

Korean Housewives Since the 1990s: Changes and Continuities in Sustained Gender Roles Among Highly-Educated Women

RYOO Cheyon

This paper aims to clarify the social-historical context of the phenomenon of reinforcement of women's reproductive labor and the increase of highly educated housewives in Korea. Previous studies have primarily explained the phenomenon as the effect of Neoliberalism or Korean Familism. Various changes surrounding women after the 1990s, however, have not been adequately considered. This paper attempts to examine changes and continuities in the sustained gender roles among highly-educated women by analyzing discourses on housewives documented in women's magazines.

In the 1960s-1980s, the lifestyle of the modern housewife and the gender-role ideology spread widely while the labor force participation rate of married women rose. In the mid-1990s, the new "full-time housewife" focused on the economic and social value of domestic work. As higher educational attainment for women led to the rise of working women in professional and managerial jobs, the social status and role of housewives became a subject of wider discussion.

By the 2000s, these highly-educated full-time housewives were taking advantage of their educational backgrounds in child rearing and came to regard their work as the alternative to "professional jobs." This became a unique, reinforced justification for the role of housewives. The low value of domestic labor in Korean society and housewives' increased need for social recognition are factors working in the background to reinforce the role of contemporary housewives.