The Making of Super-Women:
Parental Leave and Women’s Work in South Korea*

Eunsil Oh, Harvard University
Eunmi Mun, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Abstract
Despite the growing concern that parental leave policies may reinforce traditional gender roles, little research has investigated how women view and utilize such policies. Analyzing in-depth interviews with 64 college-educated young Korean mothers, we ask in what ways leave-taking affects women’s career choices and shapes their ideals as workers and mothers. We demonstrate that although women’s involvement in family responsibilities increases during leave, professional women continue to be constrained by cultural and organizational demands for ideal workers. In the first place, mothers in our sample took leave only when they were committed to continue working. During the leave, they strategized about leave length in order to accommodate workplace expectations, and when they returned from leave, they tried to compensate for their absence. Through this process, many leave-takers in our sample constructed a strengthened work devotion. Some eventually quit, but their newly developed commitment to the family played less of a role in promoting the option to quit than did strict work norms, norms that these women, as new mothers, could not meet. Our findings reveal how the experience of leave-taking can lead women to aspire to be super-women by more strictly following the ideal-worker ideology while managing family responsibilities.

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