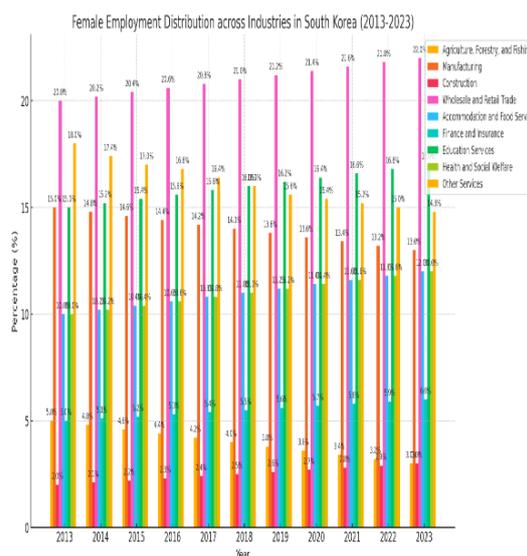


Figure 3-9: Ratio of Employed Women to the Number of Workers in South Korea
Source: Statistics Korea (2023), created by the author

From 2013 to 2023, South Korea’s employed women rose from 11.87 million to 12.46 million, a 5.0% increase (0.5% annually), aligning with SDG

Goal 8 (Full Employment). This mirrors rises in female labor force participation (49.9% to 54.0%) and employment rates (49.9% to 51.9%). Service sector employment grew from 80.5% to 82.5% (0.2 points annually), reaching 82.3% in 2022 vs. 70.11% for total employment, highlighting occupational segregation. Female employment in agriculture (6.0% to 5.0%) and industry (13.5% to 12.5%) declined, shifting toward services like healthcare (13.0%), education (18.0%), and retail (23.0%), with women comprising 97.5% of healthcare jobs in 2022.

From 2013 to 2019, service sector share rose to 81.7%, driven by education gains (tertiary degrees: 36.2% to 46.3%) and service GDP growth (48% to 50%). In 2020, it hit 81.9%, but COVID-19 cut female employment to 12.16 million, raising unemployment to 4.0% due to retail and food service layoffs. From 2021 to 2023, it rebounded to 82.5% and 12.46 million, fueled by healthcare and education recovery.

Higher education (53.3% tertiary-educated women by 2023) and policies like childcare support drove these trends, advancing SDG Goals 5 (Gender Equality), 8, and 4 (Quality Education). Women's service roles supported 2.3% GDP growth in 2023 and offset a 5.6% labor force decline from aging. However, challenges include low industry participation (12.5%), high non-regular employment (58%), a 31.2% wage gap, and 10% caregiving dropouts.

To meet SDGs, South Korea must enhance pay transparency, STEM access, family support, and job quality, promoting women's roles in high-value sectors for sustainable growth.

4. Laws and Government Policies Related to Women in the Workplace in South Korea

The Gender Equality in Employment Act (GEEA) of South Korea, first enacted in 1987, marked a significant step toward promoting gender equality in the workplace. Its primary objective was to eliminate gender discrimination and ensure that both men and women could enjoy equal opportunities and treatment in employment. Over the years, the law has undergone several revisions to adapt to changing societal needs and labor market conditions, reflecting South Korea's commitment to gender equality in the workplace. This paper provides an overview of the key provisions of the GEEA, its revisions, and its impact on workplace equality in South Korea.

4.1 Key Provisions of the Gender Equality in Employment Act

Prohibition of Gender Discrimination: The GEEA prohibits employers from engaging in gender-based discrimination in areas such as recruitment, salary, promotion, and job assignment. The law ensures that women have equal access to

employment opportunities and equal treatment once employed. It aims to dismantle traditional gender roles that may hinder women's participation in the workforce. The law is also a direct response to the longstanding issues of gender discrimination that women faced, particularly in obtaining the same benefits and responsibilities as their male counterparts.

Protection of Pregnancy and Maternity Rights: One of the major provisions of the GEEA is the protection of pregnant employees and maternity leave rights. Employers are required to provide statutory maternity leave, usually for 90 days, with a portion of the leave paid by the government. The law also prohibits employers from dismissing or treating women unfairly during pregnancy or maternity leave. This provision addresses the challenge women face in balancing career and family, and ensures that women's job security is not compromised due to pregnancy or childbirth.

Prevention of Sexual Harassment: The GEEA mandates that employers take responsibility for preventing and addressing sexual harassment in the workplace. Employers are required to establish policies and mechanisms to deal with complaints of sexual harassment, and failure to do so can result in fines or other penalties. This provision highlights South Korea's growing awareness of the importance of creating safe and respectful working environments for all employees, regardless of gender.

Promotion of Equal Opportunities in the Workplace: The law encourages companies to take proactive steps to increase the representation of women in leadership and managerial positions. It also promotes the participation of women in technical and professional roles, which have traditionally been dominated by men. This provision is key in addressing the gender imbalance in higher-paying, decision-making roles, and supports the broader goal of gender equity in employment.

Parental and Family Support: The GEEA recognizes the need for women to balance work and family life. It promotes the implementation of parental leave policies and flexible work arrangements, such as part-time work or telecommuting. These measures are designed to encourage more women to join and remain in the workforce by providing them with the flexibility to manage family responsibilities, including child-rearing.

Amendments and Expansions of the Law: Over time, the GEEA has been amended to reflect societal changes and the evolving needs of the workforce. For instance, recent amendments have extended support for male parental leave, emphasizing the role of fathers in child-rearing. The law has also introduced stricter penalties for gender discrimination, further reinforcing South Korea's commitment to achieving gender equality in the workplace.

4.2 The 2023 Amendment: Strengthening Gender Equality in Employment

The most recent amendment to the GEEA occurred in 2023, marking a continued effort by the South Korean government to strengthen gender equality protections, particularly in the areas of sexual harassment prevention and handling. Key revisions in the 2023 amendment include.

Increased Penalties for Workplace Sexual Harassment:The 2023 amendment imposes stricter penalties on employers who fail to address incidents of sexual harassment in the workplace. These penalties include higher fines and legal liabilities. The amendment highlights the government's commitment to creating a safer and more equitable work environment for all employees, and to holding employers accountable for failing to protect their workers.

Enhanced Parental Leave Support:The 2023 revisions also place a stronger emphasis on supporting both male and female employees with parental leave. The law encourages greater participation of fathers in child-rearing by offering more flexible leave policies. This shift is aimed at reducing the burden on women and promoting a better balance between work and family life for both parents.

Increased Employer Accountability:The new amendments require businesses to implement more effective policies and procedures to prevent gender discrimination and harassment in the workplace. Employers must demonstrate their commitment to gender equality by ensuring that their workplaces are free from discrimination and harassment, and by fostering an inclusive environment where both men and women can thrive equally.

4.3 Conclusion: The Impact of the Gender Equality in Employment Act

The Gender Equality in Employment Act has played a pivotal role in South Korea's ongoing efforts to promote gender equality in the workplace. The law's provisions aimed at eliminating gender discrimination, supporting work-life balance, and preventing sexual harassment have been instrumental in creating a more inclusive and fair work environment for women. The continuous revisions to the law reflect the country's evolving approach to gender equality and its acknowledgment of the need to adapt to changing societal expectations.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain. The GEEA has made substantial progress in promoting gender equality, but the gender wage gap, underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, and lingering cultural attitudes towards women's roles in the workplace continue to be significant issues. As South Korea moves forward, further reforms will be necessary to address these challenges and to ensure that gender equality in employment becomes a permanent and self-sustaining reality. Through continued legislative

action and societal change, South Korea can build a more equitable and inclusive labor market for all its citizens.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates the influence of South Korea's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)-aligned policies on women's labor market participation from 2013 to 2023. It advances three core propositions: (1) government-led interventions, including education reform, childcare support, and flexible work policies, would enhance female labor force participation and employment; (2) higher educational attainment among women would facilitate upward labor mobility; and (3) structural inequalities, such as wage gaps, occupational segregation, and underrepresentation in leadership, would persist despite institutional reforms. By analyzing secondary data from Statistics Korea, the OECD, and the World Bank, this study evaluates the extent to which these propositions hold and their implications for SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

The findings substantiate the first proposition, demonstrating that South Korea's policy framework significantly boosted female labor force participation from 49.9% in 2013 to 54.0% in 2023, with the employment rate rising from 49.9% to 51.9%. Key policies, such as revisions to the Gender Equality in Employment Act, childcare subsidies, and flexible work arrangements, drove this progress, enabling women to contribute to a 2.3% real GDP growth in 2023 despite a 5.6% labor force contraction due to an aging population. The second proposition is also supported, as women's educational attainment surged, with 53.3% holding tertiary degrees by 2023, up from 36.2% in 2013. This increase correlated with greater engagement in professional sectors like healthcare (12.0% of female employment) and education (17.0%), enhancing labor productivity and aligning with SDG 4 (Quality Education). These outcomes underscore the role of education and policy in fostering inclusive economic growth, particularly in service-oriented industries, which account for 65% of female employment.

However, the third proposition highlights persistent structural barriers that limit full gender equality. Despite a reduction in the gender wage gap from 36.6% to 31.2%, it remains significantly higher than the OECD average of 11.4%, constraining women's economic independence and overall growth potential. Occupational segregation persists, with only 20% of women in STEM fields, compared to 65% in lower-paid service sectors. Moreover, women's representation in managerial roles, while improved from 15.2% to 22.1%, lags behind men's 77.9%, and only 5.6% of corporate board positions are held by women, signaling a pronounced glass ceiling. Caregiving responsibilities further exacerbate inequality, contributing to a

10% female workforce dropout rate, which undermines long-term labor market stability. These challenges reveal that while South Korea has made strides toward SDG 5, systemic inequalities continue to hinder comprehensive progress.

This study's findings diverge from prior literature by emphasizing long-term policy impacts over short-term analyses. Unlike Berniell et al. (2021), which focuses on part-time work's immediate effects in developing economies, this research highlights the synergistic role of sustained government and corporate strategies in a developed economy like South Korea. It also complements Boehnke and Gay's (2022) historical perspective by demonstrating how contemporary policy frameworks, rather than external shocks, drive female labor participation. By integrating these insights, the study deepens understanding of pathways to SDG 5 and SDG 8, underscoring the critical role of corporate subsidies and diversity initiatives in amplifying policy outcomes. This perspective enriches global discourse on gender equality, offering a nuanced view of how advanced economies navigate demographic and economic pressures through gender-inclusive reforms.

To further advance SDG objectives, South Korea must address these persistent challenges through targeted reforms. Transparent compensation systems could narrow the gender wage gap, while expanded STEM education and training programs would reduce occupational segregation. Strengthening childcare and parental leave policies, particularly those encouraging shared responsibilities, would mitigate workforce dropout rates, fostering sustained female participation. Additionally, promoting women's leadership through mentorship and diversity quotas could elevate representation in senior roles, breaking the glass ceiling. Future research should explore the cultural and institutional factors shaping female leadership trajectories, particularly in STEM and corporate governance, to provide deeper insights into achieving SDG 5. Comparative studies with other OECD nations could further illuminate best practices for integrating gender equality into sustainable development frameworks.

In conclusion, South Korea's SDG-driven policies have significantly enhanced women's labor market participation, aligning with global goals for gender equality and inclusive growth. However, the persistence of wage disparities, occupational segregation, and caregiving burdens highlights the need for holistic reforms. By addressing these gaps, South Korea can fully harness the potential of its female workforce, contributing to a more equitable and sustainable economic future. This study provides data-driven insights for policymakers and scholars, reinforcing the pivotal

role of women's economic empowerment in advancing the SDG agenda.

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