Norms or Knowledge:

Unpacking Views of Maternal Employment among the Highly Educated

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Abstract

Although more women are working in almost all postindustrial societies, negative views of mothers who work when their children are young remain largely uncontested, especially amongst the better educated. Koreans offer a particularly useful case study because they have the highest educational levels in the world, but highly educated women are underemployed. Drawing on in-depth interviews in South Korea, I examine how highly educated individuals arrive at their attitudes about maternal employment and then analyze the role of knowledge in this process. Analysis shows that men and women base their views of maternal employment on scientific findings, expert opinions, and other sources perceived to be “objective,” framing their views as fact-based rather than opinion-based. I also find that the process of searching for knowledge on parenting is gendered and starts even before parenthood. These processes of seeking information and constructing perspectives on maternal employment have behavioral consequences that exacerbate gender inequality in labor market participation.

Keywords: gender; attitudes; maternal employment; knowledge; Korea