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## Does M-shaped curve still exist?:

### Revealing vivid career trajectory of well-educated women in South Korea

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#### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to reveal how well-educated Korean women face the M-shaped curve in the Korean job market in their mid-20s to late 30s.

*Keywords:* Korean Millennial women, Overqualified, Career trajectory, M-shaped curve

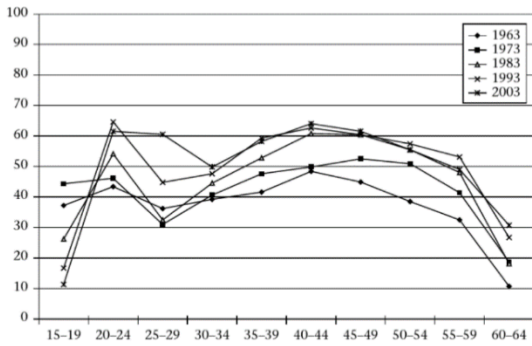
*Minji, 38 years old, identified herself as an overqualified Korean Millennial woman. She holds a master's degree in Biotechnology but faced the moment of impediment of promotion and career discontinuation due to marriage and childbirth. Although she graduated from one of the best universities in Korea and worked in a big company related to her field for seven years, she had to quit the job right before the promotion due to pregnancy. After living as a housewife for three-years, she re-entered the job market. However, it was impossible for her to go back to a similar field due to countless barriers. She realized that "oh, there is employment discrimination because of my marital status."*

Minji's story mirrors the career path of many highly educated young Korean women. This study is based on one of my dissertation findings, and the target group is well-educated Korean women born between the 1980s and the late 1990s, also known as Generation Y (Millennials). This generation received the best quality education and enjoyed various cultural experiences in comparison to their parents' generation (Baby Boomers; born between 1955 to early 1960s) or Generation X (born between late 1960s to late 1970s)<sup>1</sup>, but they are struggling with joining the workforce (Park, 2022). Unfortunately, it is not a rare situation to see in Korea that this generation is forced to accept job positions below their skill level (Allan et al., 2018; Feldman, 1996; Kim et al., 2012).

This study began with my personal experience of working as a telemarketer for one year and wondering "where are all well-educated women at?" back in 2017. The overqualified employment situation happens to both men and women in this generation, but researchers have pointed out that Korean women face tougher situations in the Korean job market (Draudt, 2016; Kim, 2013). The book 'Asia's New Mothers: Crafting Gender Roles and Childcare Networks in East and Southeast Asian Societies' introduced how the gender role changes related to marital status (including childcare) and compared women's life course patterns in six East and Southeast Asian countries: China, Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan (Ochiai & Molony, 2008). Among these six countries, South Korea and Japan showed a vivid M-shaped curve for women's life pattern as they leave the workforce and return at some later time due to marriage or pregnancy and childbirth. The graph (Figure 1) shows the M-shaped pattern of female labor force participation in Korea by age for five decades: 1963, 1973, 1983, 1993, and 2003.

Figure 1

*Female Labor Force Participation Rates in Korea (1963, 1973, 1983, 1993, 2003)*

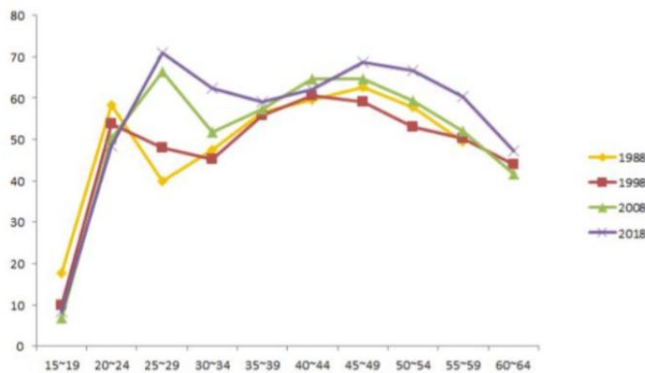


*Note:* The figure was cited from Ochiai & Molony, 2008 (Chapter 2)

Interestingly, the most recent report of labor force statistics from the Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS) shows (Figure 2) that the M-shaped curve still exists in the Korean job market, and it has not changed much. The M-shaped curve might have slightly changed but it is obvious female employees fall out of the workforce in their early 30s and then the curve rises again as women gradually rejoin the workforce throughout their 40s. It is significant to explore the main reason the M-shaped curve still exists among well-educated Korean women’s life course to fully utilize their skills in the workforce, but few studies focus on the issue of their overqualification (Choi, 2017; Park, 2022; Park & Kim, 2003).

Figure 2

*Women’s Employment Rate by Age in Korea (1988, 1998, 2008, 2018)*



*Note:* The figure was cited from Park, 2022.

**Purpose and Research Objectives**

Based on this evidence, exploring well-educated Korean women’s vivid experiences of entering the job market and the existence of an M-shaped curve is the main point of this study, which collected 10 Korean Millennial women’s vivid voices/experiences of their career pathway in their mid 20s to late 30s. This purpose was completed using these research objectives: (1) Does M-shaped curve still exist in the job market? (2) How do structural barriers underutilize well-educated women and prevent them from accessing quality jobs which utilize their qualifications?

**Definition of Terms**

**Overqualified**

Scholars have used various terms to describe the phenomenon of individuals being considered overqualified including ‘overeducated’ (Kang, 2010; Kim et al., 2012; Yang, 2020) or ‘underemployed’ (Feldman, 1996; Greenwood, 1999; Green & Henseke, 2016). The term overqualified is when an employee brings too much experience, skills, and education to the job (Erdogan et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2015). The issue is prevalent in today’s job market and organizations, leading to challenges such as reduced job performance and increased turnover (Erdogan et al., 2011). Even though this has become an urgent issue in the job market among the younger generation, the issue is still a neglected research topic (Feldman, 1996).

### **M-shaped curve**

M-shaped curve is easily seen in the Korean labor market, especially in regards to women’s labor participation and contrasts with the inverse U-shaped curve in Western countries (e.g., Sweden, Finland, USA) (Jeon, 2019) and Korean men’s labor participation (Park, 2022). The M-shaped curve shows that women employees were forced to leave the workforce shortly after getting married, getting pregnant, and after childbirth. Those life changing events impede female employees’ promotion at work or their job pathway. The issue of the M-shaped curve highlights that Korean women are still restricted by socially pervasive stereotypes and structural barriers in the job market. The worst aspect of this curve is which jobs women applicants qualify for when they re-enter the workforce: non-regular employment, short-term contracts, or part-time work (Draudt, 2016; Park, 2022).

### **Methods**

For this study, I applied a qualitative research methodology using the feminist lens and qualitative feminist interviews. The target group of this study was 10 Korean women who had a higher education degree and who identified as overqualified employees in the workforce. My research design was guided by an Asian feminist theoretical framework and incorporated feminist qualitative interviewing and timeline elicitation. I used innovative methodological approaches including digital tools such as online chat messaging, and communication with emoticons to elicit participants’ rich and nuanced narratives. After we built trust with each other via online chat, they shared their deep-inside stories and feelings they had while they were in the job market and the workforce. To capture their vivid-experiences, we communicated in Korean (our mother language) to have a cozy interview condition. Most of the participants preferred phone-call interviews (some requested written interviews) due to sensitivity of disclosing personal information to the interviewer. They all agreed to have their interviews recorded and a full transcript was shared within 1 week.

### **Findings**

The 10 women participants disclosed their experiences in the job market and in the workforce in their mid-20s to late 30s. They described their job trajectory as “*Walking in darkness (Dealing with the unknown)*” because their journey was full of struggle and anguish and moments of having a sense of shame for being a job seeker. Their stories highlighted the gendered situation in the recruitment process in which they faced many restrictions and challenges related to sexism, gender and employment discrimination while searching for a qualified job. In this section, I will walk you through their career trajectory journey with an artful and poetic approach to our dialogues.

### **Passage of Time**

Interview participants, who identified themselves as well-educated and overqualified, experienced

an age limit because of the social structure and gender stereotypes in the job market. Regardless of their marital status, single or married, they all experienced (in)visible discrimination and often wondered “*where are women applicants?*” in their job trajectory. For the 6<sup>th</sup> interviewee, Minji, being eliminated from the workforce and the job market stopped everything for her, not just for her career, but also for herself. She felt she was disappearing while taking care of her family and child all day long.

*I found a job posting in the field I used to work for. It was a researcher position at a company located in China. But the headhunter rejected my application because I was a woman with a family. I kept saying that I can work in China, but headhunters thought it was impossible for me to work overseas because I have a family. Also, they kept asking me to apply to other positions which were not related to my interests and fields. I wanted to apply for A position though, not B... I guess the headhunters cannot recommend a married woman with a family to the company... thus I could not apply. I thought I could get a new chance and start a new career. I remember the exact feeling of that moment. It was terrible and unpleasant. My educational background, my career, and my work ability were no longer evaluated. They only evaluated me as single or married, with or without children, and the gender. I was upset with the reality, the society, the situation, my status, and even my husband.*

Figure 3

*Dark Moon*



*Note:* Author drew after the 10<sup>th</sup> interview (the last one)

The illustration I did in the artful analysis was inspired by a quote, “art allows artists to transform their lived experiences “into transcended configurations”” (van Manen, 1990, as cited in Freeman, 2016, p. 86). The dark moon (a crescent moon) (located on the right side of Figure 3) is waning and barely visible; it is very dark. The dark moon was like women in their late 30s who try to get a job (re-enter the job market), but they are invisible because of many restrictions against them.

### **Still Dreaming**

Your smile saved me today,

Thank you.  
Your warm heart made me  
Laugh today.  
Thank you.  
It feels like finding a light in the dark.

You might think  
I am wasting of time,  
But I have a dream about  
Soaring high up in the sky.  
I will NEVER EVER STOP  
Pursuing my future.  
I am creating my own life map.  
I am finding a light in the dark.

Jiyoung, the 7th interviewee, was shocked when she re-entered the job market in her late 30s. She held a master's degree, but she faced unexpected discrimination in the job market. She recalled her job search in her 20s and it was not difficult at that time. But it got harder for her to find a new job that she had not majored in. Also, she was a mother of two children, and she had to think about their (i.e. husband and kids) schedules first. Jiyoung said everything changed compared to when she was single. As she was in her late 30s, she faced age limits before the interview. So, she changed her job field (from daycare center principal to manager at a bakery). *"The boss at the bakery said there was no age limit for this position. This is the best option for me, right now."*

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study pinpointed that the M-shaped curve still exists in the Korean job market and well-educated women are still struggling with the social structure and countless barriers. Based on the women's vivid experiences in their job trajectory in their mid-20s and late 30s, the pervasive gender stereotypes against Korean women in Korean society, including job market and workforce, underutilize their exceptional educational and cultural backgrounds, skills, and hidden potentials. This is such a waste of workforce and human resources, too. Even worse, it gets harder for well-educated Korean women to get out of underemployment once they are underemployed because their previous career will affect implicit stereotypes to employers (Park, 2022). Thus, it is significant to have more studies or HR programs related to fully utilizing the human resources in the workforce and eliminating the (in)visible boundaries against women applicants in the job market.

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