

**Development, Culture and Gender in Korea:  
A Sociological Study of Female Office Employees in Chaebol**

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**A Thesis Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for  
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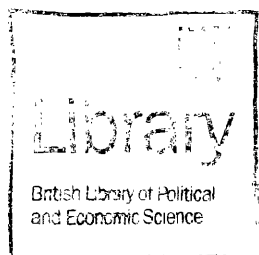
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## ABSTRACT

The broad objective of this thesis is to evaluate the impact of economic development on white-collar women by exploring gender relations at work in modern Korean chaebol offices, and also to assess the extent to which the cultural legacy of traditional (particularly Confucian) ideology has influenced contemporary corporate culture and women's status and roles in it. For this purpose two hypotheses are tested: first, that national development, having generated women's increased participation in paid work, has failed to integrate them fully into the process; second, that the national culture, with its strong Confucian tradition, has been a major obstacle to full integration by 'legitimising' and sustaining gender inequality.

The structure employs both a macro and a micro perspective: the former offers an appreciation of the country's cultural and socio-economic environment as it affects women in society and at work, while the latter encompasses a case study of employment policies and practices within chaebol offices in the late 1990s to probe the extent of sexual discrimination at work and to identify cultural influences on their gender relations. The theoretical framework for this research was initially based on Tiano's theses of *integration*, *marginalisation*, and *exploitation* that were developed in relation to factory-working women in the development process.

The research shows that while gendered employment practices and the male-centred work culture have clearly been assisted by the deep-rooted Confucian tradition, national development process and the growing influences of global economy do not necessarily suggest any apparent improvement in delivering gender equality. In addition, the onset of the Asian economic crisis in 1997 (one year into the research) was an opportunity to observe the ever-changing dynamics of the socio-cultural ideology and the fluctuating needs and practices of big business in a global market, as well as to test further theories on women's labour participation, such as those relating to a 'reserve army of the labour'. The study concluded that Korean women's participation in chaebol white-collar employment most closely fits a *marginalisation* thesis, yet to be 'modified' to take account of the complexity of the country's development process.



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## Abbreviations

EOI	Export-Oriented Industrialisation
EPB	Economic Planning Board
GAD	Gender and Development
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HR	Human Resources
HRM	Human Resources Management
KWDI	Korean Women's Development Institute
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ILO	International Labour Organisation (of the United Nations)
ISI	Import-Substitution Industrialisation
IT	Information Technology
NIC	Newly Industrialised Country
OJT	On-the-Job Training
ROTC	Reserve Officers Training Corps ( <i>hak-goon-dan</i> )
TNC	Transnational Corporation
WID	Women in Development (or Women in International Development)

## Glossary

Korean words that appear in the text once only, and are clearly defined there, are excluded from the glossary.

<i>bu-jang</i>	senior manager
<i>chaebol</i>	Korean conglomerate(s)
<i>cha-jang</i>	manager
<i>daeri</i>	‘supervisor’
<i>kongchae</i>	open recruitment
<i>kwa-jang</i>	junior/section manager
<i>insakokwa</i>	a regular assessment, evaluation, criticism and guidance on the performance ability and achievement of employees
<i>ju-im</i>	grade higher than <i>sawon</i> , lower than <i>daeri</i>
<i>sawon</i>	general staff
<i>yeon-bong-je</i>	remuneration system, based more on ability and achievement than on age, educational qualification and work experience; individual salaries are based on a regular evaluation of work performance.
<i>yeon-kong-seo-yeol</i>	ranking by length of service

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION: 'Flowers of the Office'?**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This study is an enquiry into the labour participation of female white-collar workers in large companies (chaebol<sup>1</sup>) in South Korea (hereafter Korea) in the context of the socio-economic development of the country. Using a case study of white-collar employees working in chaebol offices, this thesis examines their employment policies and practices towards female staff in the late 1990s - which throws light on the current status of working women in Korean society and gender relations at work.

As a background study (chapters 2 to 4), I undertook a review of literature on 'gender and development' and 'women in white-collar work' to help understand Korean women's position in their national development and the growing importance of their participation in white-collar work. In addition, the socio-economic development of the country is also examined historically, together with a discussion of its traditional culture and its influences on contemporary Korea. For the case study itself (chapters 5 to 8), an understanding of chaebol as the specific context is established by reviewing existing literature, complemented by interviews.<sup>1</sup> This is followed by a close examination of their employment policies and practices, a discussion and analysis of work practices, administrative culture, and employees experiences including gender relations – largely based on interview outcomes. 64 interviews of chaebol employees (28 females and 23 males) and others (12 females and one male - see later for details) were conducted using face-to-face, semi-structured interviews held in Seoul mostly during the main research in 1999 (following preliminary field studies in 1996 and 1997).

The Asian crisis, which peaked in November 1997, crucially affected my research - not only by delaying the main fieldwork originally planned for 1998 owing to the subject chaebol's reluctance to grant access, but also by requiring a

reassessment of the original hypotheses developed before the crisis when a mood of optimism prevailed. In effect, what emerged from post-crisis Korea has made a crucial contribution to the analysis and findings - in the sense that the recent socio-economic changes have made the circumstances surrounding female employment more complex and multi-dimensional, and the predicament of working women more precarious. This has brought a new insight to women's labour participation and gender relations in the changing national and global economy.

## 1.2 'Flowers of the Office'

The title of this introductory chapter has a particular significance for this study since it was this expression that first aroused my interest in the subject, and which eventually led to this research. While growing up in Korea in the 1970s and 1980s, my initial impression of female white-collar office workers was captured by this phrase, which was often used casually by men to extol the presence of female colleagues in their office yet implying a vague but somewhat demeaning hint of inferiority. The phrase insinuated that women were regarded as inferior, submissive and 'decorative' in the eyes of other people (mostly men), and had the effect of deterring me from even considering employment in a Korean company as a career option. There is little doubt that I was not the only Korean girl affected in this way.

Traditionally, women who work in Korean offices have been known as '*yeo-sawon*' (female staff), and have often been referred to as 'flowers of the office' (*samoosil-ui-kkot*)<sup>2</sup> (Park and Kang 1994; *Woorisahoe yeongoo hakhoe* 1998:179). While '*yeo-sawon*' clearly distinguishes female staff from male '*sa-won*' (staff/employee), the words 'flowers of the office' encapsulated the perceived role of female staff in Korean companies. As 'flowers' they served to brighten up the otherwise harsh, masculine atmosphere of the office; for work they were offered a limited range of tasks commanding low status and poor remuneration. Their role in the office resembled that of 'office ladies' (OLs) in Japan, where an OL denotes a woman working regularly in an office engaged in simple, repetitive clerical work (such as photocopying, answering telephones, serving tea, and acting as an assistant



to 'career-track' male employees) without expert knowledge or management responsibility (Carter and Dilatush 1976; Iwao 1993; Ogasawara 1998, 2001). Female office workers, until the mid 1980s almost always high-school leavers, were supposed to carry out relatively simple and fragmented tasks under orders from a male superior or colleague (usually a graduate), in addition to other trivial duties traditionally regarded as 'women's work' - such as cleaning, decorating the office and making tea for male colleagues and visitors (Park and Kang 1994).

The phrase 'flowers of the office', when applied to Korean female office employees, suggests an image controversial in itself and carrying a complex, somewhat contradictory, insinuation for women in white-collar employment in modern Korea. While the word 'office' may imply modernisation and development (of companies or country), for women the floral association connotes a traditional, patriarchal, gendered ideology. Although Korea and its social institutions have endured relentless development and modernisation, the cultural climate appears to remain deeply traditional and conservative - revealing a sharp dichotomy between modern business practice and traditional ideology, as will be shown clearly in later chapters. This particularly affects Korean women, whose labour participation has been critical to the successful development and modernisation of the country, and yet who in their everyday working lives frequently face disadvantages and obstacles arising from the strong traditional culture.

Korea is a developing country that has demonstrated rapid economic progress over the past several decades. With limited natural resources the nation has, particularly since the early 1970s, focused on export-oriented manufacturing to drive its development, and has achieved dramatic industrial and economic growth to become one of the 'newly industrialised countries' (NICs) (Hsiao 1988; Schive 1990; Edwards 1992). Since 1950 its growth rate in total output was more than twice that of other less-developed countries, and in manufacturing output about three times as fast (Edwards 1992). This gathering pace of economic development and industrialisation in the post-war period, and particularly over the last few decades, has affected the lives and work of Korean women as much as it has the culture of society. During this period women have progressively participated in the

labour force<sup>3</sup>, and have vitally contributed to national development (Yoon SY.<sup>4</sup> 1977; Koo H. 1987; Bello and Rosenfeld 1990; Park KA. 1994). Female labour participation in Korea during the post-war period will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3.

However, it is questionable whether this contribution by women to national development has been properly appreciated, and whether improvements in their status have fairly reflected national progress. For example, according to the UNDP Human Development Report in 1995 Korea, while ranking 28th in GDP per capita, stood 37th (of 130 countries) in the Gender-related Development Index<sup>5</sup> and 90th (of 116 countries) in the Gender Empowerment Measure<sup>6</sup>. Among other factors, the frequently-quoted, disproportionate wage differential between men and women in Korea (Kim HG. 1980; Park HK. & Park SI. 1982; Kim MJ. 1994; Park SJ. 1994) is one example of widespread gender inequality. In 1980, female remuneration in manufacturing was on average just 44.5 percent that of men; this 55.5 percent wage gap exceeded that of any other country for which data were available from the International Labour Organisation (ILO 1981, cited in Amsden 1989:203). Although there has been some improvement since that time - in 1993 female hourly wage rates were, on average, 52.2 percent of those for men (ILO 1995) - progress has clearly been disappointing<sup>7</sup>.

Apart from obvious, and measurable (e.g. with data or statistics), gender discrimination in conditions of employment, working women also experience less-visible, subjective discrimination at the workplace. This may take the form of a gender-discriminative working environment, where the attitudes and customary behaviour of employers and male colleagues are manifest in gendered practices and with a male-centred corporate culture serving to restrict and discourage women from full, active participation. Referring casually to female staff as 'flowers of the office', or specifying physical criteria for female job applicants (see the discussion of Korean female white-collar employment in Chapter 3), are just two examples of many. Further, ideas and concepts that are widely accepted as 'customary' and 'established practice' may often hinder female participation in employment and discourage them from positively pursuing their careers.

Recognising the controversial status of working women in Korea has led me to become interested in elucidating whether economic development has succeeded, or failed, in integrating them into the human (and gender) development process; and if failing, for what main reasons. The issue is concerned with whether Korean development, and especially female labour participation in it, has brought women liberation and proper integration into the process, or whether they have merely been exploited and marginalised while the nation pursues its capitalist economic interests. Any such failure to liberate women and integrate them into the process would be related to issues of culture and traditional ideology, which have played such a vital role in shaping the social structure and particular form of gender relations in Korean society today.

The importance of culture in the gender relations of a society, and the fact that gender is 'culture specific', has been widely noted (e.g. Beneria and Sen 1981; Moore 1988; Afshar and Agarwal 1989; Brydon and Chant 1989; Lim 1990; Brett 1991; Dawit and Busia 1995). For example, Beneria and Sen (1981:288) pointed out the importance of social and cultural structures, as well as economic structures, in gender relations and argued that the roots of women's oppression must be sought not only within the sphere of production but also reproduction, and not only in economic structures but also in social and cultural structures.

In considering Korean culture, Confucianism is often regarded as one of the most important traditional sources of the country's character and the principles guiding its institutions<sup>8</sup> (Foster-Carter 1985; Kim KD. 1988 & 1994; Eckert et al. 1990; Edwards 1992; Janelli 1993; SaKong 1993; McKay and Missen 1995; Lew SC. 1997; Hahm CB. 1997; Helgesen 1998; Compton, Jr. 2000; Deuchler 2003). Even though Korea is currently a nation of mixed religions with a variety of non-traditional influences (e.g. Christianity, Western modernisation, globalisation etc.), the impact of Confucianism on Korean society and the structure of its organisations has clearly been too great to ignore. Not only have many academics acknowledged and studied the distinctive influence of Confucian tradition on modern Korean society (e.g. linkage between Korea's recent economic achievements and its Confucian tradition - see Chapter 4), but also ordinary Koreans still feel the strong

influence of this historical culture in their everyday life - as was frequently confirmed by my interviewees. For example, when referring to work culture, one female interviewee stated, “the major influence on Korean customs and culture is Confucianism; Korean work culture can be well understood and explained by Confucianism” (fg61<sup>9</sup>), while another asserted, “Korean culture means Confucian tradition” (mu26<sup>10</sup>).

In examining the status and conditions under which women live and work in contemporary Korea, an understanding of the country’s culture and the persisting influence of traditional Confucianism is clearly crucial. Although Confucian tradition is important in many Asian countries<sup>11</sup> (Kim BW. 1992; O’Harrow 1995; Rowley and Lewis 1996; Song BN. 1997; Zhang 1999; Compton Jr.2000; Roces and Edwards 2000; Brinton 2001; Warner 2003), Korea has long been popularly viewed as the nation that adheres most faithfully and strictly to its Confucian heritage (Palley 1992; Janelli 1993). Korea is a developing country that, during the past few decades, has achieved rapid industrial success within the global capitalist system while maintaining its strong cultural tradition. Its culture has been strongly influenced by Confucian philosophy, widely known for strict gender segregation and its tradition of male superiority. In speaking of Korean traditional culture, the importance accorded to ordering vertical relationships between superiors and subordinates based on Confucian morality and the conservatism of the patriarchal family is widely recognised (see Chapter 4 for detailed discussion). For these reasons, therefore, a discussion of women’s status and gender relations in Korea would not be complete without considering its strong Confucian heritage.

Among many who blame Confucianism and its values (which venerate men over women) for gender inequality in Korea, Yoon SY. (1977) specifically attributes the genesis of the under-privileged status of women to the cultural traditions of Korean society. Choi E. (1994) also claims that Confucian belief has prolonged the prevailing, negative discrimination against women. Even though the strict norms and practices of Confucian tradition have largely faded the core beliefs, with their oppressive, sex-discriminative traits, still influence contemporary society and the lives of Korean people. The deep-rooted Confucian ideals and practices of male

superiority and gender inequality still persist as a major influence on the lives of Korean women.

What then is this culture like? The Confucian law of nature portrays manual workers, minors and women as inferiors (Cho H. 1992) and its philosophy stresses a rigid hierarchical order of human relationships based on age, sex, and inherited social status. This has not surprisingly led Confucianism to be criticised for its less-desirable characteristics, such as “embodying authoritarianism, nepotism, conservatism, and male chauvinism” (Edwards 1992). Traditional Korean society (before the development and modernisation of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) strictly adhered to Confucian principles that were oppressive to women, who were thereby constrained by their role as daughter, wife or mother and confined relatively freedom-less within the home (see Chapter 4 for examples). It might easily be assumed that the economic progress of recent decades has liberated women and that their status and living conditions in modern society have consequently changed dramatically for the better. Women in contemporary Korea now have the opportunity to be educated in universities and freely to enter paid employment as workers in offices alongside male colleagues. Unlike their predecessors of half-a-century ago, Korean women now have better access to national resources (such as education) to improve their circumstances, and more freedom to chose their lifestyle. However, in spite of all this it is hard to escape the impression that essentially women’s status remains secondary, decorative as ‘flowers of the office’, and that injustices and gendered practices are still common at the workplace and in society.

In this regard the Confucian tradition can be considered relevant to the capitalist development of modern Korean society, as it not only provides a sympathetic, and ordered cultural climate (see Chapters 4 and 5), but also encourages traditionally exploitative human relationships and gender roles. If so, is there a connection between the strong Confucian tradition, successful national development, and the exploitation of women in the pursuit of capitalist interests - legitimised by the repressive, gender-biased culture?

### 1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The prime objective of this study is to examine to what extent Korean women have been integrated into, or exploited by, the process of development as a result of their involvement in paid employment. It seeks to establish whether gender discrimination at work exists today and, if so, to suggest its causes. While the broad aim is to examine the impact of socio-economic development on women and their labour participation, and whether or not this has been a means of integrating women into the development process, it is also to explain the importance of culture in influencing gender relations in socio-economic organisations.

Overall, Korea would appear to provide a good test-bed for examining the impact of economic development on women and their employment, and exploring whether or not this has been a means of integrating them into the development process. Further, in light of the fact that Korean culture has traditionally been oppressive to women, it would seem to provide a good opportunity to examine whether the development process has served to improve their relative status; or whether it has merely sustained existing gender inequality, albeit different in form. If the latter, it would prompt an evaluation of the extent to which Korean socio-economic organisations, such as large industrial corporations, operate primarily to serve the chief goal of generating profit by exploiting women in their particular cultural environment.

In summary, the objectives of this study are:

- i) to form an appreciation of existing gender relations at work in contemporary Korea.
- ii) to examine the impact of economic development on women, especially their status and conditions of employment, and judge whether they have been integrated equitably into national development or exploited by it; and, further, to consider whether or not the process of economic development and modernisation has contributed to improving women's status in employment and in society.

- iii) to assess the extent to which traditional, particularly Confucian, ideology has influenced contemporary culture and gender relations at the workplace.
- iv) to appraise the extent of gender inequality at work, identify its causes and understand how it has been created and maintained, and thereby to suggest ways further to promote equality at the workplace and in Korean society.

To achieve these objectives I intend to test the following *hypotheses* during this research:

First, *that national development, which has generated an increased participation by Korean women in paid work, has failed to integrate them fully into the process.*

It had been expected that participation in the process of economic development would bring to Korean women gender equality in society and equal status at work. However, it was my impression that their participation in the development process has not correspondingly brought women the gender equality and improved working conditions that their contribution deserved. The implication of this is that there has been no true 'integration of women' into Korean development, but that they may merely have been providing cheap and easily expendable labour - in other words, that Korean development is simply a continuation of the exploitation of women.

Second, *that it is 'the use of the culture', with its strong Confucian tradition, by social actors and institutions that has been the major obstacle to full integration of women into the Korean development process – because it has 'legitimised' and sustained gender inequality and sexual discrimination at work and in society.*

If the first hypothesis is valid, it is my further contention that the prime reason for the persistent gender inequality in Korean society and at work is the continuing and pervasive influence of traditional culture, particularly that of Confucian origin. This implies that Confucian values remain embedded in everyday social mores and working relationships and are used to maintain and legitimise gender discrimination.

To test these hypotheses, I have chosen to carry out a case study of white-collar office workers in Korean chaebol. Office workers were chosen as subjects because white-collar employment is an increasingly important sector in the expanding national economy, and one which for Korean women is among the most popular and

accessible of all employment opportunities. Women working in offices have in recent years increased dramatically in number, and now comprise a significant proportion (13.4 percent) of all employed women.<sup>12</sup> However, female white-collar employment in Korea, as in other developing countries, has so far received relatively little attention; it is a comparatively under-researched topic and there are few empirical, up-to-date studies on this subject. In contrast, most studies on working Korean women have concentrated on production workers (e.g. Lee HC. 1985; RAS 1988; Cho SK. 1987; Koo H. 1987; Pearson 1992a; Lee OJ. 1993), as part of the relatively wide academic attention over the last few decades that has been focused on Third World women in export-oriented manufacturing industries. This relative paucity of academic focus on office workers in Korea raises the issue of the corresponding lack of gender perspective on the subject, and suggests that perhaps such a study is timely. This is discussed later in this chapter, when the significance of the study is addressed, and also in Chapter 3.

Chaebol were selected as host organisations for the study for a number of different reasons. *First*, among the many different types of organisation employing female white-collar workers, they command special national status and play a critically important role in the country's economy and its labour markets. Their historically close relationship with government (see Chapter 3 and 5), which has supported them with benevolent dissemination of licences, permits and loans on favourable terms, has allowed chaebol to grow at rates far surpassing that of the overall economy (Soh BH. 1997). Kang MH. (1996:128) argues that in Korea the government usually sets policies and businessmen follow. This means, among other things, that the employment policies and practices of chaebol are considered closely to reflect governmental policy and guidance (Kim YT. 1998)<sup>13</sup>. *Second*, apart from their important contribution to the labour market, chaebol have long been considered the leading model for employment policies and practices in Korean firms. This implies that they embody, indeed pioneer, current and future trends in national employment strategy. *Third*, chaebol are generally regarded as better employers, in terms of wages, conditions of work and general organisation, than other Korean companies, and as such are usually favoured by job seekers (see



Chapter 5). This probably also applies in the case of female employees: it is often speculated that chaebol are 'better' employers for Korean women than small and medium-sized companies because their employment policies and practices<sup>14</sup> appear to be less discriminatory and more likely to promote gender equality<sup>15</sup>. *Fourth*, even though they are Korean, chaebol are effectively transnational corporations (TNCs) – a feature which is relevant to this study in the sense that TNCs can act as agents not only of economic modernisation (Lim 1985:97) but also cultural modernisation (and globalisation) in a developing country like Korea. Chaebol may be considered a bridge between modern (global) and more traditional domestic market enterprises<sup>16</sup>: while firmly based in domestic society, they have more international contacts, are more likely to be influenced by non-Korean culture, and consciously seek to present a 'modern' image by adopting sophisticated, 'Western' forms of organisation. In addition, as previously mentioned, they appear to be influenced and encouraged by the government to become involved in the global economy and its industrial politics. Therefore, even for gender relations and equality at work, they can provide good examples of an environment where new changes can easily be introduced and recognised. Chaebol offices may be seen as a place where modern organisation and traditional Korean culture meet and intertwine to produce an environment that is particularly relevant for a study of gender relations at work. Chaebol, therefore, seem ideally suited for my research on female employment as they provide a social context where two contrasting influences, traditional and modern (global), coexist and interact with each other to produce a particular work culture and office discourses affecting gender relations.

Since the particular aim of the research is to examine current female white-collar employment and gender relations in the offices of chaebol, I intend to explore the following research questions by examining and analysing their current employment policies and practices:

- i) are current employment policies and practices in chaebol gendered - and if so, to what degree?
- ii) to what extent are elements of traditional culture (and other cultural influences) manifest in the office, particularly in relation to gender relations?

- iii) how far does current gender ideology, revealed in work culture and customs, play a role in generating and sustaining gender inequality and sexual discrimination at work?
- iv) to what degree have changes in socio-economic conditions influenced current female employment and the status of women working in chaebol?
- v) what factors, if any, could help improve gender equality and the status of women at work?

In order to explore these questions, a total of 64 in-depth, face-to-face interviews were carried out with office employees and a small number of other relevant subjects; the majority of these (51) were working in the offices of eight different chaebol located in Seoul.<sup>17</sup> In addition, I attended group presentations by 11 chaebol managers and staff representatives. The details and profile of the interviewees are reported in Appendix One (Tables 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3).

This study of office employment in chaebol focuses on female employees, of which there are broadly two categories, both of which are relevant and important to this thesis: high-school leavers and university graduates. High-school leavers, who are usually recruited for lower-grade administrative jobs, comprise the overwhelming majority of these female employees to date (see Chapter 3). Their experiences are particularly pertinent in that their existence and roles in Korean offices reflect a more 'traditional' approach towards female employment by chaebol (and other Korean firms) since these are the women who have been customarily hired as female office staff. The graduates, on the other hand, are relatively few in number (see Chapters 3 and 6) and as a group are new to chaebol office work; they have been employed for an 'executive' career path and may reflect a modern, more-progressive trend in female employment. Their separate experiences at work, and the gender discrimination encountered by these two distinctive groups, exhibit some elements that are common to both and some that are distinct. A consideration of both these groups of women is necessary for a thorough understanding of female employment in chaebol. Therefore, I intend to discuss the historical development of these two groups and then compare and contrast (throughout the study, whenever possible) their different recruitment processes, the nature of their tasks, their

working conditions, expected roles in the office and their employers' attitude towards them. In order to provide a fair and comparative evaluation, almost half (45 percent) of the chaebol employees interviewed were male (mostly graduate) staff (see Appendix 2.1); clearly they compare most closely with female graduates, yet their views on, and working relationships with, high-school leavers are also particularly instructive and relevant to this study.

To show that employment practices are gendered, and therefore sexual-discriminatory to women, I will use both an objective and a subjective approach in identifying and investigating the types of unequal treatment. The former focuses on an objective examination of general employment policies and practices from a gender perspective (see Chapter 6), while the latter considers actual gender relations in the office by examining real, informal, attitudes and practices of both employers and employees from a subjective viewpoint (see Chapter 7 and 8).

The more formal, objective approach reviews the key elements of human resource management in four sections: i) 'recruitment', ii) 'development', iii) 'rewards', and iv) 'termination'. The 'recruitment' section covers general recruitment methods, the availability and access of information for open recruitment, procedures and selection criteria, and the allocation of recruits to departments and jobs. In 'development', staff training, task assignment, job rotation and transfers are considered. 'Rewards' discusses performance evaluation, promotion and remuneration issues, while the final 'termination' section examines the topics of retirement, resignation and dismissal.

The subjective approach, exploring how common beliefs, office discourses and customary practices are gendered, and how they relate to Confucian tradition, probes questions such as: i) Is there gender bias or prejudice in the attitudes of (male) employees and managers? If so, how is it justified?; ii) What are the customary gendered discourses on women's traits and roles?; iii) Do these influence women's behaviour and ways of thinking, and adversely affect the evaluation of their performance?; and iv) How are they related to Confucian influences, and exhibited in the workplace?

## 1.4 Background and Rationale of the Field Work

My interest in female white-collar employment in Korea as a research project developed in the mid 1990s at a time when major changes in female employment in Korean enterprises were taking place. While large Korean companies, especially chaebol, had long been popular among graduate job seekers as preferred employers, until the mid 1980s this only really applied to male graduate candidates (see Chapter 3 for details). A few female graduates might have been employed in secretarial positions, but this was usually as a result of personal introduction, rather than through 'open competition' (*kong-chae*) as was used for male graduate candidates. Until this time, female school leavers who were recommended by their (usually, commercial) high schools were hired for simple administrative work, bookkeeping and other tasks of an assisting nature. In 1985, however, this recruitment system underwent major change when one prominent chaebol, the Daewoo group, for the first time included female graduates as applicants for core white-collar jobs – which had previously been reserved only for male graduates (*Minwoohoe* 1997:1). Subsequently, other chaebol began to follow this lead by allowing women to participate in their open recruitment process (this is considered in more detail in Chapter 3).

When I visited Korea in the summer of 1996 for preliminary field research, the prospects for women seeking employment in large conglomerates appeared bright in a country where the general atmosphere was prosperous and self-confident. Moreover, the movement towards 'globalisation', that then headed the public industrial policy agenda and was actively being promoted by the government of Kim Young-Sam,<sup>18</sup> also incorporated gender equality at work as an integral component. As a result, 'women's rights' issues were much in evidence nationally as the government was strongly advocating the 'globalisation' of both business and culture. In spite of the fact that Korean society was still deeply discriminatory against women, the country and leading employers appeared to be making genuine and positive efforts to improve gender equality both in society and at work.

These changes led me to wonder why they were happening; was this the beginning of liberation for long-suffering Korean women and a 'natural' consequence of the country's progress towards fully developed status?; would economic development and modernisation (and globalisation) in themselves serve to redress existing gender inequality? It seemed to me at the time that the most effective way to improve the status of Korean women was perhaps to allow the country, with its closed society and strong Confucian tradition, quickly to open up to outside influences and encourage further inter-communication with the comparatively less-gendered developed world and its modern culture. During this visit, therefore, I began to form a hypothesis that, as long as Korea maintained its economic progress and accessibility, the accompanying modernisation and globalisation would of itself help alleviate sexual prejudice and gender discrimination, and thereby lead to an improvement in the status of Korean women.

However, when I returned for the second visit in July 1997, the mood of the country had changed perceptibly. There was a national feeling of unease, the business climate was less optimistic, and both companies and employees appeared less confident about the immediate future (an account of the country's economic condition at that time is given in the first part of Chapter 3). As a result, and in contrast to the first visit, many signs favourable to the promotion of gender equality had disappeared. Gender issues had become less important, women seemed to be losing jobs (often being asked to leave before their male colleagues), and 'globalisation' now seemed to most business people merely to mean "more competitive in the global market", rather than a means of improving the conditions under which women worked to a 'global' standard. What struck me this time were doubts as to whether the previous advances for women in the labour market were genuine and permanent - or even still existed. I began to question whether the recent enthusiastic encouragement of companies to employ female graduates for white-collar work might have been more a temporary market response to the demands of industrial growth and the economic needs of employers, rather than a more sustained voluntary and egalitarian recognition of the needs and rights of women. While this was one of the major issues to be explored in my study, the economic

crisis in 1997 clearly introduced, however temporarily, a reluctance to discuss gender issues and a lack of interest in promoting gender equality. The economic difficulties of the country and chaebol were serious to the extent that the main field research, originally planned for 1998, had to be delayed for at least a year because of the discouraging and evasive responses from companies to my requests to carry out interviews bearing on issues of gender equality. They were clearly distracted in attempting to cope with the economic crisis that was, perhaps, even threatening their own survival. This experience led me to re-examine some of my previous ideas, and to modify the hypotheses and research questions. The main field research was eventually carried out in the summer of 1999, when economic pressures on Korean companies had become less intense after the initial panic, and the situation had ameliorated.

## 1.5 Structure of the Thesis

In examining female white-collar employment in Korea, and investigating whether its effects on the women employed can be considered to be in the nature of integration or exploitation, the overall framework of the thesis is based primarily on the feminist paradigm outlined by Tiano. In her review of the literature on women in industrial development in Latin America, Tiano (1986) subsumed current viewpoints within three competing perspectives which employ contrasting assumptions about patriarchy<sup>19</sup> and its relationship to capitalist development: these are the theses of '*integration*', '*marginalisation*', and '*exploitation*'. According to Tiano, the '*integration thesis*' holds that industrialisation leads to female liberation and sexual equality by involving women more centrally in economic and political development (Tiano 1994:37). In the '*marginalisation thesis*', capitalist development makes women peripheral to socially-valued roles and resources; it maintains that capitalist industrialisation excludes women from productive roles and confines them to the household or to the informal sector. Finally, the '*exploitation thesis*' claims that capitalistic industrialisation creates a female proletariat supplying low-wage labour for the purpose of accumulating capital at minimal cost (ibid.). These theses

will be discussed further in more detail in the succeeding chapter, when a general literature review on women in development is presented.

These theses outlined by Tiano are a good starting point for building a framework for my study of Korean female white-collar workers - even though they were formed primarily in the context of female manufacturing workers. This is because they can be useful in viewing, not only the outcome of women's work involvement in the export processing zones of developing countries but also, in a broader sense, the effect of development on Third World women. My assumption is that the experiences of Korean women as paid employees in the development process may share elements in common with those of working women in other parts of the developing world. At the same time, this study also provides an opportunity to assess whether Tiano's framework is suitable for explaining the experiences of female white-collar employment in the developing world.

While the general theoretical framework for this case study of Korean women in development is largely derived from Tiano's theses, the overall structure of the study of female white-collar employment in chaebol employs both a macro and a micro perspective. From a macro perspective, a general understanding of the socio-economic background (including labour market conditions for women) and cultural environment in the country will help properly to appreciate the position of Korean women in society and at work. Although this study particularly concerns the situation of women in the labour market and their role and status in work organisations, their position in society at large and general attitudes towards working women should first be appreciated. This is because the status of female workers in the labour market is both directly and indirectly influenced not only by labour market conditions, but also by the country's general social structure, including its traditional patriarchal system.

The macro perspective is used from two angles: first, *socio-economic factors* are considered by examining historically the country's economic and social changes during the post-war period (1953-1990s) that influenced current female employment policies and practices. This will include an introduction to the current Korean labour market for female workers and, more specifically, that for white-collar employees

(Chapter 3). Second, *cultural factors* that have directly and indirectly influenced the status of Korean women in society and gender relations at work are examined and discussed (Chapter 4).

The micro perspective, on the other hand, involved research within the offices of selected chaebol in order to explore the extent to which sexual discrimination and gender inequality still persist. While research from a macro perspective comprised primarily an examination of existing literature and data sources, and constituted the background for more focused and specific empirical research, the micro perspective focused on relevant employment policies and practices in chaebol offices and the experiences of chaebol employees.

#### 1) Macro-perspective

##### *Socio-economic Factors*

These factors influence the changing demand for labour at particular historical junctures, and the ways in which this demand has been met. It is, therefore, important to examine whether, and to what extent, the development process in Korea has attracted women from the private sphere into the public domain of paid employment, and how certain patterns of female employment have evolved over time in response to varying demands from the nation's development process. Further, it is particularly useful to explore how female employment has developed and changed as a result of employers' demands and the influence of government policy. For this purpose, an historical examination of the development of the Korean economy, and its demands for labour to meet its needs, is considered appropriate. It will also be helpful to consider national policies towards economic development, and other related issues such as the recent movement toward globalisation, the role of chaebol in the economy and the labour market - particularly in relation to female employment. Most importantly, the nature of the labour market for women, both white-collar and production employees, as it has developed over recent decades, is examined; this will be discussed in Chapter 3.



### *Cultural Factors*

Gender identity is a social construction with a rationale related to the biological difference between the sexes. Gender inequality and sexual discrimination, which have existed in most societies throughout history, reflect basic assumptions and traditions about the different nature of men and women, and the presumed roles they can and should play within a society. These assumptions and traditions exhibit great variability across different cultures and societies, as do the respective roles of men and women and their consequent gender relations.

In contemporary Korea, although a nation with mixed religions and beliefs, Confucianism retains a strong presence. A discussion of Korean society would be incomplete without some understanding of the ideology and moral code associated with Confucian tradition - as well as other cultural influences. An understanding of the changing roles and status of women in Korea requires analyses, not only of this traditional culture but also other more recent influences arising from modernisation. The relevance of Korea's traditional culture to contemporary society (encompassing family, household and social organisations), and its impact on modern women who face the dilemma of identifying variously with traditional and modern roles, is crucial. Korean culture and gender relations will be discussed in Chapter 4.

### **2) Micro-perspective**

This approach specifically involves an examination of work practices and gender relations in contemporary chaebol offices. The research explores the employment policies and practices of chaebol, the perceptions of employers towards, and treatment of, female employees compared with their male staff, and the experiences and attitudes of female (and male) employees bearing particularly on gender relations at work.

The status of women and the conditions under which they work are influenced by a variety of factors, including those relating to culture and ideology manifest at the workplace, the domestic role and responsibilities of female employees, and the attitudes and actions of employers and the government toward female employment; it is important that they should all be considered. It is at the micro level of the

workplace that these different factors are distilled and displayed in the complex interactions among and between employers and employees.

## **1.6 Methodology**

This part describes the methodology followed in the empirical investigation into employment policies and practices for female white-collar employees and gender relations in chaebol. To explore the situation of Korean women in paid work, and how traditional Confucian culture has contributed to their present condition and role, I have particularly chosen (female) white-collar office workers in chaebol to be the subjects of my case study.

### **a) Research Strategy**

#### **Qualitative Approach**

To collect and analyse the primary data for this study, I have chosen a qualitative, rather than a quantitative, research approach. This was because the theme of my investigation and the nature of the research questions called for a closer, more detailed examination from the perspective of the subjects than is usually satisfied by a quantitative approach. For example, I was interested in examining diverse working conditions experienced by employees, interactions between them in the light of gender relations and administrative culture, and their attitudes towards various issues including work ethics, culture and gender roles. The research, therefore, focussed on exploring beliefs, experiences and behaviour of the respondents in relation to gender relations and cultural influences at the workplace, and identifying patterns of direct and indirect sexual discrimination. For this reason, it was particularly important that the research truly reflected the perspective of the participants.

A research challenge of this nature can usually best be undertaken by a qualitative approach, as many suggest (e.g. Allan and Skinner 1991; Judd et al. 1991; Kvale 1996; Flick 1998). Allan (1991:178) asserts that satisfactory

explanations of social activities require a substantial appreciation of the perspectives, culture and 'world-views' of the actors involved, which is a core feature of qualitative research. Further, as Judd et al. (1991:231) observe, "questions about beliefs and attitudes are particularly difficult to explore" since they are often complex and multi-dimensional. While recognising qualitative research as specifically relevant to the study of social relations, due to the pluralisation of life worlds, Flick (1998) argues that this pluralisation requires a new sensitivity to the empirical study of issues. A source of knowledge in this context is gradually to take an insider's perspective – to understand the individual's viewpoint or the organisational principles of social groups from a member's perspective (ibid.).

Further, qualitative approaches to human interaction are important within feminist research:

"..... feminist approaches have in common a focus on the everyday world of women, work with methods appropriate for understanding the very lives and situations of women, and understanding is a means for changing the conditions studied" (Kvale 1996:72).

Qualitative research is sensitive to the human situation, it involves an empathic dialogue with the subjects studied, and it may contribute to their emancipation and empowerment (Kvale 1996:70). Although in Korea there are a number of studies on sexual discrimination in white-collar employment (typically surveys undertaken by organisations, such as women's pressure groups promoting gender equality, with a more quantitative approach) and various academic works assessing the influence of Confucian culture on women in society, few studies satisfactorily focus in depth on the experiences of women in white-collar jobs and how they are affected by gender relations and discrimination derived from Confucian ideology. Therefore, even though some aspects of the research could have been assisted by a quantitative approach (such as those involving some factual information about the employees as respondents), I was more interested in developing qualitative data that would show the various adaptive responses of female interviewees to their experiences, the different justifications for gender discrimination offered by male respondents, and finally how the work culture of chaebol is still subject to ideological influences.

## **Research Methods**

As the main method for executing this qualitative research, I employed semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. My selection of this method derived from “the expectation that the interviewed subjects’ viewpoints are more likely to be expressed in a relatively openly-designed interview situation than in a standardised interview or a questionnaire” (Flick 1998:76). To allow respondents to answer in a relatively unconstrained way and to convey subtleties of attitude to their own satisfaction, open-ended questions can be ideal, especially when the full range of their “attitude positions” is not known (Judd et al. 1991:239). Consequently, establishing a close rapport with interviewees to encourage them to reveal their personal opinions and express themselves freely on sensitive issues was considered important. I also sought to conduct interviews in a relaxed and informal manner so that feelings and opinions could be expressed as candidly as possible. This was particularly important when dealing with the subtleties of sexual discrimination (or, in some cases, sexual harassment) in the perception of respondents.

An interview guide, containing an outline of topics to be covered and a sequence of carefully worded questions was used. Because the interviews were arranged through personal introductions, and the feeling that I was being ‘controversial’, questions were designed to appear less ‘provocative and contentious’ yet hiding nuances of meaning, especially when involving male respondents. Even though I followed the guide as closely as possible, occasionally a particular interview situation or interviewee required a modified sequence or wording of questions. Throughout, I sought to employ non-directive, conversational questioning and avoid making early appraisals. For example, in exploring the influence of traditional (Confucian) culture at the workplace (Question No. 21 – see Appendix 3), by first asking Question No.20 (“Are there any aspects of the work culture with which you are not happy? Which aspects of the work culture do you consider are hindering the efficiency of the workplace?”) I would allow the respondents voluntarily to introduce the issue of traditional Confucian culture – which they often did.

For my own convenience the interview guide was grouped into topic areas: on personal background, current employment experiences, beliefs and cultural

influences, and gender relations. In putting together interview questions, it was intended to leave sensitive and more complex issues towards the end of the interview - until rapport and trust had been established. Further, in finalising the interview guide, a pilot study of test interviews was carried out prior to the main research (see below) to reflect upon the questions being asked and to amend them if necessary. The interview guide was modified several times, especially after pilot interviews with female office workers in 1997.

The questions (see Appendix 3) were broadly arranged into four sections according to their subject content:

- a) general information about the respondent, including educational and other qualifications;
- b) experience of the respondent with the present employer, including length of service, job description and nature of work, job satisfaction, personal career plans, degree of satisfaction with salary and working conditions;
- c) beliefs, experiences and behaviour of the respondent in relation to cultural influences at the workplace and its administrative ethos.
- d) attitudes, behaviour and the shop-floor discourse on issues of gender relations and equal opportunity, such as gender relationships with male colleagues and superiors, any persisting sexual division of labour, direct and indirect sexual discrimination etc.

It was intended that these interviews, which often concluded with an open-ended discussion, should also cover other important issues relevant to gender relations at work - such as cultural ideology unfavourable to working women, new influences originating from modernisation and recent globalisation, women's domestic responsibilities and their roles at home, and currently-popular discourses on women in society. Apart from the semi-structured interviews, a few other methods of gathering information were used to complement the primary data collected: these included personal observations and written material and data provided by the subject chaebol.

## **Groundwork and Securing Access**

### *Collection of secondary data*

Initially, extensive secondary data and literature was assembled both in Korea and the U.K. relating to: Korean economic development over the last few decades,

recent changes in the socio-economic environment, gender relations in general, and female employment in factory and white-collar office work. Additional literature, available in the U.K., was also gathered on women in the developing world and female white-collar work in general. For the case study of chaebol, research literature and published materials and data were collected (both in Korea and the U.K.) to help understand their role in the Korean economy and labour market, their interaction with government, and their work culture – in order to ascertain and clarify the recent changes and current status of their employment policies and practices. However, it proved difficult to acquire information about their actual work policies since little printed matter was available. In order to complement the interviews, the relevant literature used is primarily derived from the sources mentioned above and articles in recruitment magazines and newspapers.

#### *Selection of chaebol and interviewees*

Gaining research access to chaebol and interview subjects was expected to present problems and was a major concern in selecting chaebol and interviewees. For an outsider to approach a chaebol, particularly to interview their female employees about gender issues, was challenging from the outset owing to their traditional privacy and reticence; in the present economic circumstances with many chaebol facing acute financial threat (see Chapter 5, where the recent economic crisis is discussed), it was particularly problematic. Negotiating this access took considerable time and required introductions from influential intermediaries. As a result, the chaebol studied and the employees interviewed were selected largely on the basis of convenience samples.

From my initial contacts with chaebol business executives in 1996, I formed the impression then that it would be very difficult to persuade even one chaebol to allow me to carry out an extensive case study over a fairly long period entirely within one organisation (which could have been a research option). However, I did make progress on an alternative plan: through a personal contact, I became acquainted with an influential intermediary (a former president of a major affiliate of chaebol S1, currently working as a business consultant to chaebol generally) who introduced

me to a few large chaebol. He did this indirectly, through very senior executives in subsidiary affiliate companies where I was ultimately given permission to conduct interviews with employees chosen and arranged by an executive manager. Other interviews were arranged through private introductions from working colleagues and friends.

Even though the chaebol covered in the research were primarily selected by availability of access, in the event I was able to interview employees working in between one and three affiliated companies within each of the five leading chaebol - although the number of interviews in each chaebol varied. The largest number of interviews (21) was conducted in chaebol S1, often considered the foremost large chaebol (especially in relation to its management of human resources and administrative structure - a fact confirmed by many interviewees, both those working within the group and in other chaebol). Among the many affiliated companies of chaebol S1, used as the core case study, I specifically chose one particular company operating in the textile and fashion industry - known as a 'female-friendly' sector and therefore 'allowed' to employ more female staff than other sister affiliates, such as those in engineering sectors. Interviewing subjects in prominent chaebol well regarded for their progressive policies towards women, and many in a 'female-friendly' affiliate, might seem to introduce an element of bias in the sample. Yet this fact probably makes my findings of continuing gender discrimination even more striking.

In total I interviewed 14 staff from this one company; for comparison purposes a smaller number from two other companies within the same chaebol were also interviewed. Apart from these, I also interviewed 8 employees from chaebol H1, 4 from D1, 4 from S2, and 3 from L (all members of the top five chaebol at the time). In addition, interviews within chaebol H2 (6), P (4), and the smaller D2 (1) were added (see the Appendix Table 2.1). Employees (and sometimes managers) from each company participated in in-depth interviews using the semi-structured interview guide. Care was taken in the selection of interviewees to ensure, as far as practicable, that a representative balance between men and women (55% were women), ages, educational backgrounds (67.9% of the women were university

graduates, the remainder were high-school leavers) and status was achieved. Further, selected interviewees were chosen from a variety of job occupations, in different industries and at different office locations. At the outset I had intended to pay particular regard to female graduates, as representing the most 'modernised and perhaps least gendered' employment sector. Their apparently small number in the sample is indicative of their position in the chaebol – very few female graduates are still working, a circumstance that was undoubtedly accentuated by the recession. In total, 51 interviews were carried out with employees of chaebol (see below for further discussion on additional interviews outside chaebol).

## **b) Data Collection**

### **Field Visits**

The bulk of the data was collected during the main field research that was conducted in the vicinity of Seoul in 1999; this followed two earlier periods of fieldwork in 1996 and 1997. These two preliminary visits were planned to build the hypotheses, and establish contacts that could facilitate access to research sites for interviewing. In addition, they enabled me to conduct pilot studies to test the preliminary question guide, and undertake some valuable interviews with less directly-apposite people such as local academics working in related fields, female university students seeking jobs, female white-collar employees working in various organisations, senior executives and personnel managers of chaebol, and representatives from women's pressure groups.

During the first visit (12 July – 20 August 1996), preliminary personal contacts were established, leading later to further introductions and meetings with intermediaries for access to potential interviewees. Further, to gather useful information on related subjects, visits were made to a small number of academics in sociology and gender studies, a women's white-collar employment organisation (e.g. *Minwoohoe*), and an important journal specialising in graduate recruitment (e.g. *Sisa Journal*). Some of the pilot interviews were carried out with the respondents (mu38m, fu46, fg60, ff57, fg61, fw63, mb64 - all of whom were re-



interviewed in 1997 and 1999), while some of these (mu38m, fu46, fg60, mb64) subsequently acted as intermediaries introducing new subjects during the subsequent field visits (see Appendix 1.1 and 1.2 for codes and profiles of interviewees).

During the second visit (28 July – 8 Oct 1997), the contacts previously established in 1996 were pursued and new introductions for gaining access to chaebol and interviewees developed. Some further pilot interviews were undertaken (with mu38m, fu46, ff57, ff58, ff59, fg60, fg61, fw63, mb64 - all re-interviewed in 1999) while the main interviews began with a few chaebol employees (i.e. fu20, fu21, mu38m, fu46, fu50) and some job candidates (i.e. fs52, fs53, fs54). Some other non-chaebol subjects were also interviewed (i.e. ff57, ff58, ff59, fg60, fg61, fw63 - all re-interviewed in 1999) in an informal and less-structured fashion - the main aim being to establish contact for the main interviews to follow. Some interviews (e.g. with ff59, fg60) unexpectedly suggested introductions to new interview subjects for the following visit in 1999. I also attended five different recruitment seminars for female graduate job candidates given by four major chaebol, presented by a total of 11 people (cs65~cs75; see Appendix 1.3 for presenters at chaebol recruitment seminars). In addition, further meetings were arranged with appropriate people in pursuit of access to chaebol – with little success. Academics (about 10) in related fields, such as sociology and gender studies, were contacted and met for brief meetings or discussions: this provided me with some useful ideas for research planning and methodology but offered little to the main body of research - none were included in my interviewee list. Visits to Korean women's organisations (e.g. *Minwoohoe*, KWDI) yielded some interviews and the collection of published materials on gender issues.

The final, principal, field visit was in 1999 (from 1 May to 1 Sept). The early months were devoted to securing access to chaebol and interviewees and making frequent contacts with potential intermediary-interviewees (e.g. mulm, mul5m, fh23, mu25m, mu30m, mu38m, fu46, ff59, fg60, mb64; plus some others who chose not participate). By the end of the visit these contacts had led to further introductions which enabled me to complete the remainder of the interviews. Thus,

the majority of the interviews (all except fu20, fu21, mu38m, fu46, fu50, fs52, fs53, fs54 – which were conducted in 1997) was completed during this time allowing me to finalise the field research by the end of August 1999. Meanwhile, recent secondary data and literature were gathered (including that from women's organisations) to support and complement my empirical research.

Together, these field studies yielded a total of 64 interviews, including 51 interviews with employees from 11 companies in 8 different chaebol. Because of the lack of U.K. data and literature on Korea and its female workers, and the paucity of literature and research on female white-collar work even in Korea, it was necessary to conduct pilot interviews in a manner designed to elucidate information about contemporary female employment and any relevant research, as well as soliciting the personal experiences and opinions of interviewees. The two earlier visits provided the background that enabled me to appreciate and focus on more recent, important issues, and were valuable in developing the study hypotheses and question guide. The interviews, most of which were tape-recorded for later transcription and analysis, lasted usually between one and two hours. As agreed with the companies and interviewees, to maintain anonymity references to both in the body of this study are indicated by code initials.

## **Interviews**

Interview subjects, who were located as explained through a variety of sources including personal contacts and referrals, were interviewed using a semi-structured question guide with an open-ended, 'informal' discussion of key issues. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, either in the offices of the subjects or at a tearoom near where they worked, and lasted from 45 minutes to two hours - the time depending on how much they could spare. Even though the main focus of the study is female employment, it was decided also to include male employees to compare and contrast their status and conditions of employment with those of female colleagues, and to elucidate their views about female staff and provide a more complete evaluation of female experiences.

As already discussed, the interviews were to cover a broad range of topics, including personal background, individual experiences in the current job, perceptions and attitudes towards work and corporate culture, and gender relations in the office. In interviews with managers, topics would also include the company's recruitment policies and practices, their evaluation of work performance and attitude of both female and male employees, matters relating to the general administrative culture of the chaebol, including decision-making and authority patterns, attitudes to female employees, and sexual discrimination. In addition, their views were solicited on recent national socio-economic developments (such as modernisation, globalisation, the current economic crisis etc.) and whether they affected their company and had any impact on its everyday working life and gender relations.

Some additional interviews with female subjects who were not chaebol employees were included to provide further comparison and contrast: they comprised five employees of foreign companies in Seoul, three government employees, three job candidates and one housewife; one male chaebol specialist was also interviewed (see Appendix Table 1.2). Finally, presentations by 11 chaebol managers and employee representatives during chaebol recruitment seminars that I attended are also included with an individual code name for each presenter (Appendix Table 1.3).

### **c) Discussions and Limitations and Constraints**

#### **Sample Size**

A core sample of 64, of which 51 were employees of chaebol, may be considered too big or too small – depending on the perspective and the approach taken. To the question, “How many interview subjects do I need?” in research, Kvale (1996:101) simply answers: “Interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know.” In current interview studies with a qualitative approach, the number of interviews tend to be around  $15 \pm 10$  (Kvale 1996:102); this number may derive from the time and resources available and the law of diminishing returns - where further interviews would yield little new knowledge. In this vein, the size of my sample

may be regarded too large: as Kvale (1996:102) points out, “if the number of subjects is too large, then it is not possible to make penetrating interpretations of the interviews”. On the other hand, the size of this sample might also be regarded as small and ‘unrepresentative’ - if the study appears “to be designed on a quantitative presupposition - the more interviews, the more scientific” (Kvale 1996:103). Even in qualitative interview studies, if the number of subjects is too small it is not possible to make statistical generalisations or to test hypotheses of differences among groups (ibid. p102). Therefore, selection of sample size is a delicate yet critical matter. It may be assumed that the necessary number of subjects depends on the study’s purpose and feasibility. ‘Feasibility’ implies “not simply whether a project is feasible in principle, but also whether it is feasible within the constraints of time and resources available” (Clark and Causer 1991:170).

Bearing in mind that my research is essentially qualitative, principles of qualitative approach were used - while some elements of quantitative research were also incorporated. As already explained, the feasibility of gaining repeated access and ample time for satisfactory ‘in-depth’ interviews was a major constraint, and some adjustment to the research approach was made as the fieldwork progressed.

Although access to all interviewees was gained through personal contacts, it was without official sanction or ‘powerful’ connections. Access typically resulted from a single kindness or ‘favour’ (sometimes a token gesture to save the face of an intermediary) - although many female respondents seemed to enjoy being interviewed and expressing their opinions. Apart from those few who became ‘friends’, with whom I established a certain rapport during the first meeting and could feel comfortable enough to invite later for tea and an out-of-working-hours ‘chat’, it was almost impossible to arrange a second interview. Further, as most of interviews took place during working hours, the time they could spare was often limited. In some cases, the intermediaries who helped with arranging interviews had already set a timetable for them. Therefore, it was unrealistic with most chaebol respondents to conduct to my satisfaction ‘in-depth’ interviews that may require lengthy or repeated meetings. As these constraints prevented me from pursuing

proper in-depth interviews for all, I decided to select a sample larger in size and variety to achieve an improved validity.

Overall, therefore, there is an element of empirical quantitative approach in my selection of the size and nature of the interview sample; I sought to cover a number of variables, such as different sizes of company (including the then-top five chaebol), various industries, both sexes and diverse educational qualifications of interviewees etc. While not a controlled representative sample, it was considered to provide an appropriate social spectrum of responses. Including more chaebol or more interviewees might, arguably, have been useful in establishing differences of detail between them, yet would contribute little further to exploring the existence of sexual discrimination in chaebol offices and the cultural influence of Confucianism. Indeed, such a sample would not necessarily be more statistically representative. In a sense, differences between chaebol are not a central issue here, although it was interesting to explore variations in work culture, the pattern of gender relations and degree of sexual discrimination. Ultimately, in designing the research methodology and carrying out the fieldwork, I considered that the most important issue was to achieve, within the constraints faced, a practical balance between the *depth* of interviews and the *spread* of interviews.

### **Sensitive Topics**

Apart from the constraints set by the issues of access and time, there were some other limitations faced during the interview research. Particularly relevant here is the issue of talking about sensitive topics. For example, although the discussion of sexual harassment frequently come up during the interviews, it mainly related to unequal, gendered treatment (*seong-cha-byeol*, 'gender differentiation') rather than harassment in a more sexually explicit sense (*seong-hee-rong*, 'sexual harassment'). If women were asked during a face-to-face interview whether they had ever been subject to sexual harassment (*seong-hee-rong*) at work, most would say "No". This would be particularly so if the introduction was through their male superiors and the interview took place at work, which was often the case. To be subject to sexual harassment (especially in Korean society) and talk about it to a stranger can be

regarded a degrading experience, and I did not have sufficient confidence to pursue these matters in depth. Further, clarifying the various definitions of 'sexual harassment' with respondents, and attempting to ask non-directive questions about these sensitive issues, was considered less urgent than pursuing other issues more relevant to my study. A separate study directed towards understanding sexual harassment, and women's reactions to it, may be worthwhile: however, it may need to employ large-scale survey techniques involving the use of relatively highly-structured questionnaires to deal with such sensitive issues – or, if a qualitative interview study, having special access (e.g. through women's organisations or unions etc.) where respondents feel comfortable and secure enough to talk candidly about their experiences.

For similar reasons, discussing the salary of respondents in a face-to-face interview was constrained by their uneasiness in revealing their remuneration: when asked in the pilot interviews the response was intentionally vague, "I earn as much as others at the same level in the company". Therefore, even though salary itself was a crucial element in evaluating 'rewards' (see Chapter 6), direct questions could not be asked. However, considering the present remuneration system in most Korean companies (where a person's salary has largely been based on length of employment, and related to the seniority level - see Chapter 6), gendered features for investigation in this research were less concerned with actual salary but more related to promotion opportunities and security of employment. For this reason, the lack of open discussion on salaries may not be considered crucial.

In summary, the aim of my qualitative research was achieved by focusing on people's everyday experiences and office discourses, and elucidating their personal feelings and attitudes. Even though there could be benefits from a larger (and better controlled) sample, the data and findings of this study clearly showed how gender discrimination and cultural influences operate at the office floor level. Further, the impact of changes in the business climate amplified the need for this type of data. Halfway through my field research there was a sudden, dramatic economic recession (see Chapter 5) which produced no simple, uniform response at any level of society - thus making insights of a qualitative nature, focusing on subtle changes

occurring at a micro-perspective level, more appropriate. In the future, findings from this initial qualitative research could be used as a pedestal for an appropriate quantitative survey on a larger scale.

## 1.7 Significance of the Study

There are a number of reasons why this study of female white-collar workers in chaebol is considered to be of significance:

a) Examination of female white-collar labour in developing nations has to date been somewhat limited, and the experiences of these workers relatively little documented. As far as working women in developing countries are concerned, most academic attention has been directed towards low-income employees, such as production workers in manufacturing, petty traders in informal sectors, and subsistence agricultural workers. The experiences of female factory workers in developing countries, and their association with the development process, has been extensively covered by international academics and writers - and will be considered briefly in Chapter 2. This attention is perhaps not surprising since it is women on low-incomes that are often placed at the margins of economic activity, where a gendered (therefore unbalanced) distribution of wealth and resources can affect women more seriously than higher-income or more-privileged women. The relative lack of interest in white-collar workers may be explained by the fact that, until recently, the proportion of women working in offices in developing countries has been low and of relatively little importance. Nevertheless, female office workers do exist in such countries and, even if working under comparatively better conditions than their counterparts in factories, they may also face sexual discrimination and exploitation.

It appears that the relative importance of women in offices is greatest in more developed countries, where secretarial work is almost a completely feminised occupation, while they “comprise a much lower proportion of office workers in developing countries” (Joeke 1987:108). The growing number of white-collar (both absolutely and in comparison with blue-collar) occupations in Korea would appear

therefore to carry significance as an indicator of the country's stage of economic development. It is widely believed that developing countries, including Korea and other Asian NICs, which have grown quickly and have undergone rapid economic and social change during the last few decades, no longer really belong to the developing world where the importance of female white-collar workers remains minor<sup>20</sup>. As these countries develop, the number of female white-collar workers increases and their role, domestically and internationally, becomes more important. The number of women working in white-collar office jobs in Korea has expanded dramatically, and this trend is likely to continue as the nation develops further. Yet so far these developments have attracted relatively little academic attention and there is to date limited literature covering the recent changes, the current employment market and the gender relations within it. Perhaps it is now timely and appropriate to bring a little more attention to this relatively ignored group of working women - white-collar employees.

b) In the light of current interest in the field of development and the on-going search for human (and gender) development indicators, the study attempts conceptually to identify non-economic indicators that could help clarify the process of development at the micro level, particularly as it affects women. This is important because investigating the theoretical background to the study may also help fill gaps in the gender and development literature relating to female employment in the developing world, particularly that in Southeast and Far East Asia.

c) The study is also intended to contribute to the literature on female white-collar employment in general - both in the developed and developing world - by analysing how this research in its particular context differs from others, especially those relating to the developed world. Most existing literature on female white-collar workers relates to developed countries, written by their own academics and perhaps reflecting the viewpoints and experiences of the developed West. (e.g. Kanter 1977; McNally 1979; Crompton and Reid 1982; Crompton and Jones 1984; Murolo 1987; Anderson (ed.) 1988; Rogers and Henson 1997; Davies-Netzley 1998; Baxter and



Wright 2000; Wallace 2001). Mohanty (1991) argues that Western feminist scholarship often misleadingly generalises on the basis of a limited perspective, and ignores women's voices from different social groups and regions<sup>21</sup> (see also Momsen and Kinnaired (1993). In spite of common features shared by all women worldwide, gender relations are currently fragmented by race, class, historical and cultural particularity, and individual differences. In this sense, no single explanation or solution can apply to all women everywhere. Instead, it may be more productive to focus on the differences and diversity of women's needs and experiences across disparate cultures, regions and classes when seeking constructive and beneficial insights that would apply to each case in its own special context.

d) This empirical study on Korean female white-collar workers also provides an opportunity to look at the complex matrix of social change in economy and culture as it effects gender relations. It also allows an examination of how and to what extent socio-economic organisations (e.g. chaebol) operate to serve capitalist goals by making use of women, who find themselves caught between two contrasting ideologies - a strongly sex-discriminative Confucian tradition and the less-gendered (or more egalitarian) non-Korean ideology derived from transnational modernisation. This study also provides an opportunity to assess the relevance of traditional culture to such modern socio-economic organisations and the people working in them.

e) Further, the research findings may be able to assist leaders in chaebol and other Korean firms, policy makers in government and non-governmental organisations, and women themselves, to appreciate the reality facing working women by illuminating the problems and challenges they face, and thereby suggest how equal opportunity and a reduction in gender discrimination might be achieved.

f) Finally, although not a primary purpose, the study also attempts to make a contribution to the debate and literature on research methodology for gender studies - which can be sensitive and are in most circumstances difficult to conduct,

especially in a society with little gender awareness or where gender issues are still controversial and discussion of them can be met with hostility.

## 1.8 Thesis Organisation

*Chapter 2* presents an overview of literature on women in the developing world and the impact of their labour participation on the development process in order to provide a theoretical background for the study of female white-collar employment in Korea. A basic understanding of women's general participation in development, as well as their role in white-collar work, is considered essential in forming a proper appreciation of female white-collar employment. *Chapter 3* is divided broadly into two parts, covering the country's economy and national development, and Korean women's labour participation in the development process. Without doubt, the gathering pace of economic industrialisation and modernisation in the post-war period, and particularly during the last few decades, has affected women's life and work. To understand female employment characteristics and patterns it is important not only to consider socio-economic factors but also cultural factors covered in *Chapter 4*, which explores the country's cultural background in order to elucidate the status of contemporary Korean women and gender relations in society. Development and modernisation, most intensively during the last few decades, has transformed both the economic and social life of Korean people; yet despite the onset of industrialisation, modernisation and Westernisation, Confucian influences undeniably still persist in the value systems of the country. Accordingly, the manner whereby Confucian-influenced culture historically has defined women's status and role in society is examined. By considering gender relations in their specific societal context, this examination should help to establish the origins of current gender discourses and explain how women came to assume their present status in society and in the labour force.

The next four chapters focus on chaebol as employers of white-collar labour, and their employees, particularly women. *Chapter 5* presents a descriptive and historical overview of chaebol and encompasses their role in the Korean economy, their

relationship with government and their importance to the national labour force. The chapter also describes the administrative culture that characterises office employment in chaebol, and explains why they were selected as the context of this case study of female employment. *Chapter 6* considers the employment policies and practices of chaebol by examining their general characteristics and features from a gender perspective; the purpose is to explore the manner in which their employment practices are gendered, and to assess the degree to which unequal employment practices and gendered hierarchies are still maintained. In *Chapter 7*, where gender relations at work are considered within the context of work culture, the main factors influencing the perpetuation of gender inequality in the workplace are identified, and the degree to which they are sustained by the existing work culture in chaebol offices is assessed. Apart from overt gender inequality in conditions of employment, subjective gender discrimination also exists and is more difficult to evaluate, yet is no less serious and injurious to the women who experience it. *Chapter 8*, therefore, focuses on women's work experiences and reactions to perceived discrimination by exploring different outcomes offered by female interviewees as to how they adapt and plan their careers and lives. This chapter also attempts an overall evaluation as to whether white-collar employment has served to integrate women into development, or whether it has exacerbated the exploitation of their labour for capitalist ends. The concluding *Chapter 9* presents an overall summary of the enquiry and adjudges, in the light of the research, whether Korean women can be regarded as a fully-equal human resource - whether there appears to be a genuine movement towards gender equality or merely that women are exploited or marginalised as secondary labour supporting employers and the state. In this chapter, I will offer an assessment of the limitations and obstacles hindering equality in employment for women in Korea, and present some suggestions as to how improvements may be introduced.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The term, '*chaebol*', comes from two Chinese characters, meaning "wealthy extended family." (Kim W. 1994:83). Chaebol are generally very large conglomerates, owned and managed by a single family and composed of several firms operating in a wide array of often-unrelated industries (Janelli, 1993:81). See Chapter 5 for further details.

<sup>2</sup> The implication of 'flowers of the office' is also well described by Iwao (1993:156) as "pretty to look at and decorative, but insubstantial and transient", referring to female office workers in Japan which bear similarity in this context to female Korean office employees.

<sup>3</sup> The proportion of females in the labour force rose from 28.6 percent in 1960 to 40.4 percent in 1990. Source: EPB, Population and Housing Census Report, 1960 EPB, Annual Report on the Economically Active Population Survey, 1990. Cited in Chang S. et al. (1991)

<sup>4</sup> Korean authors are designated by using the surname followed by the initial of the given name because of the frequency of relatively few surnames in the country.

<sup>5</sup> GDI (Gender-related Development Index) measures achievement in the same basic capabilities as the HDI (the Human Development Index) but takes note of inequality in achievement between women and men (UNDP 1995). It is measured by share of earned income, life expectancy, adult literacy and combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment in education.

<sup>6</sup> GEM (Gender Empowerment Measure) assesses the extent to which women and men are able actively to participate in economic and political life and take part in decision-making. While the GDI focuses on expansion of capabilities, the GEM is concerned with the use of those capabilities to take advantage of the opportunities of life (UNDP 1995). It is measured by the percentage of women in parliamentary seats, as administrators and managers, professional and technical workers, and also their share of earned income.

<sup>7</sup> According to some other Korean sources, the figures differ somewhat from those quoted by the ILO, indicating a worse outcome: for example, the wage gap was reported as 46.7% in 1985, 58.1% in 1995, and 62.8% in 1999, showing a deteriorating wage differential (Ministry of Labour, *Survey Report on Wage Structure* 1986, 1996; Ministry of labour, *Survey Report on Wage Structure* 2000, cited in KWDI (2000) Annual Statistical Report on Women, Seoul).

<sup>8</sup> Confucianism is sometimes viewed as a religion but it is more accurately considered a philosophy, social ethic and political ideology. It exists alongside the organised religions such as Islam, Christianity, Shintoism, Taoism and Buddhism. It spread to all East Asian countries with the influence of Chinese culture, but nowhere was it more powerful than in Korea during the Yi dynasty. From the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Yi aristocracy (*yangban*) defined itself as the carrier of Confucian values, and the penetration of court politics by Confucianism was unprecedented (Edwards 1992:101).

<sup>9</sup> Interviewee code: the first letter (**f** or **m**) denotes sex; the second indicates occupation (**s** - student, **f** - foreign company employee, **g** - government employee, **w** - housewife, and **b** - own business); a **number** identifies a non-chaebol interviewee (from 52 to 64). See Appendix 1.2 for the codes and profile of non-chaebol interviewees.

\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for working women than for men).

<sup>10</sup> Interviewee code: the first letter (**f** or **m**) denotes sex; the second indicates educational attainment on joining: **h** (high-school leaver) or **u** (university graduate); the **number** identifies the chaebol interviewee (from 1 to 51); a final **m** denotes manager. See Appendix 1.1 for the codes and profile of chaebol interviewees.

\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for working women than for men).

In instances where it is judged to be relevant, the identity of the employer chaebol is indicated after a hyphen with an upper-case postscript followed (where appropriate) by a lower-case letter for the particular affiliate. For example, 'fu10\*-S1a' indicates that the interviewee number 10 was female, university educated, married, and worked in affiliate 'a' of chaebol S1. However, reference to a particular affiliate is rare as in only a few cases is it deemed to be relevant.

<sup>11</sup> According to Foster-Carter (1985:107), in East Asian societies the cultural heritage of Confucianism emphasized the subordination of women as one of the several parallel 'natural' hierarchies: young to old, children to parents, ruled to rulers. He further argues that, although to a degree transformed by socialist revolution in some countries and capitalist industrialisation in others, such norms persist.

<sup>12</sup> In 1999, 13.4 percent of all economically-active women were employed in 'clerical work', the highest category after 'sales and service' (35.1%) and 'elementary occupations' (simple labour work) (15.1%). Source: National Statistical Office, *Annual Report on the Economically Active Population Survey*, 2000, cited in Moon YK. and Joo JS. (2000).

<sup>13</sup> An example of this was the Kim Young-Sam government's strong promotion of both globalisation and gender equality. It had an immediate affect on chaebol's recruitment of female office workers in the mid-1990s: with government encouragement and 'pressure' many leading chaebol (whose 'open-recruitment' was previously intended mainly for male applicants) hired female graduates in increasing numbers.

<sup>14</sup> For example, while 85 percent of large Korean firms (including chaebol) offered equal opportunities for women to apply in open competition without sex-specific recruitment, in smaller companies more than 50 percent of firms either exclusively employed men or found new staff through personal contacts (Park SJ. 1989).

<sup>15</sup> As sometimes claimed in their public image and recruitment literature, chaebol can play an important role in improving sexual equality in employment practices. For example, a quotation in a study (Berman et al. 1995) on cross-cultural issues at Samsung Corporation (a major chaebol) is indicative:

"Samsung is breaking new grounds in Korean society by expanding the roles that women play in the workplace. The group welcomes married women to stay at their jobs by giving them the chance to move up in the organisation. Effort has also been made in ensuring the same remuneration and chances of promotion as male employees enjoy; this guarantees loyalty towards Samsung, thus enhancing the quality concern of workers" (p.9).

Although it will be interesting to determine how genuinely Samsung believes in, and implements, this practice it is certainly true that chaebol have played a leading role in promoting gender-equality practices.

<sup>16</sup> There is no direct and simple dichotomy between globality and national origin. The large Korean chaebols are likely to be both national companies with foreign connectedness, and at the same time decentred global actors who, regardless of national origin, take their mobile resources to the most profitable business location. Nationalism (or localism) and globalism coexist and interact with each other in many forms (Kim YT. 1998:230).

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<sup>17</sup> The qualitative approach was designed to explore the nature of office discourses and gender relations from the perspective of the subjects involved. While the size of the sample may be considered relatively small, and the chaebol were selected primarily on the basis of access, individuals were chosen as far as practicable to provide a balance between sexes, ages, educational background and status, and encompassed a range of occupations in different industries and at different locations.

<sup>18</sup> The Committee for the Promotion of Globalisation was set up by the Kim Young Sam government in 1995 (Kang MK. 2000; Shin KY. 2000). See Chapter 3 for more details.

<sup>19</sup> According to Lim (1983:76), "Patriarchy is the system of male domination and female subordination in economy, society, and culture that has characterised much of human history to the present day. In the economic sphere, it is reflected first in the sexual division of labour within the family, which makes domestic labour the sole preserve of women. Their involvement in production activities outside the home varies with different societies and different stages of development, but is, particularly in those countries where capitalist development has penetrated (Boserup 1970), often accorded inferior status and reward compared to the activities of men."

<sup>20</sup> For example, as far as clerical occupations in the developing world are concerned, in places like India office work is regarded as a 'masculine' occupation and women only fill 6 per cent of all clerical positions; in some more-industrialised countries, for example part of Latin America and Southeast Asia, 30-40 per cent of the clerical labour force is composed of women (Momsen and Townsend 1987).

<sup>21</sup> Mohanty (1991:51) states that,

"Any discussion of the intellectual and political construction of 'third world feminisms' must address itself to two simultaneous projects: the internal critique of hegemonic 'western' feminism, and the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally rounded feminist concerns and strategies. The first project is one of deconstructing and dismantling; the second, one of building and constructing. While these projects appear to be contradictory, the one working negatively and the other positively, unless these two tasks are addressed simultaneously, 'third world' feminism runs the risk of marginalisation or ghettoisation from both mainstream (right and left) and Western feminist discourses."

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS for the Study of Women in Employment**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

In examining the situation of women and their work in the developing world, it is important first to understand the broad economic, political and social context within which these women participate in labour forces to support the industrial growth of their countries. Korean women, like most women in developing countries, have faced challenges arising from these economic and socio-cultural changes and have experienced repercussions affecting their gender roles and status in society. Although their situation is to some extent unique, I believe that Korean working women share certain experiences with women from other parts of the developing world - particularly those engaged in paid employment in countries undergoing recent industrial development. While female white-collar employment in Korea is the main focus of this study, in order to understand how economic development has affected Korean women and their work, and to evaluate the extent to which they have been integrated into the development process, this chapter reviews two major, relevant bodies of literature by way of background: that bearing on i) female labour participation in development, particularly in factory work, and ii) women in white-collar employment (chiefly in developed countries).

The first half of the chapter examines literature on women in development and their labour participation in developing countries. This primarily involves production, rather than white-collar, workers in export-oriented manufacturing industries. This is partly because the conditions of production workers seem to reflect more clearly the impact of development on 'Third World' women (in the sense that it is women on low-incomes, such as production workers, that are usually placed at the margins of society where gendered distribution of wealth and resources affects them more severely), and partly because they have inspired a wider body of

relevant literature for women in the developing world. While examining women's labour participation in manufacturing industries, some of the major debates around women's changing roles and their status in development are discussed. This is important for developing an appropriate framework to elucidate the roles and experiences of Korean working women, not only for production but also white-collar workers.

The second half of the chapter focuses on women in white-collar employment. This begins with a brief examination of the development of white-collar work in selected developed countries traditionally linked with industrialisation and economic advancement, together with their influence on the growth of female white-collar employment. Some controversial implications of bias against female white-collar employment, such as gender-based work allocation and subordinate roles borne by women, will be introduced and discussed. This discussion is intended to assist an understanding of female white-collar employment in general, before addressing female white-collar office employment in Korean chaebol in later chapters. Even though the situation of female white-collar employment in Korea differs from that in more developed countries (arising from its different stage of development and the unique socio-historical context), a general introduction to female white-collar employment in other countries can serve as a useful foundation. Furthermore, an appreciation of female white-collar employment in Korea also requires some basic understanding of female white-collar work in similarly developing countries. Therefore, some newly emerging literature on female white-collar work in such countries will be also examined. While this literature body may not yet be broad enough to offer a systematic comprehension of white-collar employment in the developing world, it still provides some useful insights.



## 2.2 Women's Labour Participation in Development

### **Women in Development**

Orthodox economists and development planners have often assumed that national development increases opportunities for women to participate economically, and that it naturally advances their social status and promotes gender equality. As a result, it was widely accepted that 'what would benefit one section of society (men) would trickle down to the other (women)' – an assumption which has been increasingly acknowledged and criticised by many academics (e.g. Rogers 1980; Jones 1984; Mazza 1987; Brett 1991; Elson 1995; El-Bushra 2000; Nussbaum 2000; Molyneux and Razavi 2002).<sup>1</sup> This can be clearly seen in a brief review of the historical development of the literature on 'women in development' (WID).

In the 1950s and 1960s women's issues in development were subsumed under the question of human rights<sup>2</sup>, and women were viewed as objects to protect or make recommendations for, but not necessarily to consult (Brett 1991). The assumed benefits of development for women have, however, begun to be questioned when, by the late 1960s, some economists had realised that development was not proceeding as smoothly as expected and concerns were raised about the continuing poverty and deprivation of Third World women (Parpart 1993). In this climate, the study of Boserup in 1970, 'Women's Role in Economic Development', arrived as a watershed in thinking about women in development, and called for planners and politicians to recognise and consider women's roles in economic development and take the interests of women fully into account when drawing up development plans (Whitehead 1991; Parpart 1993; Kabeer 1994).<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s, therefore, efforts were made to link women's issues to development for the first time (Beall and Davila 1993). According to Kabeer (1994), the initial implication of Boserup's critique, reinforced by WID<sup>4</sup> advocates and scholars who succeeded her, was to shift attention from 'welfare' to 'equality for women' in the development process.<sup>5</sup> In the 1980s, although there was a growing trend towards viewing women as agents and beneficiaries in all sectors and at all levels of the development process (Brett 1991), women were primarily regarded as agents of social development, whose caring and

nurturing could substitute for expenditure on health, education and social services (Antrobus 1988; Dwyer and Bruce 1988, Elson 1991).<sup>6</sup> In brief, not only have women often been adversely affected by the development process, but their roles in the process have also not been properly addressed by most development planners and workers (Moser 1993; Pearson and Jackson 1998; Fenster 1999).

In recent decades, a growing number of researchers and academics progressively have recognised that, as development has proceeded in Third World countries, its impact on men and women has been different, and that women have not necessarily benefited from it as widely as was expected (e.g. Boserup 1970; Joeke 1987; Sen 1990; Tinker 1990; Elson 1991; Pearson 1992b; Moser 1993; Kabeer 1994; Okin 1995; Roces and Edwards 2000; Rai 2002). As pointed out by Moser (1993), while the so-called 'development industry' had realised that women are essential to the success of the total development effort, it did not necessarily follow that development improved conditions for women. In this context, Joeke (1987:128) also argued,

“Growth has created general employment opportunities from which women have benefited. Yet, their greater participation has also played a significant *causal* role in industrialisation, related to their lesser status and rewards in industrial production than men's. In some regions, industrial development has added to women's income-earning opportunities to an extraordinary degree, but the terms on which they have found employment have been inferior. Therefore, despite the wage income, this new employment for women has not been unequivocally beneficial.”

In summary, as Brett (1991) concludes, there is a wide gap between women's high, yet relatively unrecognised, economic participation and their low political and social power, and that development strategies have usually taken the needs of the most vocal and politically active group as their starting point. Therefore, to understand gender relations at work the activities of men and women need to be addressed separately, and for the successful incorporation of women into the development process their particular needs, status and conditions in society should be considered independently.

Not only should women's concerns and needs in development processes be addressed separately, but the diversity of women's experiences must be

acknowledged. For example, the wide variation in conditions experienced by female export-oriented factory workers in developing countries is determined by many different factors, such as “the type and level of economic development in the country” (Brydon and Chant 1989:13) and “the local labour market conditions, and by the differing needs of employers in different industries” (Lim 1990:108). The development process is, as Beall and Davila (1993) pointed out, not homogeneous but one that varies considerably from one national context to another, and from one decade to the next. Furthermore, this diversity is reflected not only in intra-regional and intra-community differences on the basis of religion, culture and political ideology, but also in significant variations in the status of women according to their position in the class hierarchy (Brydon and Chant 1989; Parpart 1993). For this reason, the approach also acknowledges the need to incorporate race and culture, as well as class and gender, into feminist analysis of development, as Parpart argues (1993:443). For academics and feminists engaged in debate on development, the post-modern focus on differences has offered ammunition to women who felt excluded - by providing a space (or opening up new spaces) that legitimises the search for different voices from different places and experiences.<sup>7</sup>

Acknowledging women's multiple realities, Parpart (ibid.) suggests that the notion of Third World homogeneity, especially for women, can be damaging both to understanding and practice (see also Mohanty 1991; Okin 1995). She accordingly advocates that the goals and aspirations of Third World women should be ‘discovered’ rather than assumed, and strategies for improving their lives should be constructed on the basis of actual experiences and needs. This clearly recognises the relevance and importance of historically and socially-grounded empirical research (Moore 1988): the actual experiences and opinions of participating workers can lead to a better understanding of the complexities and diversity of circumstances faced by them, and used to support, refute or modify academic scholarship and help develop strategies for improvement. This post-modernist approach towards gender issues in development is relevant to my study: since the conditions of women in developing countries are diverse and complex, to understand the situation of women

in Korea it is important to take into consideration their specific socio-economic and cultural environment - which will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

### **Women in Export-oriented Industries in Developing Countries**

In the 1970s and early 1980s, studies of “women and development” led to exploration of the ways in which an increasingly global economy, and its vast movements of capital, labour, and changing technology, posed radical implications for third world women (Freeman 2000:37). One of the most popular areas of research since the mid-1970s relating to women in development has been that bearing on female factory workers in Third World export-oriented industries, particularly women employed by multinational corporations. The reason for the widespread interest in this subject is, according to Lim (1990), the historical coincidence of a growing focus on women's changing roles worldwide combined with the expansion of export manufacturing in Third World developing countries.<sup>8</sup> While women in manufacturing employment are only a small proportion of all women living in the Third World, theirs is an important case study. This, according to Elson and Pearson (1981), is because the provision of jobs for them is often seen as an important way of 'integrating women into the development process'.<sup>9</sup>

Export-led industrialisation, as a key component of national development in Third World countries, has served to mobilise large numbers of women into productive employment. In many of these countries, work in 'world-market factories' producing manufactures for export to rich countries has become accessible to women as a new type of waged employment since the late 1960s (Elson and Pearson 1981). By the 1980s, women constituted about 80 percent of the assembly-processing labour force in export zones throughout the world (Mies 1986); in particular, East Asian assembly plants alone employed half a million women (Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983:16). According to Seager and Olson (1986), high numbers of multinational 'world-market factories'<sup>10</sup>, and a preference for hiring female labour (on account of its relatively low cost), meant that the proportion of female employment in Southeast Asia was among the highest in the Third World. It should also be noted that, where there is a significant amount of export-processing

manufacture, multinational firms often relocate assembly operations to tariff-free production zones - in South East Asia and elsewhere. (see Chapter 3 for a discussion on female production workers in Korea).

There are a number of explanations for this rapid rise in female labour participation in these manufacturing industries. Generally, manufacturing for export has been concentrated in labour-intensive industries, which in all countries tend to be female-intensive. This, according to Lim (1990), is because these industries are sensitive to wage costs<sup>11</sup> and female labour is typically cheaper than equivalent male labour. When women become involved in the production process, 'sexual divisions of labour'<sup>12</sup> and gender differentiation permeate the process and inevitably result in gender inequality. An important consequence of this gender differentiation is what is generally referred to in the literature as women's 'secondary status' in the labour market. Because of their capacity to bear children (Moser 1993) and their relegation to household work, the perceived and actual roles of women in production become secondary to men's (Stichter 1990). Stichter claims that men get the better jobs because they are men, that the jobs that men do are considered more important than those performed by women, and further that there seems to be a general and systematic over-valuation of male attributes and a corresponding under-valuation of female ones (see also Elson and Pearson 1981 for the discussion on women being viewed as 'the bearers of inferior labour'). This secondary status results in rates of pay for women that tend to be lower than those of men doing similar or comparable jobs. Lim (1990:102) also argues that the difficulty of combining factory labour with rearing children also ensures that a labour force is largely unmarried, and therefore young and healthy, with a consequential high turnover and a low average wage, but without jeopardising productivity because of the short learning curve.

The job characteristics of these industries also fit well with the needs and attributes of female workers. A number of studies (e.g. Elson and Pearson 1981; Enloe 1983; Mitter 1986; Stoddard 1987; Lim 1990; Pearson 1998) confirm that production factories of TNCs justify their preference for female labour in terms of qualities that women are assumed to acquire through gender-role socialisation. A tolerance for tedious and monotonous work and manual dexterity (so-called 'nimble

fingers<sup>13</sup>) is considered to suit them for intricate tasks, and a docile nature enables them to withstand the pressure of rapidly-paced, closely-supervised production. According to Lim (1990:102), these readily learned skills, requiring manual dexterity and patience with tedious tasks, that make women appropriate workers have been conditioned by culture and extensive experience with sewing, food processing, and other household tasks. These attributes, internalised by women over years of socialisation within the family, and manifest in docility of behaviour and respect for male authority, are a commonly stated reason for employers preferring to employ women rather than men in export-oriented manufacture, argues Afshar and Agarwal (1989:7).<sup>14</sup>

However, the involvement of Third World women in export-oriented manual work, and particularly their status within it, is subject to some controversy. Much of the discussion has centred on the implications of the new job opportunities for young women: do they gain greater independence; are they exploited; is their traditional patriarchal subordination weakened (e.g. Elson and Pearson 1981, 1989; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Lim 1985, 1990; Mitter 1986; Tiano 1986, 1987, 1994; Pearson 1998; Afshar and Barrientos 1999)? Academics remain divided about the extent to which industrial and economic development assist the integration of women into development, or whether it merely exploits them to the ultimate continuing advantage of a patriarchal capitalist system.

Thus, when it comes to an overall evaluation, the outcomes of industrial development and modernisation for women are neither easy nor simple to elucidate; women's position and status is characterised by the simultaneous existence of positive and negative, exploitative and liberating, features and consequences of capitalist development (Lim 1983). As Elson (1991) suggests, women's lives may be improved or worsened in complex and contradictory ways: the extension to them of the employment marketplace brings new opportunities, but also new risks. It is clear that involvement in economic development does not of itself guarantee a reduction in gender discrimination and an improvement in conditions faced by women. For example, in her study of Javanese factory workers, Wolf (1992:256) argues that it is simply not possible to reduce the situation to a judgement of either

“better” or “worse” for women workers, since the situation is paradoxical and contradictory and must be understood as such. According to her, Javanese factory workers recognise that factory employment is poorly paid, insecure and unfair, yet they are also certain that it has brought them both material and personal benefits that few would give up. The point, as Sklair (1993: ch.8) argues, is that the dilemma bluntly is whether women are better off inside, rather than outside, factories. According to him, it is important to ascertain what alternative work is available to these women; where there is dearth of other job opportunities, female assembly workers do benefit from their employment - however poor their job satisfaction may be. In this regard, Pearson (1998:184) also asserts that “although..... employment for women in export industries is unstable, often short lived and undertaken in exploitative working conditions for lower than subsistence wages, factory work because of its collective nature inevitably provides a location for a different kind of gendered experience, offering the possibility of alternative versions of gender roles and expectations”.

Some academic writers have attempted to postulate an analytical framework to help understand women’s roles and their situation in labour participation in manufacturing work, and to measure the overall impact of development on women. In assessing the outcomes of women’s labour participation in development, Elson and Pearson (1981), for example, identify three tendencies in the relationship between the emergence of factory work and the subordination of women as a gender: a tendency to ‘*intensify*’ the existing forms of gender subordination; a tendency to ‘*decompose*’ them; and a tendency to ‘*recompose*’ new forms of gender subordination<sup>15</sup>. However, they explain that this does not imply that these are mutually exclusive tendencies – as any specific situation might well show signs of all three. According to Elson and Pearson, these are not categories which can be aggregated to produce a uni-dimensional conclusion that the position of women is getting worse or better; rather, they are suggested as ways of analysing particular conjunctions of forces shaping women’s lives, in the hope that this will help clarify the strategic possibilities facing women in those situations (ibid.). This provides a helpful way of observing and categorising the processes and dynamics of the

relationship between women's labour participation in factory work and gender subordination.

Tiano later offers a slightly different approach: while the analytical categories defined by Elson and Pearson focus on the actual process itself and its diverse nature, Tiano places greater emphasis on evaluating the outcome of the process by looking at the resultant positions of working women in the economy and society. In her review of the literature on women's involvement in industrial development in Latin America, Tiano (1986; see also 1987 & 1994:ch.3) subsumed current viewpoints on women's labour participation in development within three contrasting perspectives; which are termed the '*integration*', the '*marginalisation*', and the '*exploitation*' theses. These perspectives employ differing assumptions about the impact of industrial development on women and their households, on patriarchy, and on its relationship to capitalist development.

Tiano's 'exploitation thesis' claims that capitalist industrialisation creates a female proletariat supplying low-wage labour for accumulating capital at minimum cost (Tiano 1986). According to this view, women provide cheap and easily expendable labour because discriminatory hiring practices, sex-segregated labour markets, and inadequate training weaken their position within the labour market. Further, the typically intense competition for scarce jobs keeps wages low and workers docile, while they are often powerless to change their circumstances because women workers rarely organise effective workers' unions. This perspective assumes that Third World women are often central to industrial production but that their involvement is, for them, more harmful than beneficial. Good examples of this stance are, among many others, the works of Fernández-Kelly (1983)<sup>16</sup>, Elson and Pearson (1981)<sup>17</sup>, Mitter (1986)<sup>18</sup>, and Chant and McIlwaine (1995)<sup>19</sup>. Proponents of this exploitation thesis are usually unsatisfied with a relativist approach (e.g. the 'better-than-nothing' approach of the *integration* thesis) and prefer to evaluate export-processing jobs in terms of absolute standards of human fulfilment and economic well-being (Tiano 1986).

While much of the literature describing the nature and consequences of women's participation in assembly-processing industries is consistent with the assumptions of



the '*exploitation* thesis', some others would argue that export processing is a valuable means whereby women can be integrated into national development by incorporating them in modern industry. Advocates of the integration thesis - such as Rosen (1982)<sup>20</sup> and Lim (1981, 1983, 1985, 1990)<sup>21</sup> among others - tend to take a 'better-than-nothing' approach towards export-processing jobs, and view them as superior to other jobs available for women. According to Tiano (1986; see also 1987, 1994), the '*integration* thesis' is based on the belief that industrialisation leads to female liberation and sexual equality by involving women more in fundamental economic and political development. It also assumes that industrialisation, and its attendant cultural and structural changes, involves women more centrally in public life.

Tiano's third category, the '*marginalisation*' thesis, in which capitalist development is seen as making women peripheral to socially-valued roles and resources, maintains that capitalist industrialisation excludes women from productive roles and confines them to the household or to the informal sector (Tiano 1986; 1987; 1994: ch.3). The underlying assumption of this thesis is that capitalist industrialisation isolates women from production and political control and, therefore, despite the ideology of egalitarianism, industrialisation has generally increased women's economic and social marginality (Tiano 1986:159). Writers such as Beneria and Sen (1982)<sup>22</sup> and Scott (1986)<sup>23</sup> have expressed their strong interest in this approach.

These three different perspectives are, however, as Tiano points out, neither mutually exclusive nor entirely distinct: the marginalisation and exploitation theses share some basic assumptions, and although the integration thesis interprets the data differently it describes trends similar to those suggested by the other two perspectives. Even if the different portrayal of these theses may reflect the different personal stance of each author or researcher, it is also likely that they reveal the multiple realities of women's roles and status in the developing world, and the importance of its diversity and complexity, as many would recognise (e.g. Brydon and Chant 1989; Lim 1990; Tinker 1990; Beall and Davila 1993; Parpart 1993; Okin 1995; Pearson and Jackson 1998; Afshar and Barrientos 1999).

So far this chapter has discussed women in development, particularly production workers, in order to illuminate the situation of women in developing countries in general as a useful prelude to considering that of Korean women. Further, the process will assist the generation of a structural framework for evaluating and analysing women's work and gender relations in Korean development. The relevance and applicability of Tiano's analytical model to Korean women in white-collar work will be discussed later in the concluding part of this chapter. The remainder of the chapter reviews academic literature on white-collar working women in developed countries, and developing countries where the services sectors (particularly office work) have been the focus of growing debate about new trends in female employment - such as the impact of new technology on women's work (Mitter 1995). This would provide useful literature relevant to the study of female white-collar workers in Korean chaebol.

## 2.3 Women in White-collar Work

### **White-collar Work**

'White-collar work' is a vague term with a meaning that differs between countries, and even between individual scholars. Indicative of the confusion surrounding the term is the large number of synonyms which it has acquired: 'salaried work', 'office work', 'non-manual work', 'blackcoated work' etc.. However, the definition given by McNally (1979:22) is useful here. She writes,

"The term may broadly be used to distinguish all non-manual occupations from manual ones, connoting differences in working conditions, career prospects, methods of payment, and even orientations to work and towards trade unions. More narrowly, the term may be used as shorthand for all lower and intermediate categories of non-manual work, thus making a further distinction between such groups and professional and managerial employees. According to this meaning, the terms 'white-collar work' and 'clerical work' are interchangeable".

My preference is to use (though loosely) the second, narrower definition since it embraces the overwhelming bulk of general (female) employees in chaebol offices,

the prime subject of this study. The research focuses on chaebol staff who are university graduates, but also covers employees who joined after leaving high school. The high-school leavers (mostly female) are considered lower-grade clerical workers, and engage in such menial tasks as typing, filing, running errands etc. The graduate staff, whose job titles may appear professional but in reality undertake general administrative work, are recruited from university with a general academic degree (perhaps involving some business-related subjects) and then trained by the chaebol for the particular tasks allocated. For the purposes of this study, these graduate employees without special professional qualifications can be regarded as an intermediate category of non-manual worker. This definition, therefore, naturally excludes professional employees (e.g. qualified lawyers, accountants etc.) that have completed specialist training (as distinct from purely academic university studies) and whose work is concerned primarily with their professional field. White-collar office workers in this study thus comprise junior and intermediate-grade clerical and administrative workers in chaebol offices.

The growth of the white-collar labour force is one of the most striking features of the economic and social development of the twentieth century (Bain 1970:11). In a survey of trends in the United Kingdom labour force during the twentieth century, for example, Bain found that between 1911 and 1966 the number of white-collar workers<sup>24</sup> increased by 176 percent, while over the same period the number of manual workers increased by only 5 per cent, having actually decreased in total since 1931. Similarly, in the United States there were in 1870 only 91,000 clerical workers (most of them males) representing 1 percent of the labour force; by 1880 there were 186,000, and by 1890 the number had risen to nearly half-a-million. Almost a century later, in 1982, there were 18.4 million clerical workers, 18.5 percent of the employed labour force - four out of five of them women (Oppenheimer 1985:117). The importance of white-collar workers in developed Western countries is still increasing. This growth is both absolute and relative: not only is the total number of white-collar workers increasing, but so also is the proportion of these workers in the labour force as a whole. For example, while figures vary with definitions used, in the United Kingdom some two-thirds (67.5

percent) of all employees may be considered 'white-collar' by 2002 (*Labour Market Trends*, May 2002). The United States has also reached a point where its white-collar employees far outnumber manual workers (74.1 percent in 2000)<sup>25</sup>. There is every likelihood that this trend will continue, and that white-collar workers will dominate the labour force of developed countries.

The growth of white-collar employment is generally associated with periods of rapid industrialisation and expansion in world commerce. In the United Kingdom, for example, the growth in the scale of manufacturing and commercial enterprise in the second half of the nineteenth century created an enormous demand for workers equipped with clerical skills (McNally 1979:23). As Bain (1970:16) pointed out, the changing occupational structure of any society can be attributed to two fundamental but related causes: technical developments within industries that lead to changes in the type of skills required, and differences in the relative growth rates of industries. The emergence and growth of large corporations also helped to reinforce the increase in size and importance of the white-collar administrative class, as exemplified in the United States (Kanter 1977) and elsewhere.

As white-collar workers have become more numerous, they have played an increasingly important role in the social, political, and economic life of their country. Yet, paradoxically, their value in economic terms and their economic position compared with that of manual workers have become less favourable (Bain 1970:71). In fact, in the social strata of a country the position of white-collar workers has been considered as somewhat ambiguous by many commentators, especially by those who hold a 'new-working-class' view<sup>26</sup>, such as Mills (1951). White-collar workers traditionally have seen themselves as 'privileged' in comparison with blue-collar workers, and this sense of privilege was often considered sufficient reward in itself (Kanter 1993:86). Yet they are often referred to as having 'contradictory status', because of the failure of this social 'middle strata' either to develop an independent political philosophy of its own or to align itself clearly with the bourgeoisie or the proletariat (Oppenheimer 1985:84). Even for Lockwood (1958:14) (who saw the similarities between the clerk and the manual wage earner, both divorced from ownership and control of the means of production,

and considered the former 'proletarian' - using Marxian terminology) the clerk has never been strictly 'proletarian' in terms of income, job security and occupational mobility. As a group, 'black-coated' (i.e. white-collar) workers have, according to Lockwood, enjoyed certain material advantages over manual workers<sup>27</sup> - even though his views may not always be so relevant to present-day conditions.

One of the main adverse characteristics, often discussed in relation to modern white-collar work, of employment in capitalist enterprises is that of the 'deskilling' process. In his work 'Labour and Monopoly Capital' (1974), Braverman argued that the logic of capitalist production is such as inexorably to 'deskill' the labour process - that is, progressively to render most work in capitalist society increasingly routine and fragmented, so that it ultimately requires very little skill on the part of the worker. Even though much of his discussion concerned the deskilling of manual work, he points out that non-manual (particularly clerical) work has also been substantially deskilled. This has, according to him, contributed to the 'proletarianisation' of clerical work - in respect both of the nature of the work and the employment terms and conditions under which it is carried out.

However, although the process of deskilling serves to render non-manual labour relatively homogeneous, it has not become completely so, as Crompton and Jones (1984:2) argue. According to them, the impact of the technical deskilling of clerical work has been significantly moderated (particularly for men) by the fact that the resulting large bureaucracies are characterised by internal labour markets with clear job hierarchies through which individuals with suitable attributes historically have made progress. These writers claim that this process has been overlaid by a gender-based job allocation process which has tended to group women into particular types, and lower levels, of clerical employment. Therefore, unlike Braverman (1974:355) who saw office employees as "an immense mass of *wage-workers*" representing "the creation of a large proletariat in a new form", Crompton and Jones (1984) viewed the 'office proletariat' not as a 'mass' but stratified by age, qualifications and (most particularly) by gender. They also confirmed in their study that the women in their population were concentrated in the lowest clerical grades of non-manual employment: in other words, the ranks of the 'white-collar proletariat' may be said to

be filled largely by women<sup>28</sup>. In their view, despite technological deskilling a bureaucratic career has to date been largely the preserve of men (ibid.:211). They also conclude that, in a very real sense, men *need* women in the office: the male career rests on the continuing subordination of non-manual female workers. That is because the bulk of the deskilled, routine work in the modern office can be carried out by women - most of whom will never receive promotion. As we shall see in later chapters, there is substantial evidence of this in Korean chaebol offices – especially relating to female high-school leavers (see particularly Chapter 7).

### **Women in Offices**

The progressive introduction of women into the white-collar labour force is one of the most noticeable characteristics of labour markets in developed countries. In the United Kingdom, where clerical work was once a small, mainly male occupation until the close of the nineteenth century (Anderson 1976:2), a large and growing number of women today pursue this type of work (see also Anderson 1988). Between 1911 and 1961, not only did the number of female clerical workers increase dramatically, but the proportion of all white-collar jobs occupied by women increased from 29.8 percent to 44.5 percent (Bain 1970:14). According to Braverman (1974:296), by the time of the censuses of 1961 in the United Kingdom and 1960 in the United States, the percentage of women had risen in both countries to about two-thirds. And within only another decade in the United States, three-quarters were women. In the United Kingdom, while 45.0 percent of all employees are female, they represent 38.6 percent of all managerial and professional jobs and 79.5 percent of administrative and secretarial employment (*Labour Market Trends*, May 2002). To provide background and some insight into the present situation of Korean white-collar working women, a brief selection of representative literature relating to female office workers in the United States, United Kingdom and Japan, as well as some developing countries, is summarised and presented.

*The United States*

In his study of the white-collar working class in the United States, Sobel (1989) recognised that the numerical analysis of occupations tended to mask an underlying disproportion in roles between men and women – which seems to confirm the earlier argument advanced by Crompton and Jones (1984). According to him, in spite of the fact that in 1975 white-collar labour appeared numerically to be split exactly 50 percent male and 50 percent female, the upper and lower divisions of white-collar work proved to have unequal gender compositions. For example, the upper white-collar employees were two-thirds (67.7 percent) male, while the lower white-collar workers were almost the same proportion (68.8 percent) female. By 1980, when women represented 53.2 percent of all white-collar workers, the upper-white-collar sector was slightly less male-dominated (63.2 percent), but the lower-white-collar sector was even more dominantly female (71.2 percent). Women continued to move into low-level clerical jobs, which were 80.1 percent female at the time of his research in 1989. Sobel (ibid.:51) concluded by suggesting that a proxy for gender relations in offices was to consider ‘upper white-collar’ as representing males and ‘lower white-collar’ representing females.

This concentration of women in the lower strata of the labour market can better be understood in the context of dual labour market theory which evolved from post-Fordist *flexible specialisation*<sup>29</sup> (see Sabel 1982; Piore and Sabel 1984). In a ‘dual labour market’ there is a relatively advantaged *primary* type of employment and a correspondingly disadvantaged *secondary* type of work and employment (see Berger and Piore 1980; Piore and Sabel 1984). The primary sector is characterised by good working conditions and pay levels, fair treatment and opportunities for advancement and, especially, stability of employment. This sector is usually occupied by ‘core’ employees (such as skilled workers and managers) who are permanently employed, flexible in the work they do and willing to be retrained and re-allocated within the internal labour market as required. Secondary sector workers, on the other hand, are worse off in all these respects and their employment is considered less secure and prone to high turnover. This secondary labour force tends to comprise workers who are easily dispensable, possess clearly visible social

differences, are little interested in training or gaining high economic reward and rarely organise themselves collectively. These 'peripheral' workers often undertake clerical, assembly, junior supervisory or testing jobs requiring skills easily met from the external labour market (Watson 1995:348-9; see also Christopherson 1987; Hakim 1990). Companies and organisations tend in time to restructure their staff into core and peripheral groups, with the former representing the most skilled and functionally-flexible labour, while the latter provides some degree of numerical and financial flexibility (Atkinson and Meager 1986; Grint 1998:305). The search for 'flexibility' has encouraged the trend towards increasing casualisation of work and suggests that the composition of the 'peripheral' workforce will be maintained (Broadbent 2003:29; see also Piore and Sabel 1984).

Although this development has its root in market forces, the allocation of workers into the different sectors is clearly social and cultural. Factors such as socially-influenced low expectations, and discrimination against women (as well as youths, coloured and immigrant workers) determine that secondary labour disproportionately comprises workers in these categories (Piore 1979; Watson 1995:185-7). Most relevant to this study, women often seem concentrated in the secondary, peripheral labour force, and remain marginalised in low paying, low status positions. In summary, in the global economy a dual labour market has developed that takes advantage of the existing gender hierarchy in society to marginalize women for capitalist interests. The following two studies, covering a significant time span, clearly illustrate the gendered white-collar job sector, where women are concentrated in a peripheral workforce as lower graded clerical workers rather than core employees.

Murolo's study (1987) of the Aetna Life Insurance Company's headquarters office in the United States during 1910-1930 provided an insight into the rationalising of a labour force accompanied by the feminisation of its lower grades. She explained that, like most large clerical employers, Aetna Life hired women to fill the routine jobs created when skilled work was separated from simple, repetitive operations: jobs requiring the exercise of judgement in decision-making remained the province of men. She further argued that the study of changing labour systems at



her research site showed that it was the managerial drive to minimise labour costs (and not that to achieve technological innovation) which provided the engine for rationalisation and the concomitant creation of a gender-divided work force. According to her, women were still concentrated in the most routine jobs at the time of her study, although the titles and content of these jobs had changed with computerisation.

A similar argument was also made by Kanter (1977, 1993) when describing a case study in a large corporation, Indsco.<sup>30</sup> Kanter suggested that, while both men and women worked together in such an organisation, their respective experiences were shaped by their very different numerical distribution across administrative positions. According to her, even though the development of modern administration brought women to pre-eminence in the office, it seemed to have excluded them from management: in the 1970s, women worked in most corporate offices in one role only - as clerical labour. By the 1990s, occupational barriers had been reduced and women were represented in nearly every department in the company, even up to 'senior officer'. Yet most of the corporation's white-collar women employees were still where they had always been: in the clerical ranks (Kanter 1993:312). Kanter (1993) further added that, while management was being defined as a 'masculine' pursuit, more of the routine office chores were being 'feminised': office work was acceptable, in that women emphasised their femininity rather than their skills and saw it as clearly subordinate to the ultimate goal of marriage. She concluded from her studies that sex polarisation and sex segregation of occupations was a fact of the American work world.

### *The United Kingdom*

The situation in the United Kingdom appears to differ little from that in the United States, also displaying the sex stereotyping of office jobs<sup>31</sup>, a high degree of sex segregation<sup>32</sup> and a disproportionate concentration of women in lower levels of the organisation (Hakim 1979, 1992; Murgatroyd 1982; Walby 1986, 1989, 1990, 1997; Bradley 1989; Crompton and Sanderson 1990; Corcoran-Nantes and Roberts 1995; Pierce 1995; Crompton 1997; Hatt 1997; McDowell 1997; Mitter 1997). Employers

are keen to hire more women as cheaper, flexible and easily-manageable labour for their lower-grade clerical jobs (Holcombe 1973; Anderson 1976; Hakim 1979; Crompton 1997; McDowell 1997; Walby 1997). Walby (1989, 1990) also points out two distinct patriarchal strategies operating in paid work: exclusion, aimed at totally denying women access to an occupation or paid work, and segregation, involving the separation of women's work from men's work and grading it differently in terms of remuneration and status. In contrast to the considerable hostility among male clerks towards the initial introduction of women to clerical jobs in the nineteenth century,<sup>33</sup> the resistance to women's employment since World War II has been less trenchant and also less effective (Walby 1986). Walby (ibid.:241) explains the reasoning: "the patriarchal aspect of union strategy was now, not to demand the total exclusion of women from paid work, but instead merely to ensure that men continued to retain the higher-graded positions, or rather that men's work should continue to be graded higher than women's". Unlike in the nineteenth century when clerical work was a male occupation, during the twentieth century it has become essentially a female enclave (Hatt 1997). According to Hatt (ibid.:66), whilst the content of men's and women's jobs has changed, men are usually concentrated in the higher paid and higher status jobs while women's work is usually considered to be low skilled and commanding a lower wage rate.

Further, the gender segregation in white-collar jobs has adapted to new technology and carried over to the newly-computerised office (Oppenheimer 1985; Webster 1990; Cassell 1991; Crompton 1997; Hatt 1997; Mitter 1997). Men maintain a monopoly over the better-paid and more skilled computer jobs, just as they did over managerial jobs in the old-style office, while women find themselves once again locked into lower-level jobs. Oppenheimer (1985:122) argues that sex stereotyping at work, which has developed over time, is reinforced by economic pressures to keep wages in these relatively labour-intensive fields low. According to him, discriminatory practices against women designed to keep their labour cheaper than that of men (even in similar or identical jobs) are, therefore, 'functional' to the prosperity of a particular firm or agency. Further, these practices not only involve personal discrimination but also are institutionalised and relate to longer-term

structural factors, such as differences in socialisation, education, career training, and social expectations (including the possibility of career interruption to bear children) (ibid.:120).

More recently, the situation seems in essence to be little changed. According to Corcoran-Nantes and Roberts (1995), while women represented an increased proportion of staff in all the five firms studied, those in core occupations tended to be doing relatively peripheral jobs, and those having core jobs in core occupations tended to be in more junior grades. They further argued that the companies, rather than widening their recruitment, were becoming more selective, that upward career progression for women was becoming more difficult, and that these trends were tending to reinforce rather than break down the peripheralisation of women. Taking the British banking sector as an example, Crompton (1997) also shows that the nature of employer demand and a history of both indirect and explicit masculine exclusionary practices have served to create a labour force that is typically gendered: women carry out low-level clerical work, men act in supervisory and managerial positions. She further claims that the employment situation of women in the British clearing banks has been shaped by the employers' need for a particular kind of labour (low-level clerical work), and maintained by a series of organisational rules and practices which served to keep women out of higher-level positions (Crompton 1997:111). McDowell's (1997) study of merchant banks also shows a gendered career progression, with women at a disadvantage even when more highly qualified – although there were some 'exceptional' women who successfully broke through the 'glass ceiling' that traps other women. McDowell further argues that men and women do not come to work with fixed gender attributes but rather conform to or transgress expected patterns of behaviour in a particular cultural milieu and physical setting.

As Hakim suggests (1996), reviews of post-war trends repeatedly show an intensified segregation of women into lower-grade, low-paid jobs, in spite of an enormous growth in their participation in the labour force. Walby (1997) also shares a similar view by pointing out that recent waves of industrial restructuring in the United Kingdom embody newer forms of patriarchal conditions of employment<sup>34</sup> -

which are less exclusionary, allow women greater access to employment, and have led to a major increase in the proportion of top jobs occupied by women - but that significant sex segregation in employment still remains. Women's jobs remain concentrated in a limited number of occupational and industrial classifications, relatively distinct from those in which men are employed (Hartmann 1976; Cockburn 1983; Walby 1988, 1990, 1997; Jill and Collette 1993). The segregation of women from men in employment, Walby (1997) concludes, is a major factor that potentially limits the significance for gender equality of the increase in women's employment.

In summary, the system of gender relations has been changing, from one which was based on women being largely confined to the domestic sphere to one in which women are present in the public domain, leading to significantly increased opportunities. However, the diversity between women, and the complicated development of new forms of inequality, ensures that they are still frequently segregated into unequal positions (Walby 1997). There is thus no reason to expect any significant social and economic alteration from post-war changes in female employment patterns – from this rise in 'secondary earners'<sup>35</sup> (Hakim 1996). As Hakim (ibid.:82) concludes, "the sexual division of labour did not die but was simply regenerated in its modern form"<sup>36</sup>.

### *Japan*

Considered as the closest Asian counterpart of Western developed countries, Japan further confirms this propensity towards sexual segregation in offices and concentration of women in lower-graded jobs, according to the work of many academics (e.g. Carter and Dilatush 1976; Lebra 1984; Condon 1985; Shiga 1987; Carney and O'Kelly 1990; Saso 1990; Lam 1990, 1992, 1993; Iwao 1993; Shinotsuka 1994; Makoto 1996; Ogasawara 1998, 2001; Brinton 2001; Broadbent 2003). When Japanese think of a working woman in the office, according to Condon (1985:211), the first image that springs to mind is that of a young, single, pretty, and uniformed 'OL' (office lady), a term that was coined in the early 1960s to describe a member of that legion of female office workers who answer the phone, greet

customers and pour tea (for a detailed discussion of OLs, see also Carter and Dilatush 1976; Ogasawara 1998, 2001). Carter and Dilatush (1976:76) also explained that OLs in the early 1970s were temporary members of a growing work force of women who contributed in large numbers to the Japanese economy, and whose work allowed them to continue to be 'ladies' (and dutiful daughters and suitable wives), and whose cost to their employer was low. According to them, all of these OLs had several characteristics in common. First, they received extremely low pay in comparison to male office workers, and were denied access to the higher supervisory positions open to men. Second, they were expected as part of their work to serve tea and perform other 'womanly' duties that made working conditions pleasant for their male co-workers. Third, they were providing an important yet inexpensive supply of labour for an economy that had been booming (until recently) since the end of World War II. Finally, it was made clear to them, both directly and indirectly, that while their work was necessary in modern Japan their primary and most important role was still, as it always had been, to care for their households, husbands and children. Most of these OLs appeared to have accepted this last 'condition of work' as a fact of life and 'the way it should be' (Carter and Dilatush 1976:76).

With more women now continuing to work even after marriage, Iwao (1993:160) claims that females in Japanese offices today are no longer insignificant, transient 'flowers of the office'. More women now tend to work in the same company for at least ten years,<sup>37</sup> and the average age of working women is also rising<sup>38</sup>. Yet, there still remains a large earnings gap between men and women: a comparison of monthly salaries of workers in general shows that Japanese women earn only 61 yen to each 100 yen for men (in 1990). Further, men occupy more senior jobs than women: the proportion of working women in general who are in managerial posts is only 5 percent, whereas that of men is 29 percent (ibid.:190). Iwao further argues that, for women who work for an extended period in the same company, promotion is definitely a matter of concern. However, due to the close relationship between promotion and continuous service in Japanese corporations, those women who drop out of the work force temporarily (e.g. to have children) and then return to the same

company, know from their restart that there is little likelihood of attaining promotion, and consequently do not expect it (p191). Broadbent (2003:14) also confirms this tendency by pointing out that the emphasis on continuity in 'lifetime' employment disadvantages women, since employment for many Japanese women involves, in some combination, interruptions for marriage, childbirth and child or dependant care. She proceeds to argue that 'lifetime' employment in Japan is predicated on a valorisation of male work patterns: paid jobs performed by men are seen as essential and male full-time workers are regarded as the 'core' workforce. Women, on the other hand, are consistently considered unable to become workers in the same way because they remain responsible for providing domestic services (ibid.:12).

Acker (1998) argues that core Japanese organisations have always excluded women from lifetime, high-wage, employment, while using them as a flexible auxiliary labour force (for the use of women as a flexible, temporary workforce see also Shiga 1987; Brinton 2001:31). This tendency is further confirmed by Ogasawara's (1998) recent work which shows that most OLs are excluded from the benefits of the internal labour market enjoyed by men and also from the opportunity of upward mobility. It is therefore not surprising to find that this results in women being less concerned about their performance or the impression they make with their bosses, and leaves them largely indifferent to organisational hierarchy and with an intention to remain working only until marriage (ibid.). As Broadbent (2003:33) summarizes, in Japan women's labour is used to adjust employment as a 'peripheral' workforce (see Chalmers 1989, for the peripheral workforce in Japan). When the separation of roles inherent in the gendered division of labour is combined with Japanese employment culture, which emphasises continuity, women's labour is marginalised (ibid.). In brief, Japanese women have been viewed by large employers primarily as a 'reserve army of labour', not a reservoir of managerial potential (Brinton 2001:31).<sup>39</sup>

While two of these national examples (the United States and the United Kingdom) may suggest how work practice operates in developed countries (even though they may differ in some respects from other parts of the developed world),

the example of Japan is particularly pertinent for considering female employment in Korea. Although Japan and Korea are in economic terms at different developmental stages, and clearly have their own distinctive socio-cultural character, it is also true that they are profoundly influenced by each other due to geographic proximity and shared cultural heritage – not the least of which is their China-derived Confucianism (Brinton 2001). Furthermore, the Japanese colonisation of Korea for 36 years in the early twentieth century (see the following chapter) and the socio-economic influences in recent decades have affected Korea in many ways, including aspects of its business culture and the way social organisations are structured and administered.

Song BN. (1997:189-200) suggests that while the Korean management style appears to lie between the Japanese and American approaches, in many ways Koreans are closer to Japanese than to Westerners in terms of race, culture, values, and social institutions. Examples of this include Korean chaebol (conglomerates) which are often compared with Japanese *Zaibatsu* (see Chapter 5), the tradition of ‘lifetime’ employment (though weaker in Korea – see Chapter 5), and strong individual loyalty that has long been prevalent in both countries - although in Korea it is more to a particular individual, while in Japan it is more to the organisation and a commitment to collective goals (see Whitley 1991; and Chapter 5). Another example of an organisational practice shared by both countries is their adoption of two distinct career paths for white-collar workers: new recruits in chaebol are allocated either to a ‘general’ or a ‘clerical’ track - analogous to internal labour markets<sup>40</sup> and ‘non-career’ tracks in Japan (Lee and Hirata 2001:101). Job descriptions for the former include planning and managerial (as well as clerical) tasks, whereas the latter is restricted to clerical work and assistant tasks (ibid.). Under this practice women (particularly those without a university degree) often find themselves in ‘clerical’, ‘non-career’ tracks where they hold junior positions as ‘flowers of the office’. Although brief, this review would suggest that employment practices in Japan can offer useful insights into the experiences of female office employees in Korea.

*Developing Countries*

Although Third World countries have increasingly become important producers of commodity goods and parts in labour intensive industries, the white-collar strata (including management and research) of industrial interests have remained largely the preserve of “core” or industrialised nations (Freeman 2000). As a result, the academic literature on women in white-collar employment in developing countries is, by comparison, rather limited with a shorter history and a comparatively new academic interest in the subject. More recently, however, as more women enter the skilled labour market, there has been a growing body of literature on women working in white-collar sectors. Some of the issues covered relate to the emerging trend of new technology employment in the wake of computerisation, as in developed countries (e.g. Lai 1987; Ng 1987, 1999; Ng and Yong 1995; Gaio 1995; Gothoskar 1995; Odedra-Straub 1995; Mitter and Rowbotham 1995; Freeman 2000). The impact of computer automation and the approach of the “paperless office” has received increasing attention as technological advancements in telecommunications coupled with rapid changes in both local and global economies have presented new labour processes, recruitment patterns, and the reorganisation of work itself (Freeman 2000:44). The trends may be diverse: the stage of socio-economic and political development of each society and the pre-existing division of labour are important mediators of how information technology (IT) and its different stages are implemented (Ng 1999:139).

The introduction of computer-based technology to clerical work can reinforce women’s skills and give them new opportunities to enhance human skills, or diminish them (Goodman 1987:80). In this environment, feminist writers point to a new dimension in the engendering process of new technology which has led to a gender polarisation of skills (Ng 1999:120; see also Webster 1990). For example, Gothoskar’s (1995) study of information processing jobs in the banking sector in Bombay found that, despite the numerical increase, women’s jobs were still concentrated at the clerical level, with the general picture changing only very slowly.<sup>41</sup> However, Ng’s (1999) research on office workers in IT-using companies in Malaysia reveals a slightly different picture. While the clerical workforce was



slowly becoming feminised and lower-level data entry operators were usually female, women (as systems analysts and programmers) are also gradually entering middle-level professional and management positions in the Malaysian IT and telecommunications industries (Ng 1999:165). This study further suggests that women have been the major beneficiaries of new computer-related white-collar jobs (see also Ng and Yong 1995). In Singapore, also, the expansion of those economic sectors reliant on new technology has created additional job opportunities for women in office work, albeit requiring new skills (Lai 1987) (see Goodman 1987 for the implications of computerisation and microelectronics on women's employment in South-east Asia).

While office work in the developing world may mirror similar trends in industrialised countries, there are also new initiatives particular to the former, such as hosting subcontracted office services for high-waged developed countries. In this 'offshore office work', third world women are often employed to enter data at a fraction of the cost of comparable labour in developed countries; Pearson (1995:278-9) quotes the instance of data inputting by well-educated Caribbean workers earning less than one sixth of their American counterparts.

With this type of expansion of white-collar sectors in the developing world, new concepts relating to women's involvement have emerged. Worth mentioning here is so-called 'pink collar' work. Freeman's (2000) work on informatics in Barbados defines 'pink-collar' work as repetitive, manual labour carried out in an office environment. Her work explores the emergence of the "global assembly line" and its recent incorporation of clerical work as a feminised, proletarianised "pink-collar" sector.<sup>42</sup> The nature of the labour process in the offshore industry of informatics and the symbolic power of computer-based open offices introduces a blurred boundary between what we once described as mental, white-collar work and manual, blue-collar work. This feminised arena introduces a number of wrinkles to traditional ways of interpreting class. The very name "pink collar" is an explicit acknowledgement of the gendered, and in particular feminine, construction of this new sector (Freeman 2000:229).

In summary, while the gendered practices of white-collar office work in developing countries tends to reflect those of developed countries, there are also some extra factors associated with the particular economic and socio-cultural climate of the country and its position in the global economy (see Pearson 2000; Pettman 2003). Although the introduction of new technology has universally influenced women's labour participation, particular experiences of women in the developing world may differ importantly from those in developed countries: an example being the recent phenomenon of outsourced services providing Third World women employment in a 'pink-collar' sector. It is clear that office work for women in the developing world is a rapidly-expanding arena, the implications of which have yet to be fully understood and appreciated in their own social context rather than presumed from the developed world experience.

## 2.4 Conclusion

The first part of the chapter introduced the roles and status of Third World women whose labour, particularly in fast-growing export-processing industries, vitally contributed to their countries' economic development. While the economic benefits for women of this participation in employment are often acknowledged, it remains questionable whether it has furthered gender equality. In this context, a review of current academic debate on the subject of the labour participation of female production workers was presented. In particular, Tiano's three theses bearing on the impact of economic development on participating women were introduced to foster a discussion as to whether their labour involvement has led to women being integrated into, or exploited or marginalised, by the development process.

The second half of the chapter focused on the increasing participation of women in white-collar office employment in developed countries, particularly the United States, the United Kingdom and Japan. In discussing the growing numerical importance of women in clerical occupations, it was recognised that technical advances, coupled with progressive deskilling of white-collar work, have served to maintain gender discrimination and the often-peripheral role of women in

employment. While these countries differ in the specific roles that women are expected (and allowed) to follow, they share some common features in that, although their participation in paid employment has improved their status in the labour market, it still remains largely peripheral. Gender segregation remains common and women usually occupy lower-grade, lower-paid jobs with fewer opportunities for promotion. In each of these countries, more advanced and with an assumed gender equality more progressive than in the developing world, women still suffer discrimination at work and their roles often remain secondary to that of men. The additional consideration, albeit brief, of literature on developing countries confirms the existence of gendered practices in office work, yet also reveals some new effects specific to their socio-economic position in the global marketplace. This literature review has contributed to a broader understanding of experiences of women in white-collar work and provides useful and parallel insights for the study of female white-collar employment in Korea.

Women have clearly played a significant role in the growth of new capitalism worldwide, both in blue-collar manufacturing work and white-collar clerical work. Their labour participation has undeniably brought some improvement in their roles and status in society, yet it reveals uneven and intermittent progress towards gender equality. Their increased economic participation, both in developing and developed countries, is too often characterised by low socio-political power, a questionable degree of integration into development and a status in the labour market which is frequently 'peripheral' or 'marginalised', yielding a wage gap and gender hierarchy in the organisation. The examination of this literature, even before undertaking the case study, suggested a rather negative perspective for working women in Korea, a country developing economically but also retaining a strong traditional patriarchal culture (see Chapter 4). However, the actual extent to which women experience discrimination at work, and the effect on them of the country's development process and unique cultural tradition, need to be further investigated. For this task, this review of literature assists in developing an analytical framework for the study of white-collar women in Korean chaebol.

Since my study focuses on the changes in gender relations within the white-collar sector of a rapidly-developing country, I was initially seeking a framework with a developmental context. However, unlike that covering factory work, the existing literature on white-collar work overwhelmingly relates to the developed world and does not offer a satisfactory framework for evaluating white-collar women's work in developing countries. Therefore, while the nature of gendered work practices (such as women's exclusion from the workplace, gender segmentation and segregation, unequal power and low pay etc.) may resemble those in developed countries, and which consequently may provide some insight, the broad framework for appraising white-collar women in rapidly-developing Korea is adapted from studies of factory work in developing countries.

For the analytical framework of this study, the context of development took priority over the nature of white-collar work. In this respect, Tiano's theses make a good starting point, although they were formed with factory workers in mind. My contention is that their perspectives not only provide a useful analytical model for understanding the impact of economic development on female factory workers, but that they can be extended to encompass other categories of female workers within a developmental capitalist context. Tiano's theses, therefore, offer a suitable structural framework within which the experiences of Korean women in the white-collar sector can be studied and evaluated.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jones (1984:6), for example, claims that “it may be true that women’s status in Southeast and East Asian societies is a generally subordinate one, and that elements of this subordination are present in the development strategies being pursued; but most planners undoubtedly perceive their strategies as benefiting women as well as men in both the short and longer run”.

<sup>2</sup> The principle of equality of men and women was recognised in both the UN Charter in 1945 and the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

<sup>3</sup> Boserup (1970) argued that development schemes had often deprived Third World women of economic opportunities and status, rather than improving their lives, by proving empirically that women in the developing world (particularly women in rural Africa, Asia and South America) had not benefited from whatever development had taken place in those areas.

<sup>4</sup> The declaration of the International Decade for Women (1976–1985), with the official themes of equality, peace and development, signified the new visibility of Women in Development (WID) in international forums (Kabeer 1994:4). WID emerged in the 1970s, not because women had been totally ignored by policymakers in the first decades of development, but rather because they had been brought into development policy on very sex-specific terms. In other words, while men entered the policy process as household heads and productive agents, women were viewed primarily in their capacity as housewives, mothers and ‘at-risk reproducers’ (Jaquette and Staudt 1988). Consequently, mainstream ‘development’ efforts were targeted mainly at the male population, while women were relegated to the more marginal ‘welfare’ sector (Kabeer 1994:5).

<sup>5</sup> In fact Boserup’s work, as Kabeer claimed, helped launch a wave of new feminist scholarship on WID. The United Nations’ Decade for Women (1976–85) also stimulated WID literature (Moser 1993; Charlton et al. 1989; Beall and Davila 1993), playing a crucial part in highlighting the important, but often previously invisible, role of women in the social and economic development of Third World countries, while also drawing attention to the particular plight of low-income women (Elson 1991; Moser 1993:2). Issues relating to women and their role in the development process have now become more central to feminist movements and important feminist debate. Because gender inequities and inequalities are increasingly regarded as a matter of conscience, concerns about gender issues progressively impact on development, as Brett (1991) argues.

<sup>6</sup> The significant shift from the previous WID approach to a ‘gender and development’ (GAD) approach also began in this decade (Moser 1993; Beall and Davila 1993; Young 1997; El-Bushra 2000; Rai 2002; Bhavnani et al. 2003). While the WID approach viewed the absence of reference to women in development plans and policies as the major problem, the GAD approach regarded unequal social relations between men and women, and their ‘naturalisation’, as the major problem (Rai 2002). According to Moser (1993:3), the WID approach focuses mainly on women in isolation, promoting measures such as access to credit and employment as the means by which women can be better integrated into the development process, whereas the GAD approach emphasizes a focus on gender relations when designing measures to ‘help’ women in the development process, while insisting that women cannot be viewed in isolation. As a result, their focus has altered from “women” in WID to “socially constructed, endorsed and maintained relations between women and men, with special focus on the subordination of women” with a goal of “equitable development with both women and men as full participants in decision-making” in GAD (Rai 2002:72).

<sup>7</sup> Building on the WID/GAD debates but extending them in different directions, the postmodernist feminist critique of development emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Rai 2002). Rai (*ibid.*:p75) explains the significance of the post-modern approach as follows:

“The growing acknowledgement of the fact that state-based strategies of development were not working, and that international agencies remained concerned with rather narrow development agendas, led to disillusionment with ‘the project of development’ itself. Within this ‘post-development’ framework ‘reason’ and determinacy were questioned, and a more diffuse sense of power relations discovered by focusing not on binaries of western philosophy but on the multiple differences that we live with and within.”

<sup>8</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, improved telecommunication system and transport facilities encouraged transnational companies to relocate a considerable number of manufacturing jobs, especially in textiles, clothing and electronics, to countries where wages were low and where there was a plentiful supply of young women workers (Mitter 1986). Within a decade or so, several million women workers were employed in manufacturing for export. This new form of employment gave women in the developing world recognition as an important industrial workforce, and a visibility they did not receive while working in small-scale or home-based units, broadly and vaguely defined as the informal sector (Mitter 1995:24).

<sup>9</sup> A requirement which emerged from the United Nations Conference of the International Women's Year in 1975 under the tutelage of various international development agencies.

<sup>10</sup> Plants that are 100 percent foreign-owned and specialise in assembly for export (*ibid.*)

<sup>11</sup> Since labour-intensive industries tend to have low capital requirements, relatively simple technologies and low skill content, barriers to entry are low. Even in developed countries, they are highly competitive industries with low profit margins which exert continuous pressure on production costs and especially on wages, reinforcing the necessity of employing cheap female labour (*ibid.*).

<sup>12</sup> When capitalism fuelled the recent industrialisation in some parts of the developing world, the gradual establishment of the wage labour system and the emergence of the nuclear family system (and separation of home and workplace) also took place, with the emergence of an ‘ideology of familialism’ (Eviota 1992:14) – as it did in the developed world. This ideology, according to Eviota (*ibid.*), involved assigning appropriate roles for women and men within and outside the household. In this process men, as heads of households, were deemed the primary wagedworkers, while the same process extended women’s procreative functions to responsibility for the home and the reproductive role; home became ‘women’s place’. Therefore, in capitalism, an ideology of gender was central to the division of labour and the reproduction of labour-power, and it is capitalism that encouraged strict sexual divisions of labour.

<sup>13</sup> See Elson and Pearson 1981, 1989; Elson 1983; Stichter 1990; Moser 1993; Pearson 1998.

<sup>14</sup> However, it is worth mentioning some challenging views on this issue. For example, as Sklair (1993) points out in his investigation of the maquila industry in Mexico, women do not necessarily have a monopoly of so-called ‘feminised’ characteristics (docility, undemanding, ‘nimble fingers’) considered suitable for production-line assembly work. He shows that men are increasingly being hired for this work at the same low wage rates paid to women (although he suspects that an employer cartel in some centres is partially responsible for keeping wage rates low in the face of a shortage of labour). He points out that men are just as likely to be similarly dexterous, although they are less likely to have been trained to sew when young – by tradition a skill attractive to early export-oriented manufacturing which was often textile related. Similarly, he argues that women are not necessarily more docile or less demanding than men.

<sup>15</sup> While there is a tendency for some existing forms of gender subordination (such as the control of fathers and brothers over the life-styles of young women) to ‘decompose’, there is also a tendency of

new forms of gender subordination to 'recompose', both through the recomposition of gender ascriptive relations in new forms, and through relations which are not intrinsically gendered becoming bearers of gender. Indeed, the decomposition tendency itself helps to strengthen the recomposition tendency (Elson and Pearson 1981).

<sup>16</sup> Tiano takes the work of Fernández-Kelly (1983) as one of the good expository examples of this category, arguing that Fernández-Kelly considers that the 'maquiladoras' programme contributes to their economic exploitation and structural oppression rather than being a source of women's liberation and gender equality (Tiano 1986:163-4).

<sup>17</sup> The work of Elson and Pearson (1981) would also be popular with this group, as they "see patriarchy and gender subordination as crucial underpinnings and inevitable consequences of all capitalism refuse to recognize any benefits to women in the Third World from employment in export factories, insisting that such employment intensifies rather than alleviates the gender subordination" (Lim 1990:116). However, they have since re-evaluated their initial position on the issue, appreciating the benefits of factory work on women for the potentially liberating implications of collective action in the public sphere (see Pearson 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Mitter (1986) points out that the changing gender structure of employment (both in European and non-European countries) reveals that the TNCs now deliberately recruit female workers, in whom they see the promise of 'subservience, obedience and punctuality', and argues that in their search for this ideal labour force the global corporations have created a new female proletariat located in virtually all regions of the world.

<sup>19</sup> Chant and McIlwaine (1995) believe that women's overall status, both in their own society and internationally, remains determined by continuing patriarchal relations and capitalist exploitation, even though they may gain minor improvements, mainly at the micro-level of personal and family life.

<sup>20</sup> As a typical example of this stance, Tiano (p160) cites Rosen's work (1982) of family change in Brazil which showed that industrialisation increases gender equality by bringing women into the labour force and supporting an egalitarian, achievement-oriented ideology.

<sup>21</sup> The works of Lim (1981, 1983, 1985, 1990) may, in my view, fall into this category. Lim (1983, 1990), while being fully aware of the exploitative nature of industrial development on women (see 1985:2), suggests that the expansion of employment opportunities for women in the developing countries does improve conditions for them in the labour market. In her view, it does this by generating more income, with shorter working hours and better working conditions, than traditional housework, home-based work, or unpaid family labour, even though it may be inferior by standards in developed countries. She argues further that, in however limited a way, the availability of jobs in multinational and local export-oriented factories does allow women to escape the confines of the home, delay marriage and childbearing, increase incomes and consumption levels, improve mobility, expand individual choice, and exercise personal independence. She concludes that capitalism cannot wipe out patriarchy, yet exploitation in capitalist enterprises can provide some women with at least a temporary escape from traditional patriarchal social relations. In this context, she argues that development can provide opportunities for women to improve their economic lot, and that of their families, and may help them to overcome some oppressive aspects of traditional social relations (Lim 1983, 1985).

<sup>22</sup> Beneria and Sen (1982:161) argue that the problems of Third World women do not arise from a lack of integration into the development process: on the contrary, the masses of Third World women are indeed integrated into that process, but at the bottom of an inherently hierarchical and contradictory structure of production. This view suggests that women in development have been marginalised in their participation in the process and have become peripheral in society.

<sup>23</sup> At this point, it is worth noting Scott's own elucidation of the 'female marginalisation thesis' (1986) which seems to share certain aspects of this perspective. To Scott (1986:653-4), marginalisation encompasses a range of particular elements which she itemises as follows: i) exclusion from productive employment; ii) concentration on the margins of the labour market; iii) feminisation or segregation; and iv) economic inequality. In brief, she argues that as capitalist economic development proceeds women are progressively squeezed out of production, and that when they do work they are confined to peripheral, low-prestige sectors or to occupational segments where the workforce is predominantly female. Moreover, the benefits accruing to women from their employment, in terms of wages, fringe benefits, security and so on, are vastly inferior to those accorded to men (Chant and McIlwaine 1995:21).

<sup>24</sup> The 'white-collar workers' category Bain used includes "lower professionals, shop assistants, and clerks".

<sup>25</sup> In the United States, by 2000 three quarters (74.1 percent) of all employment may be considered 'white-collar', and of this 39.3 percent is represented by professional and managerial staff and 22.1 percent by office and administrative support employees (*Monthly Labour Review* 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Virtually all of the writers who contributed to the early development of new-working class theory shared an approach to white-collar workers that, while emphasising the ambiguity of their situation, assumed that in one way or another this ambiguity would be resolved: either by the lower white-collar strata finally joining the proletariat, or by their becoming part of a middle-class majority, or by their supporting the upper layers of the middle-class in an independent bid for power (Oppenheimer 1985:77).

<sup>27</sup> He (1958) included, as examples, a relatively-high income, a greater degree of job-security, an increased likelihood (particularly for male clerks) of rising to managerial and supervisory positions, and other non-pecuniary benefits of office work (cleanliness, comfort, even tempo, better hours and holidays etc.).

<sup>28</sup> According to Crompton and Jones (1984:211), non-manual workers are divided along lines of gender: reasonably qualified young men who follow the organisational rules – acquiring post-entry qualifications, demonstrating loyalty and good behaviour and, where required, being willing to be geographically mobile – have been able to progress upwards through the internal labour markets characteristic of large non-manual bureaucracies. In contrast women, who on the whole find it more problematic to acquire and display these characteristics, do not similarly progress.

<sup>29</sup> *Flexible specialisation* is an approach to employment and work organisation which offers customised products to diversified markets, building trusting and co-operative relationships both with employees, who use advanced technologies in a craft way, and with other organisations within a business district and its associated community (Watson 1995:344). Piore and Sabel (1984) argue that the 'old' Fordist system, characterised by mass production, is giving way to methods of production based on new technologies requiring the adoption of more flexible work practices.

<sup>30</sup> Industrial Supply Corporation (Indsco) is among the larger and more powerful American-based multinationals. In the past decade, Indsco has taken an active look at its employment practices in an attempt to benefit workers and live up to the self-chosen designation of 'people-conscious organisation' (Kanter 1993:3).

<sup>31</sup> Some jobs are regarded as 'men's' jobs, and other jobs as 'women's' jobs. This is known as the 'sex-stereotyping' of jobs and occupations. Ideas about 'suitable' jobs for men and women have reflected prevailing notions of manhood and womanhood, of masculinity and femininity. Thus, for example, with the coming of the Industrial Revolution 'woman's work' was seen as requiring high levels of dexterity and patience but little by way of skill and creativity, reflecting the assumption that



women did not possess the drive or intellectual strength of men, but nevertheless surpassed men in their docility, patience, and attention to details (Bradley 1989).

<sup>32</sup> Hakim (1979:34) earlier argued that:

“Occupational segregation [between the sexes has] remained relatively unchanged in Britain over seven decades. The types of occupation in which women or men are over- or under-represented have changed somewhat, with women increasingly forming the majority of the labour force in the lower grade of white-collar and blue-collar work, very often in occupations which closely mirror functions carried out on an unpaid basis in the home.”

However, in her recent work (2004) she also suggests that the pattern of occupational segregation and its functions have changed substantially over time (see page 145-184 for detailed discussion).

<sup>33</sup> This was due to their belief that the entry of women to clerical work was responsible for depressing the pay and status of their positions (Walby 1986:148).

<sup>34</sup> For example, during the post-war period, and especially in the last decade, there have been significant changes in the position of women in employment. Women are now almost as likely as men to be employed; but nearly all this increase is in part-time work. There has been a significant narrowing of the wage gap between women and men who work full-time (from 63 percent in 1970 to 80 percent in 1995) - but this does not extend to women who work part-time (Walby 1997:30-31, 37).

<sup>35</sup> Bain in 1970, in his work ‘The Growth of White-Collar Unionism’, expressed his views (which subsequently become widely disseminated) of the major characteristics of female employment of the time as follows, describing women as supplementary or secondary earners:

"Most women do not participate continuously in the labour market because of marriage and family responsibilities, and they generally are supplementary earners in the sense that their pay is not the family's main source of income but merely supplements the earnings of their husbands. It is often suggested that these characteristics tend to reduce women's commitment to work, thereby increasing their indifference to trade unionism, and that the large proportion of women among white-collar workers therefore helps to account for their generally low degree of unionisation" (Bain 1970:40).

<sup>36</sup> Some other academics are more optimistic about the future of working women. For example, Crompton concludes, in her recent study of women's work in the United Kingdom (1997:139), that “there are some grounds for a guarded optimism as far as movement towards a less rigid division of labour between the sexes is concerned, in respect of both paid and unpaid work”. In her latest work, Hakim (2004) also acknowledges some substantial positive changes in recent years.

<sup>37</sup> The proportion of women who have worked in the same company for at least 10 years has increased from 9 percent in 1980 to 26 percent in 1990 (Iwao 1993).

<sup>38</sup> In 1990 it was 36 years compared with 26 years in 1960 (Iwao 1993).

<sup>39</sup> See Chapter 8 for a discussion on ‘reserve army of labour’ which also proves to be one of those characteristics that describe Korean women's status and role in the white-collar sector.

<sup>40</sup> Internal labour market is the creation by an employer of a stable and well-rewarded labour force through a policy of internal promotion and training. The use of internal labour markets by employers in order to maintain consistent, appropriately skilled and motivated workforces, creates at a societal level a primary labour force (Watson 1995:186).

<sup>41</sup> This includes the burden of the dual role, sexual harassment in the workplace, the refusal of men to accept women as colleagues or seniors, the need to work twice as well as men to gain recognition, and the lack of solidarity among women (ibid.).

<sup>42</sup> She (ibid.:252) explains that the “pink collar” represents a feminine, professional “disguise” as well as an enactment of women’s sense of distinction: the data entry operator essentially performs “blue-collar” work but, in place of the dust and fumes of garment and electronics houses, she is situated within a cleaner, cooler “white-collar” setting, and as part of the trade she is expected (and expects herself) to appear distinctly feminine and “professional”.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **KOREAN DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN'S LABOUR PARTICIPATION**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides the background to the growing importance of female labour, particularly in white-collar employment, within the context of the economic and political changes in Korea over the last few decades. The chapter begins with an overview of the Korean economy and a brief historical summary of the way it has developed since the end of the active phase of the Korean War in 1953. The aim is chiefly to assist an understanding of the changes in female employment and gender relations at work in a country that has been undergoing rapid socio-economic and cultural development - from its status as an underdeveloped agrarian economy to that of a newly industrialised nation striving to modernise and match international competition. This section, consequently, examines recent social changes particularly relevant to gender relationships and the status of women at work.

The second half of the chapter deals with the participation of female labour in the economy during the corresponding period. It gives an overview of the role of female labour in Korean development, presenting an historical summary of women's participation in paid employment during the post-war period; how Korean women, traditionally home and agricultural workers, entered manufacturing industry and now increasingly as white-collar office employees. This historical approach encompasses the development of women's roles and status within the labour market, while the focus moves from female employment in general to female white-collar employment, particularly in large commercial companies. Although Korean women work in a variety of white-collar occupations in many different types of organisations, the review will concentrate on female office employment in large commercial companies, such as chaebol, as this is the main object of this study. The severely limited body of literature<sup>1</sup>, particularly any dealing with the early historical genesis of female white-collar

employment in Korea, inevitably means that the discussion will focus mainly on more recent developments and the current situation.

### 3.2 Economic Development in Korea: An Overview

#### **Korean Economy during the Post-War Period**

South Korea is a classic example of late industrialisation (Amsden 1989) and, together with Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, has proved to be one of the outstandingly successful newly-industrialising countries (NICs) in East Asia (Berger 1987:ch.7; Hsiao 1988; Riedel 1988; Schive 1990). Since the 1970s, the industrial development of East Asian countries has increasingly become a focus of attention for social scientists, particularly those interested in development studies. Together with academic writers in the fields of economics and politics, they have paid close attention to the success story of these Asian NICs. As a result, much has been written about these 'four little dragons', or 'gang of four', often focusing on the factors to which their success might be attributed and suggesting useful lessons for other follower nations (Berger 1987; Deyo 1987; Berger and Hsiao 1988; Hsiao 1988; Castells 1992; Woo-Cumings 1999; Chang HJ. 1999). In this regard, there seems to be a genuine consensus that the economic growth and dynamism of the East Asian NICs has resulted from export-oriented industrialisation which engendered a boom in manufactured exports<sup>2</sup> (Gereffi 1990b). According to Hsiao (1988), impressive performances in trade and exports by these East Asian NICs have demonstrated that they have successfully overcome the constraints of their limited natural resources by discovering feasible development strategies and exploiting the world market to absorb their increased output.<sup>3</sup>

Korea itself was little known to the world at large (except as a war zone) until these Asian NICs attracted international attention. The country was known as the 'Hermit Kingdom of the Orient' until the late 19th century when it was forced involuntarily to open its doors to outsiders (Kim KD. 1988). It was colonised in 1910 for almost 36 years by the Japanese, and was finally liberated by the allied forces at the end of the Second World War. When Japan left Korea with its defeat in the Second World War, the country was almost deserted, with little industrial base and lacking trained technical

manpower (ibid.:199). The succeeding decade, dominated by the Civil War (1950-53), resulted in the destruction of much of the industrial plant and transportation network in the South (Kim HR. 2000: 203). Although a few industries were in existence before the hostilities, and the modern Korean economy derived its roots from the colonial experience, Korean industrialisation in a substantive sense seems to have developed only after the Korean War (Yu HS. 1993; Kim HR. 2000). As a result, the nation's history of industrial development and international trade is somewhat brief.

After the civil war, the task of rebuilding and developing the country during the second half of the 1950s appeared as a desperate effort to survive but with only a slim chance of success (Lee HK. 1994). Korean economic development in this period began from an impoverished base constrained by a limited endowment of natural resources, a low level of national income and savings, an immature social and economic infrastructure, informational asymmetry, restricted managerial capacity and a general lack of administrative experience in the government (Kim HR. 2000). Exports were almost non-existent because South Korea, unlike North Korea and other resource-rich developing nations, lacked raw materials on which to base exportable goods. Further, as agriculture had previously dominated the economy there existed no worthwhile industrial base. As a result, Korea was forced to rely heavily on foreign aid to finance the major part of the nation's balance of payments deficit in the 1950s (SaKong 1993:137).

While the Korean economy of the 1950s can be characterised as being extremely depressed and dependent on American aid, the sixties can be considered as the beginning of state-promoted, export-oriented industrialisation. The early economic development plans of the 1960s began with encouraging light manufacturing, primarily of goods for consumption, in order to promote import-substitution and some exports (Shim-Han 1986-7:104). In spite of the turmoil of the civil war, according to Edwards (1992) there were two outcomes of this conflagration that became important in explaining Korea's subsequent rapid industrialisation: one was land redistribution and the other was massive US aid<sup>4</sup>. The country's traditional 'landlord' class, with strong state support, invested aggressively in industry and commerce. This established a domestic manufacturing infrastructure for the production of basic consumer products

during the reconstruction period of the second half of the decade, and was the basis for the first stage of import-substitution (Edwards 1992; SaKong 1993).

Although the intervention and support of the United Nations, and particularly the United States, was fundamental in providing the foundation for a modern economy during the 1948-1960 period, the inauguration of the process of economic development in Korea is particularly associated with the Chung-Hee Park regime, which was established by military coup in May 1961 (Castells 1992; Han SJ. 1995). As a result, in the 1960s Korea acquired a new political climate that was fully committed to national progress and economic expansion as the Park Chung-Hee government began to seek legitimacy through national development under such slogans as “liberation from poverty” and “self-sufficiency and independence from the US aid economy”. It launched a series of Five-year Economic Development Plans and encouraged export-oriented industrialisation (hereafter EOI)<sup>5</sup> which began in 1962 with the First Five-Year Plan (1962-1966). The Plan was specifically aimed at achieving higher levels of industrialisation and progressive increases in GNP<sup>6</sup>. Park’s military government was intensely nationalistic, and its prime goal for Korea was rapid economic development; to this end it mobilised all available resources and demanded that people concentrate on economic growth in the shortest time possible (Edwards 1992; Han SJ. 1995).

According to SaKong (1993), the introduction of the First Five-Year Development Plan marked a new era in Korean economic history in that, for the first time, the government provided a truly national economic vision and a clear economic programme for business and the general public. In spite of the fact that US aid was declining in the 1960s,<sup>7</sup> this decade and the 1970s saw the beginning of industrial diversification and spectacular export-led growth (SaKong 1993). This policy of export-oriented industrialisation based on foreign capital inflows, which began in the 1960s, was similarly pursued in the 1970s. However, there was one important difference; while the 1960s industrialisation was focused on light industry, particularly that producing easily-exportable goods for consumption, that of the 1970s was devoted to expanding and deepening the industrial infrastructure with a new focus on intermediate and capital goods (Shim-Han 1986-7:112). Programs to develop chemical and other heavy industries, which were forcefully promoted by the Park regime in the 1970s, completely

changed the country's industrial infrastructure. By the late 1970s big heavy-industry conglomerates dominated Korean business and the appearance of a large industrial working class, formed by migrant workers from the rural areas, was matched by the rapid decline of the farming sector (Pak SJ. 1998). Between 1963 and 1974 the GNP tripled, an annual growth rate of some 10 percent. During the same period, per capita GNP doubled (Berger 1987:146). In economic terms the programme was highly successful; industrialisation forged high economic growth, Korea met its financial goals, and within a few decades the country was competing successfully in world markets for manufactured goods.

Korea's successful capitalist development as a late-industrialising nation is widely considered to be a result of, or at least strongly influenced by, forceful intervention and direction by the authoritarian state (see, for example, Hofheinz Jr. and Calder 1982; Im HB. 1987; Jung KH. 1988; Amsden 1989; Cotton 1989; Gereffi 1990a; Porter 1990; Edwards 1992; Whitley 1992; Lee HK. 1994; Choi and Lee 1995; Kim EM. 1997; Kim YT. 1998 & 1999; Lim T. 1998; Kim HR. 2000)<sup>8</sup>. Timothy Lim (1998:457) explains,

“The particular relationship between the state and society in post-1961 South Korea is ....generally believed to have been the basis for the country's rapid economic transformation. That is, because of the state's supposed ability to thoroughly control and discipline both capital and labour, as well as its firm commitment to development goals, many scholars have argued that the state was able to literally ‘engineer’ the country's high-speed growth and industrialisation.”

The interventionist role of the Korean government was possible through its control of the banking system by supervising the allocation of bank loans, since the military regime dominated all commercial banks in the early 1960s<sup>9</sup>. The state has played a vital role in allocating financial resources, including foreign borrowing, into the hands of a small group of big businesses working in the targeted industries (Amsden 1989; Kim EM. 1991; Edwards 1992).

Another notable feature of Korea's industrialisation, partly related to the government's strong intervention and control of the economy, was the emergence of large business conglomerates known as ‘chaebol’. While the state was strongly intervening in the national economy, it invariably linked with chaebol in this process of

state-led industrialisation (Jung KH. 1988; Kim EM. 1991 & 1997; Castells 1992; Pak SJ. 1998; Gereffi 1990a; Edwards 1992; Choi and Lee 1995; Kang MH. 1996; Cho YJ. 1997; Lee SC. 1997; Kim YT. 1998; Whitley 1999; Shim and Steers 2002). In promoting export-led economic growth, the Park regime had cultivated a partnership with the country's entrepreneurs that was aimed at creating a solid industrial structure based on large companies organised in the form of conglomerates (Castells 1992). To nurture these domestic companies, the government introduced strong protectionist measures to shield the domestic market from foreign competition. Further, given the existing narrow industrial focus of export-oriented manufacturing companies, it deliberately forced them to grow stronger and combine to form large conglomerates (the chaebol) by exercising its control over the banking system and the issuing of export and import licences. By 1977, 44 percent of the total labour force was employed in relatively few large groups (just 2.2 percent of all companies) having more than 500 workers each (Castells 1992). The size of chaebol, and their broad diversification into unrelated product areas, enabled them, according to Amsden (1989:9), to survive the hardships of late industrialisation, to penetrate successfully a wide variety of price-sensitive foreign markets, and to deter foreign multinational firms from undertaking major investments in Korean industries. The relationship between the government and chaebol has altered with changes of regime (see Choi and Lee 1995:39-40), and the latter have steadily gained power and independence. All large businesses continue to depend on government support in some degree, but the country's industrial sector is now largely dominated by chaebol, which have played a critical role as a major force behind the country's phenomenal economic growth (Gereffi 1990a; Kim EM. 1991& 1997; Kim IJ. 1995; Soh BH. 1997). Further consideration of the role and modus operandi of chaebol will be presented in Chapter 5.

The government's implementation of effective policies, backed by strong leadership committed to the nation's development, was seen by many (e.g. SaKong 1993:205; Han SJ. 1995) as a critical factor<sup>10</sup> in Korea's success. The industrialisation and economic development of Korea since 1948 may be chronologically categorised as being in four successive stages (Koo and Kim 1992), each of which can be identified by a particular type of development strategy, state-economy relationship, and set of development



alliances: i) import-substitution industrialisation (ISI), based on U.S. economic aid in the 1950s; ii) export-oriented industrialisation (EOI), based on labour-intensive light manufacturing in the 1960s; iii) evolving industrial maturity, combining EOI with selective use of ISI in the 1970s; 4) economic liberalisation and internationalisation in the 1980s.

The past four decades has seen Korea recording rapid economic growth. Its per capita GNP has increased from less than \$100 in the early 1960s to more than \$5,000 in the 1990s, with annual exports rising from less than \$50 million to more than \$60 billion over the same period. In 1965, Korea ranked 118<sup>th</sup> among world nations in terms of per capita GNP, but jumped to 33rd in 1985 (World Bank 1967, 1987). By the 1990s, Korea had one of the most highly-developed and envied business industrial complexes in the Third World (in which category inclusion now seems no longer appropriate) and had become closely integrated into the world economic system, ranking 13th in terms of volume of international trade (Kwon MH. 1991). Korea has now become one of the strongest NICs, and some of its industrial conglomerates (*chaebol*) can be considered major transnational corporations in their own right (Asia Monitor Resource Centre 1987; Steers et al. 1989; Business Korea 1989/90). In 1996, *Fortune* magazine reported twelve Korean companies among its list of the world's 500 largest corporations by revenue, and Korea (jointly with Italy) was the seventh most represented country.<sup>11</sup>

While achieving rapid growth the Korean economy developed structural characteristics, derived largely from the government's development-oriented policies, which can be summarised in the following five elements (Kim IJ. 1995:43-44): i) all of the nation's available economic resources have been committed to economic development through industrialisation; ii) economic development has been promoted under the strong guidance and control of the government; iii) the government has actively intervened in the private sector's decision-making and management of affairs to advance key investment projects; iv) savings have been vigorously encouraged to secure the financial resources necessary for economic development; v) growth has been the foremost objective of all economic policies. Matters such as an equitable distribution of wealth and income, and balanced growth between different regions and industries, have been relegated to secondary importance (*ibid.*).

With its growth-first policy (Cheng TJ. 1990), the economic strategy of Korea seemed to be generally successful in the light of the many positive social and financial changes it engendered. However, this rapid modernisation also brought some negative effects - such as suppression of basic civil and political rights in the interest of economic growth<sup>12</sup> (Han SJ. 1995:60; Shin GH. 1998); conflicts between growth and income distribution (Bae KH. 1993:144); low wages for workers, income inequality, and paucity of discourse between labour and management (Shim-Han 1986-7:120); inequitable distribution of wealth and income, and unbalanced growth between different regions and industries (Kim IJ. 1995). According to Han SJ. (1995), the problem is that Korea's economic development since the 1960s has been what is termed a 'rush-to' or 'charge-towards' modernisation<sup>13</sup>, being characterised by both absolute state control and a well-trained bureaucracy for the sole purpose of economic growth. He further argues that important issues, such as improving the quality of life for all and 'humanising' social conditions, have been largely ignored while the government has pursued its primary goal of economic growth. This has meant that one of the characteristics of Korean development is the unevenness with which it has benefited different economic and social groups. A clear example of this is the way the workers who contributed so much to the economic growth have been denied its fruits, thereby intensifying the concentration of income and wealth (Shim-Han 1986-7).

As Korea's large businesses continued to depend on the government's repressive control of labour to maintain their workers' wages at low levels (Shim-Han 1986-7; Lee JT. 1988; Bae KH. 1993; Pak SJ. 1998; Shin GH. 1998), the lives of Korean workers were characterised not only by low wages (at the end of 1986 wages barely covered 60 percent of living expenses) but also by long working hours (more than 54 hours per week) and the world's highest rate of industrial accidents (Asia Monitor Resource Centre 1987; Kim DO. et al. 2000). Women workers were often paid at about half the rate for men, and rural families had incomes which continued to lag far behind those of urban dwellers (Asia Monitor Resource Centre 1987). The continuing growth of the economy was in no way matched by improvements in wage levels or a reduction in working hours (ibid.) and these fundamental problems facing workers in Korea reached a critical level by 1987 when the country experienced its first major display of labour

unrest<sup>14</sup>. One of the major criticisms levied at Korea is that its growth has been measured in quantitative rather than qualitative terms, and that it adopted development strategies which directly or implicitly rejected those human and social values which should be the real goal of the policies (Asia Monitor Resource Centre 1987:4) As Shin GH. (1998) shows, these issues were still unresolved in the late 1990s.

### **Korea in the 1990s**

The Korean economy until 1995 demonstrated macro-economic success, despite structural problems identified by some economists<sup>15</sup>. However, in the latter half of 1995 the growth of the economy began to falter before entering a serious recession (Chung UC. 1997)<sup>16</sup> leading to the 1997 financial crisis, which required the negotiation of a \$58 billion emergency loan from the IMF. Korea's financial and industrial structures were shown to be incapable of absorbing rapid changes in market growth<sup>17</sup>. Because of this, the economy was forced to undergo painful readjustment (see Chung UC. 1997; Kim HR. 2000:199-201). "The rapid Korean economic growth came to a halt and an IMF bailout was required in 1997. The impact of the crisis on the economy was severe. The *won* depreciated dramatically, housing values plummeted, many lost their jobs and the number of homeless increased. Collectively, the standard of living was lowered substantially and the situation predicated a more difficult life for the majority of the population for some years to come", as the situation was described by Ha and Lee (Ha and Lee 2001:199). The economic crisis brought an end to the \$10,000 per capita income level achieved as recently as 1996. In 1997 the nation's per capita GNP declined 9.8 percent to \$9,511 from \$10,543 the previous year (Bank of Korea 1998). More significantly, the nation's domestic economic growth rate, measured by GDP, shrank from 7.1 percent in 1996 to 5.5 percent in 1997 and to a negative 3.8 percent during the first three months of 1998 (Kim HR. 2000: 200).

The deteriorating economic situation in late 1997 inevitably had an affect on the companies and employees involved in my field studies. It was already apparent when I visited Korea in mid 1997 that the situation had changed unmistakably from that the year before; most importantly, the general outlook was no longer so optimistic and the national economy appeared increasingly unstable so that employees were becoming

worried about their job security, according to my preliminary interviews with business executives and employees in a number of different sectors. A revision by the government of labour-related laws in 1997 also caused widespread concern and appeared to threaten job security. Choi KS. (1997:85), an economist, describes the situation as follows, adding his own view:

"In the past, mostly blue-collar workers worried about job insecurity, but now white-collar workers, who used to be practically exempt from layoffs, also face the prospect of losing their jobs as a result of the extended freedom to declare redundancies provided by the revised laws. Yet, while white-collar workers fear that they will be laid off, businesses must have the ability to reduce or restructure their work force if Korea wishes to join the ranks of advanced countries and ensure continued economic growth."

Concerns about job security began to spread in 1997, when the national unemployment rate was 2.6 percent<sup>18</sup>. It subsequently reached a record high of 8.7 percent in February 1999 when the number of jobless surged to 1.78 million; this became one of the country's most serious social issues in recent years (Ha and Lee 2001:200).<sup>19</sup> The drastic and on-going reforms and changes in the Korean economy since 1997 have inevitably affected a large proportion of the population. The problems encountered by the government and people in Korea do not simply encompass the unemployment caused by the restructuring programs, but extend to the effect they will have on family, self-esteem, and the waste of the resources of the urban poor<sup>20</sup>, as pointed out by Ha and Lee (2001:210). A Korean economist, Professor Cho, estimated that the shock of unemployment for Korean families was 1.5 times as severe as that for their European or American counterparts (*The Korea Herald*, April 17,1999). He based his assertion on the division of labour in typical Korean households, where husbands are the sole bread winner, wives are confined to household chores and children rely on their parents' support until they are aged 25 or so - particularly true for the middle- and high-income groups. In Korea, job losses by men are more painful to Korean families than those in Europe and the U.S. where, in most cases, family members other than husbands earn money. The lack of a social safety net further threatens low-income families as medical insurance benefits are suspended and children are forced to abandon higher education (Ha and Lee 2001:201). In this regard, the government has committed itself

both to structural adjustment of the economy and protection of the dismissed workers. This policy direction has caused some confusion by pressing companies for structural adjustment while at the same time demanding that they avoid mass firing of workers (ibid.:210).

Although the situation had stabilised by the year 2000, by all accounts Korea's current economic difficulties are unlikely to end soon. As Kim HR. (2000:200) argues, the Korean government now faces the challenges of revitalising the financial sector, restructuring the corporate sector under market principles, reforming the labour market, and moving towards a leaner and more efficient public sector (see Chapter 5 for further discussion of the financial crisis and restructuring programmes). The Korean government is taking steps to prepare for globalisation and the liberalisation of worldwide markets by restructuring the financial and corporate systems (Ungson et al. 1997; Lepage and Gross 2001)<sup>21</sup>. At the same time, the business sector is adjusting corporate structures along more specialised lines, reforming its historical practice of mutually guaranteeing debts owed by subsidiaries of the same business group, and beginning to hire professional managers. Although besieged by international and domestic pressures, the Korean economy may be exhibiting characteristics of change and reform that will propel it through the current crisis to a balanced position in the new global economy (Kim HR. 2000: 217; see also Kim JW. 1997).

So far in this chapter a brief review of the Korean economy during the post-war period has been presented to provide a background for considering the political and economic implications of women's labour participation in the economy. The following section examines how changes in Korean growth and the economic climate have affected women, and especially their participation in economic development. For this purpose, a brief history of women's involvement in paid labour, including the different roles they have played and the conditions under which they have worked in both production and white-collar employment, is presented.

### 3.3 Female Labour Participation in Korean Development

#### **Background**

Even though little information relating to female labour in Korea prior to the late nineteenth century is available, women were always important contributors in the traditional economy and were extensively engaged in agricultural production (Chang PW. 1994). However, a defining feature of women's work was that it was, by cultural tradition, largely complementary - an immense reserve labour pool that was drawn upon in times of harvesting or transplanting (Yoon SY. 1977). The main responsibility of women on farms was for household-centred work and procreation, to which any other productive activities were forced to adjust (ibid.). Lee HC. (1985) also showed that, in addition to their agricultural work, women were exclusively responsible for the production of textiles - which were not only for family self-use but also had monetary value, since textiles were submitted as a means of paying tax to the nation in traditional Korea.

Most women remained as agricultural workers during the period of Japanese occupation and colonisation (1910-45), when they comprised one third of the farming population - even though the actual number of female agricultural workers decreased<sup>22</sup> (Cho H. 1987). While the traditional agriculture, manufacturing and commerce sectors<sup>23</sup> lost women workers during this period, the expansion of colonial industrialisation provided some women with the opportunity for waged employment outside the home. Early industrialisation under the Japanese brought some changes to the traditional sexual division of labour, opening up opportunities for women to participate in outside-the-home economic activities (ibid.). The beginning of industrialisation combined the traditional work of women with new technology; the first modern factory in Korea manufactured textiles and recruited women as workers (Lee HC. 1988). By the 1930s, women made up half the work force in manufacturing, and more than half the women employed in manufacturing were concentrated in textile-related industries, where they represented over 80 percent of all workers (Chang PW. 1994:15). A few modern, professional occupations - such as teaching, midwifery and nursing - were pursued by educated women, although the number of such professional women was small<sup>24</sup>.

Similarly, a small number of women began to enter white-collar jobs as secretaries and clerks (Cho H. 1987).

After the traumatic disruption between 1945 and 1960<sup>25</sup>, described earlier in this chapter, the adoption in the early 1960s of an outward-looking development strategy laid the foundation that led to Korea becoming the major trading nation it is today. As the Korean economy began to grow it brought, among other benefits, an enormous expansion of employment opportunities. Beginning in the 1960s, the export-driven Korean economy increasingly required a highly educated and skilled labour force (Ha and Lee 2001). As a result employment multiplied; the participation of labour in manufacturing between 1961 and 1979 almost tripled (Lim 1985:54).

Seen in terms of the interests of labour, whose importance grew substantially with the onset of industrialisation, it can be argued that the low-wage policy was a direct result of the export-oriented industrialisation process, because cheap labour was constantly demanded for international market competitiveness (Shim-Han 1986/7; Lee JT. 1988; Bello and Rosenfeld 1990). According to Bello and Rosenfeld (1990:24), the secret of Korea's success lay in the combination of long working hours, cheap labour, and the organisation of this cheap labour force into a highly efficient system of production. Amsden (1989) also points out that Korea was among the first countries to penetrate world markets for manufactured goods on the basis of low wages rather than a technological edge. In fact, from the 1950s to the 1980s, low labour costs have consistently been Korea's main, if not only, comparative advantage in the international export marketplace (Eckert et al. 1990) and have seemingly served as an engine for growth over the last two decades. In referring to Korea (and Taiwan) during this period, Lim (1990) argues that local firms in these countries could penetrate developed countries' markets because the low-wage characteristics of pre-industrial and newly-industrialising economies made them particularly competitive in labour-intensive, female-intensive industries, such as textiles, garments, footwear, and toys.

This development strategy importantly planned the incorporation of women on a large scale into the national economy, and thus brought an unprecedented demand for female labour. When President Park took power in the 1960s and launched an export-oriented industrialisation program, it was mainly based on labour-intensive light

manufacturing, carried out mostly by transitional female workers (Pak SJ. 1998:57). According to Yoon SY. (1977), the Korean government recognised during the early growth period that working women should be included in development through 'mobilisation' (its more usual phrasing) since this interest of the national planners was prompted by the temptation of a more 'rational' use of female labour. As noted by Bello and Rosenfeld (1990:25), the centrality of cheap labour in global competition led both domestic and foreign export manufacturers to a preference for women workers<sup>26</sup> in the early years of the industrialisation process. Women thus became the fastest-growing section of the labour force, both in manufacturing and services, and "Kong Soonie" (a Korean name equivalent to Rosie the Riveter) became "in great part, responsible for the Korean miracle." (Launius<sup>27</sup>, cited in Bello and Rosenfeld 1990:25). This rapid increase in the number of female industrial workers allowed the expansion of 'female manufacturing industries', where women account for more than half of all workers (Park KA. 1994), and was concentrated in leading sectors, such as textiles, clothing, shoes and electronic manufacturing (Kim MJ. 1994). These industries, where female workers are characterised as 'lower-wage', 'unskilled' and 'short-term' labour, pioneered the growth in exports (Cho H. 1987; Yu HS. 1993). A study of gender-differentiated employment in the Korean textile industry by Lee OJ. (1993) demonstrated that success in that industry required products of a low unit cost to allow Korean firms to under-price competitors in the world marketplace while still making a profit. This, in turn, necessitated keeping labour costs low - often by maintaining exploitative wage levels for many industrial workers, particularly women.

Primary economic development, through labour-intensive, export-oriented industrialisation, brought women (particularly) into newly-emerging industrial sectors. As a result, women's participation in the manufacturing sector increased sharply from 26.7 percent in 1960 to 36.2 percent in 1980, reflecting an eight-fold increase in absolute numbers (Lee HK. 1994) while the economically-active female population (aged fourteen years and older) increased from two million in 1960 to six million in 1985<sup>28</sup>. According to Park KA. (1994), the number of female workers increased fourteen fold between 1963 and 1990. Today, the participation of women in activities outside the home, particularly in paid employment, is at a higher level than ever before.



In addition to the numerical increase in economically-active women, there has also been a structural change in the nature of female employment. The proportion of women engaged in primary industries in recent years has sharply declined, contrasting with a corresponding increase in the secondary (mining and manufacturing) and tertiary (services) sectors<sup>29</sup>. In 1960, 69.6 percent of working women were engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishing, 6.4 percent in mining and manufacturing, and 24.0 percent in indirect service industries. By 1990 these proportions had changed to 20.4 percent, 28.1 percent, and 51.5 percent respectively, illustrating the dramatic shift in employment from country-based agriculture to urban manufacturing and service industries.

In the main, these urban female workers were young and unmarried. They typically migrated to cities in search of work in order to achieve temporary independence, purchase a few luxury consumer goods, and send remittances home to help support parents and siblings (Oh SJ 1983; Hong SW. 1984; Koo SY. 1984; *Royal Asiatic Society* 1988; Yu HS. 1993). They also considered their work temporary until they married or had children (Lee OJ. and Lee HC. 1988; Deyo 1984:28; Koo SY.1984). Examining the structure of the labour force in Korea, many (e.g. Deyo 1984; Koo H. 1987; Bello and Rosenfeld 1990; Chang SJ. et al. 1991:29; Park KA. 1994) would agree that the remarkable economic growth that has been achieved in the past few decades is due in large part to the migration of this new female labour force to the manufacturing sector. However, most female workers are still engaged in low-wage jobs, where they are subject to employment and wage discrimination (Cho H. 1987; Cho SK. 1987; Koo H. 1987; Lee HC. 1988; Chang SJ. et al. 1991; Lee OJ. 1993; Chang PW. 1994; Kim MJ. 1994; Shim YH. 1994; Korean Confederation of Trade Unions 1996).

As industries progressed to more advanced stages of maturity, the demand for women workers increased and extended to technical, administrative, and managerial roles (Roh M. 1994). As young unmarried workers sought jobs with better conditions in an improved environment, some companies reacted to an insufficient supply of low-paid, unmarried female labour by introducing automation or by hiring married women. Whereas during the early stages of economic development young, unmarried female labourers worked primarily in unskilled jobs in labour-intensive manufacturing

industries, in the 1980s it was largely married women from the urban-poor strata who were absorbed in lower-level jobs in manufacturing and service sectors (ibid.). According to Lee HC. (1988), because of the high productivity and dependability of married women, employers were now prepared to consider utilising this labour force, even though this tendency was gradual and uneven. Lee (ibid.) indicated that in terms of the dynamics of market structure, married women's jobs tended to be the most unstable: they were located in the most peripheral, dependent part of the urban labour market.

As far as women factory workers in Korea are concerned, according to Pearson (1992a), they still constitute what may be termed a 'floating' or 'peripheral' labour force. She explains that, as industries progress from labour-intensive to capital-intensive technologies, men are encouraged to study and move up the promotion ladder through re-training programmes while women remain behind. However, women from poor social backgrounds often move from out-dated labour-intensive industries to jobs that have been discarded by men in more advanced sectors.

### **Female White-collar Office Employment**

While young Korean women have been employed in large numbers in the manufacturing sector since the 1960s, their participation in white-collar office work has only grown significantly over the last four decades (further details are given later in this section) – even though it was early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when women first began to work in offices (Kim YC. 1976:273). The employment of office girls first started in about 1910 when girls' high schools began producing 'certificated' school leavers in numbers. Il-han Tile Company was the first company in Korea to advertise for office girls with a high-school education, aged fourteen to eighteen. In 1912, the Japanese occupying government set up the Land Investigation Bureau and recruited 130 men and also fifteen women, graduates of high schools, who were selected to be office workers in the drawing section and where they received technical training for three months. Typically, these women became responsible for graphic design and drawing (ibid.) A later report, referring to this period, noted:

“Those women of the enlightenment period who worked with men in private or public offices were not looked on with favour. Breaking tradition by holding a job well into their marriageable years, they brought great changes to the lives of

Korean women. For whatever personal reasons, they pioneered women's advancement into the professional world" (Kim YC. 1976:273).

In the context of the dynamic changes during the last few decades, the emergence of white-collar work has become a significant feature in the country's economic development. For instance, although 'professionals and managers' in general comprised only 2.8 percent of the total work force in 1965, the figure increased to 10 percent in 1992 (Han SJ. 1995); clerical workers increased also, from 4 percent to 14.4 percent during this period (ibid.). Of the entire Korean work force in 1992, one of every four was classified as a white-collar worker. Women clearly have become an increasingly important constituent of the white-collar labour force. The proportion of women in the total 'clerical and related' population increased from 1.1 percent in 1963 to 15.3 percent in 1993 - while women's share of 'clerical and related' staff increased from 11.3 percent to 41.1 percent over the same period<sup>30</sup>. By 1997, 15.8 percent of economically-active women worked in offices, where they comprised 53.3 percent of the clerical workforce<sup>31</sup>.

In recruiting for employment in Korea the educational attainment and sex of the candidates are in general recognised as the two most important variables (Lee HS. 1984; Park SJ. 1994; also interviewee fh49<sup>32</sup>). For example, in his categorisation of the Korean labour market by four distinct levels, Lee HS. (1984) used educational attainment and sex of job candidates as the most critical variables: level 4 (the most favoured) is made up exclusively of male graduates; level 3 comprises male high-school leavers and female college graduates; level 2 contains male middle- school leavers and female high- or middle-school leavers; while level 1 requires no particular educational qualifications. Of course, the study leading to this categorisation was undertaken in the early 1980s and the applicability of these labels to the late 1990s and the new century can be questioned and needs to be re-assessed. However, the vital importance of educational attainment and sex of job applicants for white-collar employment still remains largely true.

Therefore it is not surprising to learn that, not only do Korean companies usually specify the educational level required in job advertisements, but also - as Park SJ. (1989) points out - they have traditionally used different standards and methods

according to sex for their recruitment. Korean enterprises have typically used two distinct approaches when hiring office employees: first, by restricted recruitment through personal introduction, and second, by an openly-advertised democratic process (known as '*kongchae*', open recruitment). The relative importance of these approaches varies with the size and nature of the company. In the 1980s, 86.1 percent of new employees in large companies, such as chaebol, were recruited by the open-recruitment process, while fewer than half of the employees in small and medium-sized firms were recruited by the same method (Seoul National University 1985). More than half (53.1 percent) of these latter firms used a form of restricted recruitment to find their new staff. Even though most large Korean business groups have been using the *kongchae* system since the 1960s (Lee HC. 1989, cited in Kang MH. 1996:112), women had not been given an equal opportunity to participate until the mid-1980s. Until then, it had been a common practice for many Korean companies to specify the sex of the required candidates in their advertisements. Some companies would specify gendered characteristics in public recruitment advertisements in order to attract mainly (or only) men. As an example of this, companies (including chaebol) would confine recruitment to male candidates by advertising for "someone who has completed (or been exempted from) army service" – which of course implies men as army service is compulsory for them while women are very unlikely to have participated (KWDI 1983:51-2). A quotation from an interview with a female graduate employee is particularly revealing in this regard:

“Until quite recently chaebol’s *kongchae* advertisements in newspapers used to specify ‘finished army service or exempted’. Even though women could apply in principle, it suggested by nuance that it was only for men and, therefore, discouraged women even to apply. Since it was not very clear, even if possible, very few women felt they would have much chance if they applied. The advertisement didn’t give a clear message whether or not it was to include women, but maybe that was what the companies intended. Anyway, one year only one woman was employed among 400-500 men” (fu43, from chaebol P).

Female college graduates with qualifications identical to male candidates had often been refused application forms from these companies; even when they did manage to apply, and had demonstrated their ability by written examination, they failed to get through the interviews (Chung & Chang, 1985; Chang PW. 1994). A study by Cho JA.

(1992) that analysed recruitment advertisements in a Korean newspaper, *Dong-ah Ilbo*, also confirmed widespread use of gendered specifications in recruitment: he found that 47.4 percent of job advertisements explicitly or implicitly specified male candidates for the job. Gender specification in recruitment was particularly noticeable among large corporate groups (*chaebol*), because of their practice of holding an annual mass recruitment, and in which over 90 percent of jobs in the 1980s had been for male graduates (Chung & Chang 1985). In recent years the situation appears to have improved: Korean companies' representation of the sex of preferred job candidates in their job advertisements has changed from being overtly discriminating to a less-obviously-differentiating, if still implicit, designation. (This issue will be revisited in the following section when discussing the employment of female graduates during the last decade or so.)

Until the mid-1980s, therefore, it was common practice that, while large numbers of men (usually male university graduates) were recruited through *kongchae*, most female office employees hired by large commercial companies had customarily been high-school leavers (fu37, mu41). These female high-school leavers were selected, usually through school recommendation and interviews rather than objective examinations and tests, and were concentrated at lower levels of the organisation working on simpler administrative, clerical and bookkeeping tasks. Their duties traditionally also included some cleaning, tea serving and errand running, as 'flowers of the office'. Steers et al. (1989:92) noted that the organisational hierarchy of a Korean firm usually comprised three principal groupings: managers and technical personnel, workers, and female employees. According to them (*ibid.*:94), the place of female employees in corporations could best be understood as consisting of a separate hierarchy, totally distinct from and largely subservient to the male hierarchy, since these women were hired almost exclusively as assemblers, clerks, typists, secretaries, or service workers. After being employed for a number of years these female staff tended to remain in their repetitive, administrative jobs at the same grade and with comparatively little salary increase, while men were promoted with improved salaries and conditions (Park And Kang 1994). Female high-school leavers are further considered in Chapter 7.

As far as female university graduates were concerned, only a very few were selected, usually by personal connection and introduction, for specific positions such as secretaries or computer-related jobs (Janelli 1993; also interviewees fu37, fu43, mu41). In Janelli's 1993 case study of a chaebol a similar tendency was observed: his work revealed that women graduates of four-year university courses were hired in small numbers if they possessed technical skills that could be put to immediate use in the factories and research laboratories of the chaebol. According to him, before 1987 women workers in the chaebol's headquarters company were not eligible for promotion above the rank of *sawon* (ordinary staff)<sup>33</sup>. Steers et al. (1989:94) argued that female college graduates earned more and had a somewhat higher status and authority than other female employees, but that like them they were clearly less important to the organisation than were the salarymen or workers – and also that they earned less than males doing similar jobs. They were seen as temporary employees whose role was to serve the (male) organisation until marriage. When a few women were hired for female-specified jobs in large companies, they were not allocated to mainstream business activities but almost always to secretarial jobs or library work (Chang PW. 1994). Female white-collar workers in large Korean companies have customarily been considered as being young, unmarried, usually with a high-school education and suitable only for reasonably simple tasks assisting male colleagues.

How then were these female white-collar workers actually treated by Korean companies? What was their status and what were their working conditions like? In 1984, the Korean Employers' Federation (KEF 1984, cited in Chang PW. 1994) carried out a survey of 724 business firms employing more than 100 people and identified a distinct gender bias in conditions of employment, such as in methods of recruitment, job allocation, promotion and retirement age. Of the firms surveyed, 50.5 percent admitted that employment conditions differed between the sexes, 74.6 percent had an age limit for female workers but not for men, and 63.2 percent employed no married women at all while regarding the marital status of male workers as of no significance. Hahn JH. (1997) claims that Korean companies are typically male-dominated, with female workers serving under male supervisors in a division of labour that is in fact a division of gender.

This gender division seems to be particularly reflected in remuneration. The existence of gender discrimination by Korean companies is not only suggested by their limited employment of female labour, but also by their tendency to under-value female labour once it is hired, which implies that they continue this discrimination during employment. One of the most obvious examples of this is shown by the large wage differential between the sexes in white-collar work: clerical and related work showed a gender differential in monthly salaries of 50 percent in 1985, and 43.9 percent in 1990 (Moon and Joo 2000)<sup>34</sup>. The results of the study by Roh M. (1991:34) on wage differentials in 1988 also showed that only 37.8 percent of the male/female wage difference was non-discriminatory (i.e. stemming from differences in workers' characteristics) and that the remaining 62.2 percent was due in effect to discrimination against women. Park (SI. 1982) argues that what is important in Korean wage determination is not the productivity or efficiency of a worker, but who the worker is. In other words gender, educational attainment and the seniority of the worker serve as the determinants of wages received (Chang PW. 1994). A male worker with a high educational attainment commands the highest starting wage. A female worker with similar qualifications would receive a wage of between 70 to 85 percent of the male starting wage. Seniority is more important than productivity in the determination of wage levels in the formal labour market (PW Chang, 1994). The work of Bai and Cho on women's wages in Korea (1995:136-141) also presents a number of factors to explain the large wage gap between the sexes: the heavy concentration of female workers in low-wage-paying firms; early retirement from the labour market (the shorter job tenure caused by marriage, child birth or childcare requirements); occupational segregation and internal labour market discrimination (women assigned to secondary jobs and serving as assistants to male co-workers); lack of fringe benefits normally offered to men (whose salaries normally include a cost of living allowance, family support, education and housing subsidies). The cumulative effect of all of these factors was regarded as explaining the wide, and gendered, wage differentials in Korea (see also Park SI. 1982; Meulen Rodgers 1997).

This wage structure is, according to Chang PW. (1994), one of the factors in the demand for an age-specific female labour force: young and less-educated female

workers have the right 'qualifications' (attributes) to be employed cheaply. Because of the system which awards incremental wage increases with seniority, she argues, the optimal period for a worker to remain with a company (from the employer's cost-conscious point of view) is about three years. Employers believe that for semi-skilled jobs the productivity of a worker does not rise after two or three years experience, so it does not concern the company if the workers leave after this period. As young women will in due course marry and then leave their jobs, this optimum working period can often be smoothly achieved (Chang PW. 1994). When looking at the age distribution of female workers in 1990, Roh M. (1994) found that 69.8 percent of clerical workers were in the fifteen to twenty-four years age group, which implies the existence of a voluntary (or involuntary) practice of 'retirement-with-marriage'. This has the effect of producing a high turnover of female staff coupled with low female labour costs.

There is another linked, yet more subtle and pervasive, influence that serves the same discriminatory purpose. This is the continuation and encouragement of the 'traditional feminine role' for female office workers in Korean offices. In fact, the position of the female office worker (*yo-sawon*) still embodies, to a considerable degree, the traditional feminine role of Confucian patriarchal society. There is evidence that shows that these gendered practices have been condoned, even accepted, by the present sex-biased culture of industrial corporations. While this issue will be further explored in Chapter 7, it seems appropriate briefly to introduce it here. One good example of this practice is the importance given to the appearance of female job candidates (see Kim HS. 1994; Park SJ. 1989, 1994:252). Prompted by the widespread and increasingly overt focus on the physical attributes of female candidates and employees, in 1994 *Minwoohoe*<sup>35</sup> and the trade union representing school and university teachers reported 44 firms to the government's legal authorities for sexual discrimination in their recruitment practices (Kim HS. 1994; Park SJ. 1994)<sup>36</sup>. The firms were shown to have specified criteria relating to physical appearance for female candidates only, such as "160cms or over in height and 50 kilograms or less in weight and pleasant appearance"<sup>37</sup> (Kim HS. 1994:40). Further, according to another study 41 percent of large firms (and 63.6 percent of small firms) admitted that for female candidates their personal appearance and impression is important (*HanKyeoRe Sinmoon*



27 February 1995). This has been particularly true in the case of female high school leavers. For example, in a study of vocational training for female students in a commercial high school, Jung and Jung (1997) showed that, while the teachers recognised 'academic performance' as most important in influencing the students' chances of finding employment, they regarded 'physical appearance' as the second most important factor, with 'other relevant qualifications' third. In helping female students find employment, most teachers (77.7 percent) stated that their greatest concern was the 'difficulty caused by the tendency of employers to put more emphasis on students' appearance than on their 'working ability or qualifications' (see Chapter 7 for further discussion of this topic).

Thus, female school leavers have traditionally been recruited by separate means using different (often gendered) criteria, and then allocated to junior tasks, typically as assistants and supporters to male colleagues. In these roles they earn less, with poorer conditions of service, than male staff. Further, rather than investing in their training for long-term career development, employers seemed to encourage a relatively high turnover of these female staff which, given the system of salary increments with seniority, may be considered to cause employers little concern. In addition, their role in the office, and even their original selection, seemed to rely unduly on traditional feminine attributes, such as physical appearance, which raises some gender-related issues that will be considered later in this study.

In this climate, however, one of the most important developments in female white-collar employment began in the mid 1980s when, according to Chung and Chang (1985:30), large Korean companies, such as chaebol, began to appreciate and employ more educated female graduates in their offices. In 1985 the Daewoo Group, one of the top five chaebol, pioneered the inclusion of female graduates in their *kongchae* (Minwoohoe 1997:1) and other chaebol also gradually began to open their doors to female graduate candidates. This practice became popular among many chaebol and even some smaller companies in the early- and mid-1990s (ibid.) when female graduates were actively recruited through the same channels and using the same criteria as male graduates - even though the majority of recruits hired by companies were still men. For example, one of the chaebol studied (S2) had employed few female graduates

until the 1990s but started including female graduates in their normal *kongchae* recruitment from 1993 (fu37). From the 1980s the proportion of female graduates hired by the top 50 chaebol showed a more or less steady rise until the mid-1990s: increasing from 4.2 percent in 1990, 9.7 percent in 1993, 8.6 percent in 1994, 11.3 percent in 1995 to 12.1 percent in 1996 (*Minwoohoe* 1997:2).

Due to labour market conditions, such as a shortage of qualified labour, together with the effect of the Equal Employment Act in the late 1980s<sup>38</sup>, the government and many chaebol became interested in the utilisation of female labour and actively promoted gender equality in employment (Oh JJ. 1998; also see Kim YO. 1997). Moreover, in the report of its meeting in May 1995, the Committee for the Promotion of Globalisation recognised Korea's urgent need for new policies for the employment of women to help the nation meet the challenges of globalisation (see *Korea Observer*, Spring 1995; Kang MK. 2000; Shin KY. 2000; Pettman 2003). They claimed that the growing importance of intellectual and communication skills in society required a new role for women, where their sensitivity and creativity could make an important contribution; they recognised that the proper development and utilisation of available human resources required a deeper involvement of women as a resource to enhance the country's competitiveness in the global market. They further argued that solving women-related problems is a pre-requisite for improving the quality of life in society, because most societal problems are directly or indirectly linked to women and gender. The following quotation from Hahn JH. (1997), an economics researcher in H1 Group<sup>39</sup>, is particularly pertinent in suggesting that Koreans acknowledge the critical inter-dependence between the wise use of female labour and future national success:

"Many futurists have predicted that the 21st century will see societies with 'softer' characteristics often associated with women. Already the demand for skills requiring delicacy and intellectual ability is greater than the demand for labour that relies on physical strength. This shift towards the growing importance of information technology and knowledge-based industries will inevitably mean changes in Korea's existing male-oriented labour structure. .... In 'soft' industries, where information technology and knowledge are key elements, companies are discovering the importance of female workers. The social conditions that lead women to seek employment also play an important role. Women with a high level of education increasingly pursue careers..... In Korea, where women's access to higher education has improved and where software-embracing industries have

developed rapidly, dependence on female workers will inevitably increase" (Hahn JH. 1997:92).

Until 1996 conditions in the Korean labour market seemed to be positive and improving for women; a general recognition that women would be a critically important part of the labour force in the 21st century, the government's globalisation campaign and emphasis on gender relations, and the opening-up of society to outside influences all served to encourage increased employment of women (particularly graduates) by chaebol.

In spite of the various corporate and national initiatives designed to promote employment opportunities for women, however, the increase in absolute numbers remained small and they still represented a minor proportion of all recruited graduates. For example, in the early 1990s approximately 80 percent of female white-collar workers in Korea were high-school leavers (Park and Kang 1994). Even by 1995, when recruiting female graduates through *kongchae* was in full swing, only some 3,600 female university graduates had been employed by Korea's 30 largest companies, representing just 13.6 percent of their new graduate intake (*Mimwoohoe* 1997; Hahn JH. 1997). However, when this is compared with the equivalent 4.5 percent of new graduate employees in 1990, it is clear that employment prospects for female university graduates had improved dramatically in just a few years (Hahn JH. 1997) and that the changes were in no way trivial. Yet this qualified progress towards gender equality was soon to be subdued by adverse changes in the economy and labour market in 1997. This issue will be considered further in Chapter 8 where the recent conditions for female employment, including the impact of economic recession, will be discussed. As my research began in 1996 and continued until 1999 when I completed my fieldwork, the important developments during this period will be considered in the main body of the study.

In summary, although clerical occupations have absorbed a conspicuous number of female workers in the past three decades, and more recent changes have offered wider opportunities to educated women, the role of women in white-collar office employment undoubtedly remains marginal in comparison to that of men. The overwhelming majority of female positions are junior and occupied by young, single women; these unmarried women constitute an absolute majority in clerical work (Chang SJ. et al.

1991:32; Bai and Cho 1996). Official statistics and research studies in this field (Cho H. 1987; Cho SK. 1987; Koo H. 1987; Lee HC. 1988; Chang SJ. et al. 1991; Pearson 1992a; Lee OJ. 1993; Cho and Chang 1994; Kim TH. 1997; KWDI 1997; KWDI 2000) suggest that female workers have been facing considerable sexual discrimination, exemplified by restrictive recruitment practices, gender wage gaps, reduced opportunities for promotion, and lower security of employment.

### 3.4 Conclusion

This chapter began by examining the historical development of the modern Korean economy over the eventful last century. After a relatively late industrialisation, the Japanese occupation and the economic and social turmoil of the civil war and its aftermath in the 1950s, came rapid economic expansion achieved only by collective dedication and self-discipline under the firm guidance of strong authoritarian government. Only during the past two decades, with the arrival of a nascent domestic consumer market and wider distribution of wealth, have some of the concealed social and gender-sensitive issues begun to be addressed. And now, more recently, economic difficulties have re-introduced an element of national anxiety and a climate of concern about security of employment.

The second half of the chapter attempted to suggest how women, typically young, unmarried and from an agricultural background, provided the low-cost dexterous labour force needed by the new export-oriented manufacturing industries to drive the economic development of Korea. These women operated the machines and worked in the assembly plants and (more recently) the offices, which enabled the country successfully to emerge from post-war disorder to attain its present recognised prosperity.

In particular, white-collar office work - the main subject of the study - has been a rapidly expanding occupation for women over the past few decades as the country has generated impressive economic growth. It is, however, clear that female office employment in Korean companies is still largely undertaken by young, unmarried women carrying out a limited range of tasks with low status and poor remuneration. Typically, high-school leavers have been employed in less-challenging jobs with few

prospects, while male graduates have been recruited for 'standard' office work. Sexual discrimination appears to start at the recruitment stage with the selection of a small number of well-educated female candidates for work with promotion prospects, and the majority of women for less-valued administrative duties. This discriminatory practice seems to continue during employment with a gender gap in wages as well as the embodiment of traditional gender roles for women at work. The attempt in recent years by a number of large Korean companies (notably chaebol) to employ female graduates on the same basis as male graduates for the same type of work has undoubtedly been a positive influence. However, the true condition must be closely examined and the reality of any progress and its lasting benefits tested over time.

This chapter suggests that Korean women are not unique and, even though they have actively contributed to national development, share the low status and gendered, discriminatory working conditions of women in many other countries. It is clear that in spite of the impressive economic achievements of contemporary Korea, and the crucial female contribution towards it, progress in improving the status of women has been less than impressive. For women the situation may have improved somewhat through advances in their education (and that of men), their increased economic rewards, positive cultural changes in society, and better, more equal, job opportunities promoted both by government and employers. However, the majority of women still appear to be employed, and trapped, in positions carrying low status and rewards while facing sexual discrimination. For them economic, as well as social, equality has yet to be attained. A large disparity still exists between the contribution of women in Korea and their economic and social rewards.

Among the many issues arising from the economic development of Korea, that of gender relations is one of the most clearly-recognised examples of a failure fully to benefit from development. It would seem, therefore, to deserve special attention. Whether the contribution of Korean women to their national development has been fully appreciated, and whether it has also been matched by improvements in the status of women generally, is one of the major issues to be addressed in this thesis. The fact that the country is currently experiencing economic difficulties, and undergoing rapid social changes to cope with these difficulties, provides a good opportunity to explore whether

or not women's status and conditions at work have been improved - realities are often starker in bad times. An exploration of how the challenges of the present economic crisis affect the female employment policies and practices of chaebol at this particular time would be interesting. For example, will employers treat their female employees in effect as marginal workers - to be released first in troubled times? Are female office employees (and working women generally), who have been actively recruited and employed in recent years, any better than 'a reserve army of labour'? These issues will be discussed in more detail in later chapters, particularly Chapter 8.

For a proper appreciation of the status and position of Korean women in society and at work, it is important to understand the cultural environment as well as the socio-economic climate of the country. This chapter has examined the historical development of the national economy and discussed the socio-economic changes affecting the participation of women, and their status, in the labour market. The following chapter considers the cultural influences affecting Korean women and their labour participation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Of course there are some exceptions, such as the quarterly magazine *Samujik Yosong* ('White-collar Women', *Minwoohoe* 1990-96), which is now replaced by the bi-monthly *Pyeong-Dung* ('Equality', *Minwoohoe* 1996~), 'the Reality and Movement of White-collar Female Workers' (*Minwoohoe* 1989), 'Female Graduates in Five Chaebols' (*Odaegurup daejolyosong*, a discussion paper, *Minwoohoe* et al. 1997), a few master dissertations, and occasional references in general works on gender issues in employment. Otherwise, the existing literature on white-collar work mostly ignores women or, misleadingly, includes them in general (male-based) material.

<sup>2</sup> All four of the East Asian NICs pursued policies of outward-oriented industrialisation in the 1960s in order to generate foreign exchange via manufactured exports. During this initial phase of export expansion, the rapid growth of these East Asian nations was founded on light, labour-intensive industries like textiles, garments, and consumer electronics. In subsequent phases, however, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore achieved success in much heavier industries like steel, petrochemicals, shipbuilding, vehicle manufacture and computers that were further removed from their original factor endowments (i.e., limited raw materials, unskilled labour, and small markets) (Gereffi 1990b).

<sup>3</sup> However, some academics take a contrary view. Bello and Rosenfeld (1990), for example, argue that NICs face serious structural challenges: their high-speed, export-oriented industrialisation model is threatened by democratic demands for a fairer distribution of income; rising wage costs have resulted in labour-intensive industries moving overseas leaving structural unemployment; erosion of agricultural sectors caused by cheaper food imports; environmental degradation from chemical pollution and deforestation; over-reliance of industry on foreign technology. In their view these countries, having used cheap labour as their 'engines of growth', were no more than 'efficient mass cloners' with little innovation serving the " 'low-end' of already mature markets with obsolete technology" (ibid.:164). See also Hoveman (1998) for recent economic crises in these countries.

<sup>4</sup> During the 1950s U.S. aid, estimated in total at about \$2.5 billion at current prices, was a major source of finance for industrialisation. According to Mason et al. it accounted for nearly 80 percent of Gross Domestic Capital Formation (GDCF) and contributed 8 percent of GNP (Mason et al. 1980:185).

<sup>5</sup> With a small domestic market and a poor natural resource base, export-oriented industrialisation was the only viable choice for Korea once it had exhausted its import-substitution industrialisation. Throughout the first EOI period, although most obviously in the initial phase, labour-intensive and low-technology industries like textiles, apparel, and footwear were the dominant industries (Yu HS. 1993:269).

<sup>6</sup> While the First (1962-6) and Second (1967-71) Five-Year Plans emphasised industrial growth, the Third Five-Year Plan (1972-6) focused on balanced growth in both the industrial and agricultural sectors and the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1977-81) stressed sustained economic growth and equity. In the 1960s and early 1970s, these strategies focused on labour-intensive light industries and then on capital-intensive heavy industries in the late 1970s until the Park regime collapsed with his assassination in 1979 (Lee HC. 1988).

<sup>7</sup> During the 1960s, the role of foreign aid diminished drastically while foreign borrowing began to play a critical role in Korea's economic development (SaKong 1993:137).

<sup>8</sup> Korea's economic growth and industrial transformation has been regarded as one of the most noteworthy economic success stories in the history of capitalist development. This miraculous growth has been attributed either to pervasive and directive state intervention through a set of export-led industrialisation strategies (Amsden, 1989; Haggard, 1990; Wade, 1990) or to liberal prescriptions of industrial policies and the invisible hand of markets (Balassa 1988; World Bank 1993; Young 1994). Although the interpretation of the roles of the state and markets is controversial, it is believed that state intervention has been a determining force in economic development, but for some also impeding the full development of the financial and corporate sectors in the national economy (Kim HR. 2000:199).

<sup>9</sup> The Park regime nationalised the banks in 1961. This move placed credit under state control, effectively making chaebol and private firms dependent on state officials. Moreover, foreign loan capital and foreign direct investment were also tightly controlled and closely monitored by the state. Distribution of both domestic and foreign capital thus rested in the hands of the state, which could then easily implement its economic-development plans and control the private sector (Kim EM. 1991:281).

<sup>10</sup> Of course, Korea did have some favourable initial conditions for development. Among these were a relatively high standard of socio-cultural development, a literate and motivated work force, and plenty of latent entrepreneurial energy. Undoubtedly, these strengths were enhanced by political leadership committed to economic development and by the choice of an outward-looking development strategy (SaKong 1993:21).

<sup>11</sup> In 2000, Korea had more corporations (12) in the list of Global 500 than any other Third World country (see Sklair and Robbins 2002).

<sup>12</sup> During 30 years of authoritarian regimes the aspirations of the labour movement were severely suppressed, while universities became battlegrounds for violent confrontations. In the second half of the

1980s, in particular, Korea witnessed the simultaneous eruption of labour and other social unrest (Han SJ. 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Or “growth first” policy, as Cho (S. 1994) describes it.

<sup>14</sup> The eruption of labour since 1987 has underlined the point that Confucian piety was not the mainspring of the energies of Korea’s workers: even though Korean workers accepted the Confucian ethic of hierarchy and wanted their employers to behave like caring parents, they came to realise that, as the inequality widened, their employers were primarily motivated by profit, argues Bae KH. (1993:147-8). Workers felt that they had to protect themselves by pursuing their own class interests (ibid.) Indeed, according to Bello and Rosenfeld (1990:23), the working class that stormed onto Korea’s political stage and grabbed the world’s attention with 3,500 strikes in the hot summer of 1987 evoked images of the European working classes in the nineteenth century: rebellious, uncompromising, and passionately class conscious.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Chung UC. (1997:65) believes that the cause of structural problems in the Korean economy is the fact that policy-makers often want to achieve too many economic goals in too short a time. He further acknowledges a number of economic ‘bubbles’ in Korea - in domestic households, in colleges, in businesses and in the government, and argues that these bubbles in the late 1980s were in part related to the excessive optimism of Koreans following the 1988 Seoul Olympics, and that economic optimism lowered people’s enthusiasm to work and fanned over-consumption.

<sup>16</sup> With the increasing influence of global capital markets, the domestic financial sector has shown various signs of weakness. Significant numbers of non-performing loans, excessive and poor lending practices, and increasingly high levels of risky assets have left Korean financial institutions vulnerable to the fluctuation of credit availability. In the corporate sector, excessive investment in a few industrial sectors and disproportionate short-term corporate borrowings have left companies so highly leveraged that an unprecedented number of business groups have become bankrupt since mid-1997. Furthermore, the contagious effects of the Asian currency crisis have appeared and developed further in the Korean economy. A major reversal in the fortune of Asian economies began in July 1997 with economic troubles and a currency crisis in Thailand. In a very short time the crisis spread to neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia, eventually triggering serious turmoil in the currency and financial markets of South Korea (Kim HR. 2000:199-200).

<sup>17</sup> For example, according to Han ZS. (1994:57),

“The French magazine *Le Point*, comparing Korea to an “out-of-breath dragon,” pointed out that the current economic crisis in Korea was the result of limitations of the Korean style of national capitalism. According to its analysis, chaebol-centred growth policy pursued for so long by the Korean government is no longer working because of the sudden increase in wages, limited technology and intense competition from China and other developing Asian economies. For the Korean economy to overcome this hurdle and join the advanced nations, all previous business practices would have to be boldly discarded and the economy modernised.”

<sup>18</sup> In the previous year, 1996, the rate was 2.0%. Source: National Statistical Office, The Economically Active Population Survey, cited in Ministry of Labour, Republic of Korea (2001) Year Book of Labour Statistics.

<sup>19</sup> This high unemployment rate eventually reduced to 4.1 percent in 2000. Source: National Statistical Office, The Economically Active Population Survey, cited in Ministry of Labour, Republic of Korea (2001) Year Book of Labour Statistics.

<sup>20</sup> Such a large drop in employment was mainly due to layoffs associated with the restructuring plans of companies. Since the IMF crisis, most (67 percent) low-income household heads had experienced difficulties in finding jobs, even so-called 3-D (dirty, dangerous and difficult) jobs (Ha and Lee 2001:200).



<sup>21</sup> Concurrently with moves to deregulate foreign investment in Korea, the government is actively encouraging chaebol to progress towards globalisation as a response to “a tendency toward open markets, changes in domestic markets and the necessity of acquiring newer technologies” (Ungson et al. 1997:111). Foreign language (especially English) skills are being strongly promoted, as also is an understanding of and adaptability to foreign cultures. Chaebol themselves are seeking to “utilize their resources all over the world”, and to develop a “managerial perspective that transcends national borders” (ibid.:110), often by adopting more ‘professional’ organisational structures, grafting Western management techniques and recruiting second-generation Koreans in foreign countries. As part of the process, they form joint ventures with overseas business partners, participate in technology alliances and jointly fund research and development projects (Ungson et al. 1997:ch.6).

<sup>22</sup> The traditional agricultural sector lost women workers (some 500,000 between 1930 and 1945 - and a similar number of men) primarily due to land surveys and changes introduced by the Japanese colonial authority which deprived farmers of land - leading to a pauperisation of the farming sector and devastation of many villages.

<sup>23</sup> In manufacturing, the decline in female employment was caused by the reduction in household industries (e.g. textiles, food, ceramics) - partly caused by the growth of the modern manufacturing sector, but mainly because of political suppression of traditional household industries where they competed with Japanese establishments for supplies of raw materials, such as cotton and silk. In addition, the commerce sector, where women tended family shops and engaged in petty trading, also registered a fall in female employment.

<sup>24</sup> For example, there were about 2,000 female teachers (14 percent of all teachers) in 1938, and by 1940 there were just over 4,000 female midwives and nurses.

<sup>25</sup> Involving liberation from the Japanese colonisation in 1945, the Korean civil war during 1950-53, and also post-war reconstruction.

<sup>26</sup> The target labour group were unmarried women aged sixteen to twenty-five with at least a middle-school education. One study for the International Labour Office notes that:

“Girls are preferred not only because their discipline is better, but also because female production wages are, on average, almost 50 percent of male wages. There is little evidence that women are less productive than men, and it is therefore much more profitable to employ women” (Michell T. ‘From LDC to NIC: The Republic of Korea: Employment, Industrialisation and Trade, 1961-1982’, unpublished manuscript, Seoul, 1988:134, cited in Bello and Rosenfeld 1990:25).

<sup>27</sup> Launius, Michael, “The State and Industrial labour in South Korea”, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 16, no.4, p.10 (the year it was published was not specified in Bello and Rosenfeld 1990).

<sup>28</sup> Source: Economic Planning Board, Population and Housing Census of Korea 1960; and Annual Report 1985.

<sup>29</sup> Source: EPB, Population and Housing Census Report 1960; EPB, Annual Report on The Economically Active Population Survey 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Source: EPB (1999), Annual Report on The Economically Active Population Survey, cited in Kim TH. (2000:65).

<sup>31</sup> However, since the ‘IMF crisis’ in late 1997 the trends have not surprisingly changed dramatically: in 1997 15.8 percent of economically active women participated in clerical work, where they represented 53.3 percent of the workforce; in 1998 the proportions were 14.1 percent and 47.1 percent respectively,

and in 1999 they were 13.8 percent and 50.3 percent. Source: EPB (1999), Annual Report on The Economically Active Population Survey, cited in Kim TH. (2000:65).

<sup>32</sup> The first letter (**f** or **m**) denotes sex; the second indicates educational attainment on joining: **h** (high-school leaver) or **u** (university graduate); the **number** identifies the interviewee (from 1 to 51); a final **m** denotes manager. See Appendix 1.1 for the codes and profile of chaebol interviewees.  
\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for women at work than for men).

In instances where it is judged to be relevant, the identity of the employer chaebol is indicated after a hyphen with an upper-case postscript followed (where appropriate) by a lower-case letter for the particular affiliate. For example, 'fu10\*-S1a' indicates that the interviewee number 10 was female, university educated, married, and worked in affiliate 'a' of chaebol S1. However, reference to a particular affiliate is rare as in only a few cases is it deemed to be relevant.

<sup>33</sup> In that year, however, a few women were hired as potential future managers and underwent the same training programme as the male recruits (Janelli 1993:145 – note no.14). This issue will be discussed later in this chapter when a major change in 1988 in the employment of female graduates is considered.

<sup>34</sup> Original source: Ministry of Labour, *Report on Occupational Wage Survey* (1986, 1991); Ministry of Labour, *Survey Report on Wage Structure* (1996-1999). Cited in Moon and Joo (2000: 281).

<sup>35</sup> 'Korean Women's Association for Democracy and Sisterhood': an important pressure group formed to promote equal opportunity at work for Korean female white-collar workers. They are also active in publishing books, periodicals and publicity material on related topics.

<sup>36</sup> Korean companies asked women's commercial high schools to recommend candidates for employment provided they were of a certain height, no more than a certain weight and of pleasant physical appearance. Protests by women's pressure groups and the trade union representing school and university teachers led the eight companies concerned to be convicted under article 6 of the Act of Equal Employment, and fined. This had the effect of preventing any further explicit discrimination against women on the grounds of their physical appearance, height, weight or marital status etc. (Kim HS. 1994).

<sup>37</sup> The average height and weight of Korean women in 1994 was 158cms and 53kgs (*Minwoohoe*, summer 1994:54).

<sup>38</sup> The Sex Equality in Employment Act was legislated in 1987, and the date of enactment was April 1, 1988. The Enforcement Decree of the Labour Standards Act, however, was passed in July 7, 1988 and revised slightly in March 9, 1989, and is now in force. This Act is the execution of Article 10 of the constitution which prohibits sex discrimination in employment and asserts the state's responsibility to guarantee fundamental human rights, as well as being one step in implementing the national obligation agreed in the Convention on the Elimination of All Form of Discrimination against Women. The convention demanded that State Parties should take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment in order to ensure, on the basis of equality of men and women, the same rights: (Article 11 (1)) (Shin IR. 1994).

<sup>39</sup> This chaebol is known to hire comparatively fewer women than other chaebol because it does not have many 'feminine' departments or businesses that it believes are naturally suitable for women: in the first recruitment secession of two in 1996, less than 5% of the new recruits were women (*Monthly Recruit*, Aug 1996:91).

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **CULTURE AND GENDER RELATIONS IN KOREA**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

To understand the dynamics of gender relations in a particular society the social and cultural perception of masculine and feminine characteristics, and the roles they play in that society, must be taken into consideration. When considering 'gender' (or gender relations) in a society, it is hard to underestimate the critical importance of culture. This is because "gender is learned through a process of socialisation and through the culture of the particular society concerned", as Brett (1991: 3) points out. Dawit and Busia (1995: 8) also argues,

"Gender identity is a social construction, whose rationale is related to the biological difference between the sexes. The way in which gender identity is formed reflects the particular needs and worldview of each society. Culture and gender are thus intertwined, interdependent and mutually defining to a certain extent".

As gender relations are acquired through a process of socialisation and through the culture of the particular society concerned (A. Scott 1986; Moore 1988; Brett 1991), there is a considerable variation in gender roles between and within cultures,<sup>1</sup> each of which results in a specific form of gender relations. Therefore, the status of women and gender relations in a particular society cannot be assumed, but has to be explored and understood in their cultural specificity in each case.

Culture and traditional ideology play a vital role in shaping social structure, including gender relations, and can often having an adverse effect on women. In their study of Asian women, Afshar and Agarwal (1989:1) emphasised the importance of understanding the contradictory role of ideology, claiming that it can act both as a disabling and an enabling factor in the lives of women seeking to earn a livelihood for themselves and their families. According to them, in some parts of Asia (particularly south-western Asia) prevailing traditional ideologies impose restrictions on women's

participation in income-generating work by prescribing their confinement within circumscribed spaces, even while their economic situation necessitates wider involvement. On the other hand, freedom from such restrictions in much of southeast and parts of south Asia, coupled with prevalent traditional ideologies that encourage female employment and autonomy, and state policies opposing traditional restrictions, can support and complement women's attempts to survive and advance in economic terms. The importance of cultural influences on women's status and their labour participation in society has also been discussed elsewhere (e.g. Beneria and Sen 1981; Moore 1988; Brydon and Chant 1989; Lim 1990). An historical examination of women's status and gender relations within the specific social context of the time would, therefore, help establish the causes of societal interrelationships and how women came to assume their present status and role in society and in the labour force. This historical approach will encompass the development of gender attitudes by giving an overview of women's roles and status within their cultural traditions.

The focus of this chapter, then, is to explore the traditional culture in Korea (where contemporary culture embodies a strong Confucian tradition) as well as more recent socio-cultural influences and changes, and how they affect the lives of women. The chapter begins with an introduction to the concept and philosophy of Confucianism as practised in traditional Korea, followed by a discussion of the status and roles of women in it. The second part of the chapter examines how modernisation and other recent cultural influences on women and gender relations have shaped the culture of modern Korea - where Confucian tradition remains influential but has inevitably been affected by changes introduced through industrialisation and modernisation. The importance of these recent socio-cultural influences and changes in assisting women to attain their present status in society is considered and assessed. The final section focuses on the influence that Confucian ideology, and social discourses originating from this legacy, still have on women and gender relations today - how the pervading culture influences social structures and policies and how the traditionally-accorded image of women and their roles directly and indirectly affects their lives in modern Korea.

## 4.2 Traditional Culture and Gender Relations

### **The Confucian Tradition**

In recent years academic discussion in Korea has been marked by a re-evaluation of the impact of traditional traits in the modernisation process. While the rapid economic development of the country has attracted attention, and also some envy, academic writers and economists have suggested that there must be a connection between the country's economic achievements over the past few decades and its cultural tradition of Confucianism (e.g. Foster-Carter 1985; Eckert et al. 1990; Edwards 1992; Janelli 1993; SaKong 1993; Kim KD. 1994; McKay and Missen 1995; Koh BI. 1996; Lew SC. 1997; Hahm CB. 1997; Compton, Jr. 2000; Kim AE. and Park GS. 2003) - even though they might disagree as to the relative importance of the perceived influences.

In fact, the post-war economic rise of East Asia (evidenced particularly by Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore) has spurred a new interest in Confucianism (Eckert et al. 1990), and this has engendered an interesting if controversial debate centred around its possible influence on the economic and political developments in that region (e.g. Berger & Hsiao 1988; Tu 1996; Zhang 1999; Compton, Jr. 2000; Bell and Hahm 2003; Warner 2003). Even though the cultural origins of Asian politics derive from various sources, such as traditionalism, Confucianism, and Buddhism (Compton, Jr. 2000), it is recognised that Confucianism has been a major cultural underpinning or, at least, inspiration for many Asian countries including Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Vietnam, and the People's Republic of China (Kim BW. 1992; O'Harrow 1995; Rowley and Lewis 1996; Tu 1996; Song BN. 1997; Zhang 1999; Compton Jr. 2000; Roces and Edwards 2000; Brinton 2001; Warner 2003).

Confucian ethics have been seen as promoting certain distinctive characteristics in these countries, such as an emphasis on education, firm government leadership, an East Asian management style involving consensus formation and entrepreneurial spirit plus a strong work ethic (Song BN. 1997:52). While some observers attribute the competitiveness of these countries primarily to the 'education fever' and strict work ethic of their people, others argue that the strong administrative capabilities of state bureaucrats having Confucian backgrounds contribute more significantly to the success

of these new economies (Lew SC. 1997). Confucianism was once cited as an obstacle to economic growth on the grounds that it emphasised abstract rather than practical learning and that it disparaged commercial activity. Now, however, the economic prosperity of Japan, followed by the remarkable economic development of Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong and the more-recent advances in Vietnam and the People's Republic of China, suggest that Confucianism can readily be adapted to, and incorporated within, capitalism (ibid.).

Culture<sup>2</sup>, together with (social) institutions<sup>3</sup>, plays a critical role in explaining the economic and political development of a society (Rowley and Lewis 1996; Compton Jr. 2000; Warner 2003). According to Compton Jr. (2000:39), by viewing economic and political aspects of society as cultural constructs, as actions orchestrated by elites, it becomes possible to explain economic and political development from a cultural perspective. In this regard, Rowley and Lewis (1996:5) also recognise that it is because familial, societal and contractual values and relations are universally so important to human beings that many commentators have emphasised differences in culture as an explanatory variable of national economic performance. While Confucianism has been a significant common feature throughout East Asia, it can be expected to have a differential influence within the region as it interrelates differently with diverse cultural configurations in each society (Lowe 1996:121). According to Zhang (1999:167), this is particularly true in relation to economic development as these countries have displayed great differences over the past 100 years.

Today Korea is often believed to be the most Confucian country in East Asia, more so even than Taiwan or mainland China, not to mention Hong Kong or Japan (Koh BI. 1996; Brinton 2001).<sup>4</sup> Helgesen (1998:136) argues that Confucianism has been pinpointed as a main source of traditional values and cherished by a majority of Korean people, not specifically as Confucian but as representing "good old Korean values". This viewpoint is shared by some of my interviewees, such as:

"A large part of the so-called 'Korean culture and customs' is Confucian-influenced and can best be understood in a Confucian context. When we talk about traditional Korean values, we usually mean Confucian values, although without specifying them as such. While Confucianism can be criticised for its negative influence on contemporary society, it nevertheless represents some good traditional values that bond Koreans together" (fg61).

This traditional culture has been kept alive, even strengthened, during the years of modernisation. Rowley and Bae (2003:192) support this view by stating that Confucianism's fundamental influence remains in contemporary Korean society: Confucianism guides daily life, its social mores, values, way of thinking and modes of conduct centred on family life, with hierarchy, seniority and traditions paramount. It not only pervades people's lives and is the core of contemporary culture, the ideology also permeates the political and social structures of modern Korea (Kim BW. 1992; Kim KO. 1996 & 1998; Koh BI. 1996; Tu 1996; Hahm CB. 1997; Helgesen 1998 & 2003).<sup>5</sup> Many of my interviewees (e.g. mu5, mu16, mu17, mu25, mu31, mu35, mu41, fu21, fu43, fu45, fu51, fg60 fg61, fg62) acknowledged that their social and working environment was strongly influenced by Confucian tradition. Two representative quotations are:

“Most social organisations in Korea (including our workplace) still operate with Confucian ideas and a male-centred patriarchal system. Even though the situation is improving and becoming less traditional with time, the changes in social structure and the system take place slowly” (fu21).

“A considerate and close family-like atmosphere at work can be one of many examples of Confucian influence; close and protective relationships between fellow workers can sometimes extend to ‘covering’ for a colleague unable, due to a personal problem, to work so that he needn’t officially be recorded as absent. With such consideration and care from colleagues we feel as if this is not merely a workplace with operating relationships, but something deeper than that” (fg61).

Hahm CB. (1997:91) also suggests that Korea's political and economic development of the past 30 years, as well as its present policies for economic reform, are all strongly influenced by Confucian political discourse.<sup>6</sup>

While some negative aspects may subsist<sup>7</sup>, the Confucian cultural heritage has been widely praised for its positive effect on the country's development. For example some academics, such as Edwards (1992), have acknowledged that Korea's ‘economic miracle’ since the 1960s was based on early-twentieth century industrialisation (under Japanese colonisation) set within a strong Confucianist cultural identity that in turn

dates from the 14th century or even earlier. Kim KO. (1996:219) also points out that Confucian culture has been embraced by economic activity, arguing that Korea's 'miraculous' economic development since the 1970s has been achieved through the leadership of governments exercising patriarchal authority. In this context, other attributes, among many, of Confucianism, beneficial to commerce, are "its effect on policy formulation and implementation"<sup>8</sup> (SaKong 1993:205) and helping to produce an "educated and disciplined" workforce (Janelli 1993; Bae KH. and Chung CS. 1997; Song BN. 1997; Zhang 1999; Rowley and Bae 2003).

During the past half-century, Confucian traditions have undoubtedly been incorporated into the process of economic and political development and bureaucratisation in Korea, notwithstanding the governmental program of modernisation (Kim KO. 1998). Confucian practice can be observed not only among individuals but also on the wider public and national stage. Before discussing the influences of Confucian culture on gender relations in the public sphere and organisations, which critically relates to women's position at work, it is important first to understand Confucian tradition in its historical context and how it impacts on contemporary society.

What then is Confucianism? Compton Jr. (2000:39) explains that Confucianism is not a religion but a philosophy that sets the parameters of social structures and relations, including economic life. Helgesen (1998:104) also regards it as an ideology and a political strategy, as being concerned with realising the prescriptive suggestions for establishing an ideal society. According to Tu (1996:345), the Confucian faith is

"the betterment of the human condition through individual effort; commitment to family as the basic unit of society and to family ethics as the foundation of social stability; trust in the intrinsic value of moral education; belief in self-reliance, the work ethic, and mutual aid; and a sense of an organic unity with an ever-extending network of relationships all provide rich cultural resources for East Asian democracies to develop their own distinctive features."

The essence of Confucianism is, as Edwards (1992:101) suggests, a belief in the continuity of authority and hierarchy extending from the household family right up to the emperor, the 'son of heaven'; the family metaphor extends from the household, to the community, to the court, to the country.<sup>9</sup> Kim BW. (1992:82) argues that, under the



process of industrialisation, Confucian concepts of human relationships (known as the Five Human Relationships, see note 9) extended into industrial society: the virtue of benevolence by parents was transformed into a benevolent management style; the precept of loyalty to the ruler into loyalty to the company; the proper order between juniors and seniors into a payment system based on age; and the virtue of trustworthiness between friends into co-operation between co-workers.

The influence of Confucianism has permeated both public and private spheres of Korean society and has provided an element of social stability in a rapidly changing social and economic environment. It is now appropriate to examine how, historically, the principles of Confucianism were engendered and developed in Korea.

### **Historical Background**

Because it is a peninsula of the Asian continent geographically located adjacent to a powerful and populous neighbour, Korea has historically been subject to dominant influences from China,<sup>10</sup> of which the most powerful, especially on political and administrative systems, has been Confucianism (Eckert et al. 1990; Ro CH. 1993; Helgesen 1998). Traditional Confucianism was first introduced to Korea during the Three Kingdoms era (BC57-AD668), when leaders inculcated the Confucian ethic as a means of maintaining their aristocratic social order and cementing the solidarity of their societies (Eckert et al.1990). Although Buddhism became the official state religion during the Koryo dynasty (918-1392), at the beginning of the following Yi<sup>11</sup> dynasty (1392-1910) it was effectively banished and (neo-)Confucianism was restored to practical ascendancy (Kim BW. 1992; Ro CH. 1993; Cumings 1997; Helgesen 1998; Deuchler 2003). This neo-Confucianism was used to consolidate the power base of the new ruling elite, who were mostly young, reform-minded Confucian scholars, and helped them establish a highly centralised, authoritarian form of government which was mobilised to bring the underlying civic structure and social mores into line with the political philosophy of the ruling class (Ro CH. 1993).

In the Yi dynasty, the introduction of Confucian-influenced institutions and patriarchal values constituted a vigorous attempt to mould Korean society into a Confucian state (Kim JM. 1995). The predominant ideology of the Yi dynasty, which

lasted for over five centuries, was what is known as the neo-Confucianism<sup>12</sup> of Chu Hsi (Kim KD. 1988:202). Kim KD. (1988:202-3) argues that, as adopted and practiced in Korea, this form of Confucianism had become a very rigid ideology governing statecraft, principles of social organisation and human relations, and behavioural norms on the one hand, and a very abstract system of metaphysical ideas on the other. Neo-Confucianism became the ideological basis of a political, social, and economic reorganisation designed to promote social cohesion and stability and maintain the class system. Classical texts in Korea, such as the *Saryepyollam*<sup>13</sup>, exhort man to incorporate Confucian rituals and ethics into everyday life (Kim JM. 1995). As a result, traditional Korean society was closed and relatively stable; the stability was maintained by a hierarchical system that segregated people according to inherited social status, age, sex and generation (Cho H. 1987). Kim HS. (1993:50) explained the political reasoning behind this state indoctrination as follows:

“From the beginning of the Choson [Yi] dynasty, the dissemination of neo-Confucian tenets was pursued on a very large scale in order to prescribe and influence the culture of political institutions and individual human relationships of all kinds. The inculcation of Confucian principles was necessary to consolidate the patriarchal monarchy, because Confucianism was very effective in institutionalising individual moral values through its emphasis on the continuity between family and state. There was no moral or practical difference between the administration of the state by a sovereign and that of the family by a father. The sovereign's relationship to his subjects was constantly assimilated through the analogy of a father's relationship to family members, most specifically to his son and wife. These relationships were taken to be the fundamental form of human association in a Confucian society, i.e., those between sovereign and subjects, between father and son, and between man and wife”.

In Korean society, as Paik W. (1990:46) writes, the basic component of authoritarianism is the domination and submission relationships between people determined by status, age, classroom seniority, sex, and the like. Paik W. (ibid.:49) argues that the authoritarian nature of Korean society stems directly from the Confucian precept that emphasised superior and inferior relationships<sup>14</sup>, and that this inequality and distinction in relationships has remained deeply rooted in the minds of Korean people in contemporary society. According to him (ibid.: 40-50), the father-dominated family is, first of all, the most important factor in fostering a naturally authoritarian

character in Korean people. A second important factor is the system of seniority; the social order in Korea is to a great extent maintained by the subordination of the younger to the older, and the paternalistic concern of the older for the younger. A third factor, the Confucian ruler-subject relationship, Paik believes, still influences Korean politics today. The leader always reigns over the followers<sup>15</sup>; the traditional practice of considering the status of governmental bureaucrats as being above that of the people is still prevalent. The final factor that is considered important in engendering an authoritarian character among Koreans is the historical prevalence of male dominance generally. Korean women were effectively secluded from all social activities and confined within the home, as will be described later in the following section. Paik (p51) further conclusively explains that, with so many factors emphasising a social order based on inequality of relationships, a person's frame of mind is essentially geared to that of an authoritarian and a hierarchical order. This was also confirmed by my chaebol interviewees (e.g. mu5, fu10, fu18, mu22, mu27, mu31, mu41, mu42, fu44, mu45, fu46, fu51), and will be considered in more detail in Chapter 5.

### **Confucian Influences on Korean Women and Their Lifestyle**

Even though Confucian values pervaded and influenced the lives of all Koreans during the Yi dynasty, they inflicted particularly harsh restrictions on women, and enormous effort and resources were directed to train and indoctrinate women to conform to Confucian ideals (Chang YS. 1983; Kendall and Peterson 1983; Deuchler 1992; Jahan 1992; Kim HS. 1993; Cho KW. 1994; Hoffman 1995; Kim JM. 1995; Kang SJ. 1998; Deuchler 2003; Haboush 2003). According to Deuchler (2003:144), the inequalities imposed on women and their offspring by Confucian ideology were much more pronounced than in China. Before this time, norms and ideology had been neither so oppressive nor discriminating towards women. For example, in the Silla dynasty (57 BC – AD 935) the right of a female to head the family was acknowledged: there were three women rulers, and mothers of young kings acted as regents - often exerting enormous political influence and power (Kim YC. 1976: ch.3). During the Koryo period (918-1392), Buddhism was predominant and women and men interacted relatively freely outside the home (Chang YS. 1983:68; also see Lee KJ. 1994;

Deuchler 2003). During this time, marriage involved the bridegroom living in his wife's parents' home until children were born and raised, and remarriage by women was widely practised and socially accepted. Rules of property inheritance did not discriminate between the sexes. It seems, therefore, clear that it was largely the later influence of neo-Confucianism that led to the deterioration of the social and economic status of Korean women (Chang YS. 1983; Ha HK. 1985; Wade and Seo 1996; Haboush 2003). The particular version of neo-Confucian philosophy that was incorporated into Korean society during the era of the Yi dynasty was fundamentally patriarchal in its construction of women's roles and status.

According to this neo-Confucianism, the 'inferiority' of women originated from the nature of the cosmic world. Beliefs concerning the relationship between man and woman were derived from the principle of Yin-Yang: Yang is the symbol of the heavens and Yin the symbol of the earth (Kim JM. 1995). Man was likened to the heavens in Confucian philosophy, meaning superior, dominant, and strong - while women were associated with the earth, inferior, submissive, and gentle (Chang YS. 1983; Kim JM. 1995)<sup>16</sup>. According to this principle, a woman (the earth) should follow the decisions of man (the heaven) and must sacrifice her instincts in order to satisfy man's will, thereby becoming a virtuous woman (Kim JM. 1995). The 'virtuous conduct' prescribed by the Confucians for women was well illustrated in *Naehun* ('Instructions for Women')<sup>17</sup> which is considered to be the most important and influential textbook for women during this period, according to Deuchler (1992 & 2003). *Naehun* taught girls the four basic rules of womanly behaviour: moral conduct – women need not have great talents, but must be quiet and serene, chaste and disciplined; proper speech – women need not have rhetorical talents, but must avoid bad and offensive language and speak with restraint; proper appearance – women need not be beautiful, but must be clean in dress and appearance; and follow womanly tasks – women need not be clever, but must pay attention to such duties as weaving and entertaining guests (1992: 257).

By analysing the books of instruction and guidance for Yi dynasty women, including *Naehun*, Kim JM. (1995) argues that in feudal times the Korean state emphasised a hierarchical social order which subordinated women to men. As a result,

males were valued as important in everyday life, and females as trivial. Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that the core members of the traditional family in patriarchal Korea were men, and that the family structure was based on a strict, male-centred hierarchy with a masculine head of household (Cho OL. 1985; see also Cho YH. and Yoon JK. 2002; Haboush 2003). Deuchler (1992:264)<sup>18</sup> further describes the traditional family structure and the position of women in it as follows:

“In Confucian terms, the family was a judicially self-sufficient unit within which domestic peace had to be preserved and disputes among its members smoothed over by ideological values that stressed the hierarchical structure of the family and the male-centred distribution of authority. Although women were responsible for the day-to-day operation of the family and thus largely determined the quality of the domestic atmosphere, highest authority over the family members and their behaviour was lodged in the family or household head.”

Under Confucian doctrine women were largely defined by their roles - as a daughter dependent upon her father, as a mother dependent upon her husband, and as a widow dependent upon her son. Her life cycle was therefore continually dependent on the males in her family. Women were obliged to follow men's decisions on all occasions, and regard their husbands as undisputed heads of their families. The relationship between husband and wife was maintained on the basis, not of equality and affection, but of domination and submission, and the husband-wife relationship was similar to that of king-subject (Kim JM. 1995).

This gender difference in the family was even more evident in ritual life where the male role was regarded as sacred and the female role as profane. Kim JM. suggests, in his study of *Saryepyollam*, that ancestor worship (‘*che-sa*’), which is the main ritual for the men, encompasses the concepts of hierarchy, spatial separation and role-division between male and female, and as such contributes to a male-centred worldview. In this ritual, suggests Kim, women are defined as ‘other than men’, and their otherness is emphasised in ritual situations by the placing of women peripherally.

With the emergence of a lineage-based society in the middle of the Yi dynasty, women's chastity also became an issue of paramount concern<sup>19</sup> (Kim JM. 1995; Lee BY. 1995:15; Deuchler 2003:160). In order to protect their chastity, girls were not allowed to sit with boys after the age of seven. Even among family members it was

thought inappropriate for men to come into contact with women. Confucian discourse, such as *nam-nyeo-gu-byeol* ('difference between men and women'), was widely propagated to promote clear gender differentiation and also to ensure a proper spatial distribution within the household. Houses were divided into inner (for women) and outer (for men) rooms and they ate meals at separate tables. In this way women were not only kept separate from men but also confined to their own space, and restricted from entering 'men's space,' both in family and ritual life.

As far as their productive role was concerned, women's work was restricted to the domestic circle, with some variation according to social status. For example, upper-status women concerned themselves with home management and household production, while their female servants looked after household labour and personal services. On the other hand the wives and daughters of commoners, representing the majority of women, worked on family farms or in household businesses. While for this latter category of women the boundaries between work and home would have been unclear, the rules of separation between the sexes must have restricted somewhat their active participation in outside-the-home economic activities (Cho H. 1987). The Confucian code, laws and customs strictly prescribed the women's place as inside the house; external matters belonged to the domain of men. Consequently, women in late Yi dynasty society were, excepting occasional royal figures, confined to the domestic realm (the 'inner room') and excluded altogether from public affairs (Kendall et al. 1983; Choi E. 1994; Wade and Seo 1996; Haboush 2003)<sup>20</sup>.

Ideologically Confucianism, according to Deuchler (1992:259), postulated a clear delineation of the male and female spheres of influence, with the public domain dominating the domestic. She further argues that this social division was accentuated by the emphasis Confucianism laid on kinship organisation as the backbone of the patrilineal family system (see also Haboush 2003). As a result of Confucian philosophy, the social status and living conditions of women in the Yi dynasty was markedly inferior to that of men. The idea of respecting men and belittling women, while at the same time constantly stressing their obedience and chastity, became a fundamental concern that dominated the lives of Korean women. The extent of these gendered practices was widespread, and to ensure obedience a number of restrictive mandates

came to regulate women's lives and behaviour during the period (Chang YS. 1983). These mandates illustrate well the degree to which Korean women at that time suffered oppression and sexual discrimination:

- i) Marriage was arranged by parents; prospective partners were given no voice in the selection process.
- ii) After marriage, a woman belonged to her husband's family; visits to her own family were kept to a minimum.
- iii) Women were not able to retain formal names but were identified by their position relative to men or by the place of their geographic origin; at marriage, the name of her maiden family only was recorded in the husband's household registry.
- iv) Females could not perpetuate the family line; if there was no son from the first wife, a male relative would be adopted or the husband would bring in another wife to bear a son.
- v) Women could not perform ceremonies worshipping their own ancestors.
- vi) Widows could not remarry; they were expected to look after their in-laws even after their husband's death.
- vii) From the age of seven a girl should not sit with a boy; when she reached the age of ten she could not move at will outside the house.
- viii) Women were not allowed to stroll in their gardens nor venture out during daytime.
- ix) Outside the house women were required to veil their face.
- x) Mature women were not supposed to be seen by men who were not close relatives.
- xi) Married women were not free to speak directly to strangers.

This control of woman within her family, in terms of marriage, education, sexuality, and the metaphysical indoctrination of Confucian values, was essential for the establishment and consolidation of the Confucian polity. According to Kim HS. (1993), the Confucian political system could not have been upheld unless the patriarchal institution of the family was maintained. This, in turn, was not possible without emphasising women's chastity, obedience to men (father, husband, son) and house work (including serving in-laws), and their obligation to produce a son to perpetuate the family line and hold memorial services for ancestors. Separate aspirations and independent initiatives for women, including efforts to improve their social status and identity, were not allowed; submissiveness was regarded as the highest womanly virtue. Interestingly, Deuchler (2003:165) argues that, within this social climate, elite women in the Yi dynasty were able to develop an inner disposition that allowed them not only

to find a meaningful place in this order but also to retain a sense of their own identity: self-confident in their ability to fulfil successfully the responsibilities of daughter, wife, and mother they, no less than men, contributed to the perpetuation of the Confucian system well into the twentieth century.

#### 4.3 Modernisation and Other Recent Cultural Influences on Women

Before evaluating the extent to which the strong, traditional gender hierarchy has influenced the status and conditions of women in today's society, it is important to acknowledge that Confucian tradition is not the only component of contemporary Korean culture. Since the early part of the twentieth century Koreans have also been subject to external, non-traditional cultural influences when modernisation<sup>21</sup> began in earnest. Towards the end of the extended Yi period (throughout the 18th and the 'eye-opening' 19th centuries), the country progressively came into contact with Western influences and culture, including those of Christianity introduced by missionaries. According to Ro CH. (1993:41), the most significant factor and true source of Korea's modernisation process was perhaps the introduction of Christianity<sup>22</sup> in the late nineteenth century. It encouraged the spread of education and generated ideals of democracy and modern thought, thereby unleashing indigenous independence movements and allowed the 'progressive' *Shil-Hak* (Practical Learning) school to play a significant role in Korea's early modernisation efforts (Kim YC.1976:195). These influences, as some argue (Yu EY. 1987; Lee BY. 1995:25-30), helped weaken the class system and the rigid barriers between the sexes, and promote the education and advancement of women. The succeeding period of Japanese occupation (1910-1945), however, saw often-brutal repression of many of these initiatives (Ro CH. 1993). In spite of this, the spread of Christianity, Japanese-inspired industrialisation, expansion of a modern education system, and also Korean independence movements, all served to provide some improvement in the lot of women (Yu EY. 1987). There was also some cultural infusion from the West as a result of American engagement: the intervention by the United States at and after the end of World War II undoubtedly had a major impact



on current Korean society<sup>23</sup>; the subsequent Korean War, in which other Western countries also participated, was undeniably an important influence.

During the post-independence period (1945-present) the concept of equality of the sexes, having been written into the 1948 Constitution, led to the attainment of major improvements in education. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, only men were given formal education and women, with little conventional schooling, had to look after the home and bear children to maintain the family line. Although education for women (and men) has improved dramatically since the beginning of the last century, the difference in educational attainment between the sexes is still apparent. Girls still receive less schooling than boys; for example, as recently as 1985 males spent more than two years longer in formal education - 9.7 years compared with 7.6 years for females (Chang SJ. et al. 1991:15).<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the educational attainment of working women has advanced considerably in recent decades and has accordingly affected their labour participation. The proportion of female employees with higher education has increased as modernisation and development has encouraged female enrolment in institutions of higher learning, and at the same time women's attitudes towards their participation in paid employment and their career aspirations have changed. In a study published in 1985 (Chung and Chang 1985:42), 79.5 percent of female university student respondents expressed their intention to work for the duration of their capable life - while in 1970, when a similar study was done, only 28.2 percent of all respondents had a corresponding view and 40.4 percent said that they would continue only until marriage.

Chang SJ. et al. (1991:40) anticipated that, as more women receive higher education and are better motivated to engage in economic activities, an increasing number of educated and experienced women would engage in professional and skilled work and would take senior administrative and supervisory posts, and that this trend would accelerate. Together with the improvement in educational opportunities, economic development and industrialisation in recent years has engendered numerous and significant social changes bringing, in particular, a great expansion in employment opportunities for women (as well as men), as was referred to earlier in Chapter 3. This

has led to a dramatic increase in the proportion of women in employment, and they clearly now constitute a major component in the country's work force<sup>25</sup>.

It is also encouraging that a new awareness of women's oppression has recently developed, which has given birth to an active social movement which seeks 'new values and a new culture' (Lee SJ. 1993) for gender equality. The women's-rights movement is relatively new in Korea, and concern with issues of gender equality and equal opportunity is quite recent - even though historically women's societies have long been in existence.<sup>26</sup> The 1980s were a time of major expansion for the women's movement in the country. Groups and organisations that identified with women's rights were formed in major cities and increasing numbers of women became involved in programmes addressing questions of female labour, urban poverty, environmental and consumer issues, community childcare, more-democratic education, and other matters affecting the culture of the country. However, there was no systematically organised body dealing with feminist theory in Korea (Cho SK. 1994), and Palley (1994:292) wrote of the situation of women, "what is most significant seems to be the very fact that the question of women's rights is discussed at all". Media presentations, Western education, and the rise of women's studies programs have all affected the emergence of the movement (ibid.). Moreover, some of the concerns that women's groups articulate have moved onto the nation's policy agenda; for example, the gender issue was included as part of the government policy of promoting 'globalisation' in the mid-1990s (Cho U. 1996), as has already been discussed in the last section of the previous chapter.

What then does 'globalisation' mean in Korea, and how has it affected Korean society in the last decade or so? When President Kim Young-Sam assumed office in early 1993, he proclaimed that "*seggyehwa*", globalisation of the economy and society, was his central objective (Mimiko 1996:360). The Korean economy in the early 1990s was regarded as simultaneously facing both threatening challenges and new opportunities from its internationalisation<sup>27</sup>. During the previous thirty years of rapid expansion, the economy was steadily internationalised. However, the degree of internationalisation<sup>28</sup> achieved is considered still to lag behind the growth and sophistication of the domestic Korean economy (Ha DM. 1994). It is also recognised in Korea that the world economy appears to be taking on the character of a 'global-village':

this would underscore the importance of 'globalisation' policies designed further to open up Korea to the world (Kim IJ. 1995). The following statement of President Kim (1995:118)<sup>29</sup> justifies the necessity for the new policy.

"Globalisation is the quickest way to build the republic into a first-rate nation in the coming century. .... Our perspectives, attitudes, institutions and practices must all be elevated to global standards. .... It is the only way for us to go. There is no other choice. Therefore, I set globalisation as the foremost national goal for this year."

Consequently, the Kim government (1993-98) explicitly set about encouraging the country, both economically and culturally, to become more internationalised and globalised. During the 1990s, "*seggyehwa*" (globalisation) became a fashionable word frequently used in Korean business society with the growing recognition that 'globalised living' is an important part of new societal developments (Lee SJ. 1993; SaKong 1993; Lee HK. 1994; Kim YT. 1998; Bae and Rowley 2001). The concept of 'globalisation' has since become popular in Korean public debate<sup>30</sup>. This was because it was believed to describe a policy that would help increase and strengthen Korea's influence and presence abroad (for example, by establishing more overseas manufacturing plants), and has been interpreted to persuade Koreans that they stand to benefit from closer economic integration with the rest of the world. It has become clear that the country is increasingly exposed to, and must compete in, a global economy and society. Korea, realistically still at a developmental stage, must play by the rules of advanced countries while at the same time competing with other developing countries (Sun HS. 1995).

However, in the pursuit of globalisation to ensure Korea's survival and enhance its prosperity in global competition, there are some major tasks. Above all, government policy should be aimed at making Koreans "cosmopolitan and open-minded citizens of the global community" (Soh JA. 1994). According to Lee HK. (1994), some of the major obstacles to successful internationalisation and globalisation originate from the nation's political and cultural traditions, which are primarily based on Confucianism. This view was also shared by some of my interviewees, for example:

"While Confucian influence may have been one of the major reasons for Korean companies' success so far, it may also be an obstacle to the further development

of Korean business due to the traditional rigid mind-set” (mu41, a chaebol employee).

“The movement towards ‘globalisation’ that was strongly encouraged by the Kim government in the mid 90s proved a kind of failure in the sense that, although widely debated and discussed, the necessary fundamental changes in the mindset of Korean people and their institutional structures never really materialised. While claiming to embrace ‘globalisation’, we were repeating the same old things with the same mentality and customs that were deeply rooted in Confucian tradition” (mb64, an ex-president of a chaebol, now a business consultant).

Ha DM. (1994) believes that the type of internationalisation that Korea is pursuing<sup>31</sup> will only be possible when supported by the internationalisation of every sector of society - including education and culture, as well as the economy. As Kim HC. (1996: 83) explains, "the concept of globalisation encompasses a wide domain. It goes beyond the idea of opening up domestic markets or urging local firms to advance overseas. It encompasses also the idea of sharing common values and quality of life as citizens of the world".

In summary, the development and modernisation of Korea in the twentieth century, and most intensively during the past few decades, has transformed both the country's economy and its culture. Traditional Korean values have been tested, particularly by economic and demographic changes since the 1950s: consciously or unconsciously, many 'non-Korean' values and mores were introduced and adopted by Korean society during the period of rapid modernisation (Kim KO. 1998; Moon SS. 2003). Confucianism as the dominant ideology has certainly been fading in Korea – as it is elsewhere in East Asia (Koh BI. 1996). In spite of the difficulty in assessing the impact of these diverse changes and influences upon the beliefs, values, and attitudes of Koreans, it is indisputable that the country is in the process of changing from a traditional into a modern society<sup>32</sup>. According to Helgesen (1998), the findings in his study indicate that people are both traditional and modern, and tension between tradition and modernity is acknowledged by most people in Korea.<sup>33</sup> This tension may also be inherent in the working environment, as a female government employee (fg61) suggests:

“Although we live in a modern society and work in a modern workplace, it is often confusing to know how to behave and relate to work and colleagues. The organisation of the workplace and work systems should in principle be logical and rational; yet in reality logic and rationality can be blurred by our ‘Korean’ mentality and ways of approaching and handling things. For example, work efficiency can become secondary to personal politics and affected by special connections and relationships with superiors, the extent of which can be extreme. For example, if one works hard during working hours and leaves on time (or before others) one can be criticised for being ‘selfish’ and individualistic. On the other hand, if someone is lazy during the day but works late until the boss leaves he is considered loyal and hard-working, and with better opportunities for a successful career. It seems that the structure is Western while the contents are Korean; this is often contradictory and illogical and can be frustrating for us, but that is the way it is in Korean workplaces.”

The consequential, sometimes contradictory, association of traditional (and nationalist) ideology with external cultural and political influences in the growth process has frequently posed cultural and political challenges<sup>34</sup>. The prime cultural challenge would undoubtedly have been to maintain and develop a uniquely Korean identity in the face of an intense barrage of foreign cultural influences (Eckert et al. 1990). How to be both modern and Korean at the same time remains a deeply felt problem in society (Eckert et al. 1990:414), and the meaning of tradition and modernity seems to vary according to a person’s political ideology and generation (Kim CS. 1992:200). One chaebol employee (mu2) expressed a similar view on this matter:

“The ways of thinking and attitudes vary a lot according to individuals and generations. The new generation, who tend to be more liberal, individualistic and ‘westernised’, think and act differently. They usually do not live up the expectations of the previous generation, who seem to value more the traditional ‘Korean’ culture. In general, the legacy of traditional culture appears to be weakening. This tendency is also present at the workplace where there is a big gap between younger employees and older senior members of the firm in their attitudes towards work and their interaction with colleagues.”

#### 4.4 Gender Relations in Contemporary Korea

While the patriarchal Confucian tradition has endured, the country’s economic development and cultural modernisation has increasingly exposed its society to non-

traditional, international influences so that contemporary Koreans face conflicting viewpoints on the role and status of women. On the one hand traditional Confucianism, with its strongly patriarchal notions about women, remains persistently influential, while on the other hand a more contemporary conception of equality between men and women is taking root and questioning the former perspective. Korean women are facing conflicting experiences and challenges in their everyday life, at home and in society at large. They frequently find themselves caught between these contrasting ideologies - the strongly sex-discriminative Confucian tradition and the more liberating, less-gendered new ideology derived from modernisation and international influences. A female employee (ff55) of a foreign-owned company, who had lived abroad for a number of years, gives her views on this subject as follows:

“Most women, especially graduates, now consider work after education as desirable, if not essential, to match the image of a modern woman. Historically, some women might have attended university partly to marry well and then settle down as a housewife. Nowadays, even the concept of an ideal bride in the marriage market has changed to someone with a privileged job (e.g. in a foreign company or chaebol) rather than ‘at home preparing herself to be a future wife’. Nevertheless, these concepts of working women are still not as contemporary or westernised as in some countries like the USA, according to my own experiences. The legacy of Confucianism causes women to be less confident about their ability as workers, less ambitious, and more likely to consider work as an option if pleasant enough. Subsequently, if really challenged they may give up and settle for marriage and being a housewife. But it is not easy for women to think and act differently in the face of the sex-discriminative working environment and gendered social expectations.”

This dilemma was also recognised by Kim SN. (1997) in her study of the presentation of Korean women in the mass media. According to her, women were portrayed in Korean media, such as women’s magazines, as both progressive and traditional role models at the same time. At this stage, it would be useful to examine the situation that Korean women find themselves in at present. What kind of cultural environment do they live in? What kind of status do they have and what roles do they play? To what extent have they overcome the impediment of the strong gender-discriminative traditional culture?

As far as gender relations and the status of women in society are concerned, these may have altered to a certain extent as part of societal change; yet a measure of

inequality still remains. The cultural tradition that distorted women's existence through gender discrimination, as described earlier in this chapter, was not merely a problem confined to traditional Confucian texts. The core of the patriarchal discourse, and the sexism that originated in this cultural tradition, has been continued until the present and is evident in many aspects of modern life in Korea. The legacy still stigmatises women, and the customs of male superiority still permeate every aspect of women's lives. One example of this is the continuing dominance of men over women (*nam-jon-yeo-bie*). This notion of *nam-jon-yeo-bie* was originally extended to traditional sex discrimination in society and male dominance in the family. Not only was the power of a patriarch guaranteed in law<sup>35</sup>, it was also (and often still is) customarily exercised in important facets of everyday life, such as the still-important ritual of ancestor worship (*che-sa*) which is based on the principles of patrilineality, and from which women are excluded.

Elaine Kim's study (1998) on constructions of women, gender, and masculinity clearly shows how contemporary Korean men and women conceive their gender roles, and how they view their expectations for the opposite sex. According to her, women of all classes accept the sexual division of labour; she supports this with some illuminating quotations: one woman described how she viewed "Korean traditions" (referred to by Kim as the "Confucian patriarchal ideal"):

"I think sex [gender] roles are just fine the way they are. Korea has an excellent tradition. I like to see men be the pillar and women the support . . . Women should never surpass men. Anyway, the basic roles of men and women will never change" (the 38-year-old wife of an airline executive, interviewed and cited by Kim E. 1998: 90).

Kim states that most of the men she interviewed expressed a belief in the notion of hierarchical opposition between men and women. A male respondent of hers stated this clearly:

"It is genetically ordained that men should win over women. Think about it: can a dog give birth to a rabbit or a rabbit have a puppy? Men and women are physiologically different. If you don't agree with my opinion now, you will in the future. God made it this way; that's why He made two sexes. I am on the outside, and my wife is on the inside. Is that system not efficient? Of course, if I were a woman I might not like it, but I am a man" (Dr. Y., the director of a large hospital in Seoul, cited by Kim E. 1998:73).

A quotation from one of my interviewees, recalling her earlier-life experience in her family in the 1970's, shows the nature and extent in which gender roles were perceived and hierarchy maintained in modern Korea:

“When I was young, I excelled at school and consequently I was usually relieved from helping with household chores - that most girls in other families had to do. Boys were of course excused from chores because they were boys. This was rather unusual as my parents did not treat me unfairly because I was a daughter. But after my elder brother failed to enter a university because of poor exam results, I was not even allowed to apply to a university. It was unimaginable for my parents to allow a daughter to surpass her elder brother by securing a university degree that he couldn't have. If I had been a boy, it would have been quite different” (fg62\*<sup>36</sup>: a manager in her early 50s, working in a governmental organisation).

These gender-discriminative practices are rarely challenged but still pervasive in the minds and lives of family members, as well as society. As a result, women still take secondary positions and remain in marginal roles (Han JS. 1996) in the family, a practice which is reflected in society in general.

Women in contemporary Korea not only have a secondary status to men, but also continue to be assessed first and foremost by their traditional, primary roles as wives and mothers. The image of the ideal woman as mother and wife, rather than merely herself, is still deeply entrenched in modern Korean values, and the role model of '*hyeon-mo-yang-cheo*' (wise mother, obedient wife) is what society demands and to which many Korean women aspire. A classic example of this tendency is described by a female chaebol employee (fu32-D1)<sup>37</sup>:

“I have this female colleague at work who has become a close friend. Her mother (who is the wife of a doctor and has had an easy, comfortable life) frequently tells her that the happiest and best life for a woman is to marry well and stay at home. She even told her not even to dream of marrying anyone other than a doctor or a lawyer. I know that my colleague wouldn't dream of having a life-time career, and therefore would leave work when she is married. For her the ultimate goal is to be a good wife to a successful man and to stay at home to look after her family.”

Being consequently expected to make any necessary sacrifices for her family, a married woman is supposed to look after not only her immediate family but that of her husband as well. According to Kim E. (1998), many of the women interviewed in her study on



gender relations in contemporary Korea believed (like male interviewees) that, in the ideal family wives should be responsible for the care of the young and the elderly, and should provide sympathy, encouragement, and relief for men from the anxieties of their work and the burden of household management. Partly for this reason, her female interviewees felt that wives should be 'inside' people, tender and nurturing, while husbands should be assertive, go-getting 'outside' people.<sup>38</sup>

Since women have traditionally been excluded from any social, economic or political activities outside the domestic sphere (Cho H. 1992), this practice has become accepted as the social norm with which most contemporary Koreans (both men and women) feel comfortable - even if many contemporary Korean women work outside the home. Kim IG.'s study (1995) is most informative in this regard. According to her, a survey in 1995 by *Monthly Win*<sup>39</sup> showed that slightly more than half (56.8 percent) of the respondents thought that an ideal family should be composed of the husband as breadwinner and the wife as housekeeper – while those aged in their 50s (67.4 percent) thought that the traditional division of work between husband and wife was ideal (p88). Interestingly, however, it also found that 85 percent of all respondents supported both husband and wife working outside the home, and that more women (87.9 percent) believed in the idea of a dual-income family than did men (82 percent), while more men (62.5 percent) supported the traditional family than did women (51.1 percent) (ibid.). This seems to suggest a disparity between the ideology of Korean people and the reality, and a gender gap in attitudes towards the suitability of traditional living in contemporary society. One female employee (fu44\*-P), interviewed during my research, strongly protested against 'traditional' living in present day Korea as follows:

“It is not right to think as if we were living as we were in the past, when women stayed at home and were financially dependent on their men. This shouldn't be the case in modern society, when women go out to work and gain financial independence for themselves. We must change our way of thinking and life style in order to keep up with (and fit in with) the changes occurring in society.”

The dynamics of change affecting the lot of working women may encompass changes in the structure of households and families. As society has undergone profound social change in recent years, it has brought about an increase in nuclear families; due to the success of the government's active family planning campaign, the size of the family

unit has reduced significantly (Choe SY. 1994). However, these changes can be deceptive, argues Choe SY. (ibid.): the male-dominated value system that has supported the asymmetrical power structure of the patriarchal family remains firmly entrenched. Choe further suggests that, despite changes in the physical organisation of the family, traditional Confucian ethics, stressing patrilineage, filial piety, solidarity among brothers and the importance of domestic harmony, still pervade the Korean family and that, as a result, the traditional gender division of labour persists. Others (e.g. Koh BI. 1996; Song BN. 1997; Hampson 2000) agree in that in spite of significant changes in the Korean family structure during the recent rapid national development, adherence to Confucian family values remains strong.

Kim JM.'s (1995) study of contemporary rural life, which explores the characteristics of the daily social order in a typical country village, confirms the strong influence of traditional culture and the ensuing tendency towards gender differentiation and sexual division of labour in that society. In the study, Kim showed that the social status of women in the village did not increase correspondingly with an increase in their participation in economic activities. Women's status, she concluded, could be better explained by cultural factors than by economic ones. The particular cultural factors cited were: the social structure of the patriarchal family, the system of inheritance, and marital patrilocality, all reinforced by traditional concepts of, for example, the predominance of men over women, preference for male children, and acceptance of women as 'inside persons' and men as 'outside persons'. These concepts seemed to persist in spite of the increased economic activities. In this instance, a woman's economic participation is even perceived as an integral part of the role of housewife. Despite changes in the social system, such as an increase in the number of women engaged in waged work, the cultural system had not changed; the 'female is inferior' perception was still evident in the village (ibid.).<sup>40</sup>

In contemporary Korea, where a woman's place still is seen to be in the home, the reproductive role of women with full childcare responsibilities has been a major obstacle to their active involvement in paid work and equal treatment for employment opportunities. Despite the growing incidence of the nuclear family, custom still prevents a woman who is living with her parents-in-law from asking them to help with childcare

or other household chores in order to allow her to work (Pearson 1992a).<sup>41</sup> With little family support working women in Korea remain at a disadvantage in the labour market, as they often find it difficult, in an environment where they have to cope with ‘single parenting’, to devote themselves sufficiently to work or to remain long enough to acquire needed tenure and skills. The challenges for a working mother are well illustrated in the following quotation by a male interviewee (mu2), referring to his wife:

“As it was impossible for my wife to keep her full-time work while caring for the new born baby or securing nearby help after her short maternity leave, she decided to leave the infant with her mother (in another city, 3-4 hours drive away). She visits whenever she can during weekends; however, I haven’t seen the baby for the last 4 months as I have been very busy with my working life. It is tough, but we may have to continue like this for a while.”

This issue will be further explored, with women’s own experiences, in Chapters 8.

Another important example of the way that traditional Confucian culture still affects women’s lives in modern Korea is well illustrated by the development and status of women’s education, which is closely linked with their status and working conditions when employed. As will be shown in later chapters, particularly Chapter 7, the socialisation process and their formal education seem to be critical factors for Korean women, affecting their participation in employment and the way they approach work – generally considered to be quite different from those of their male colleagues. This point was frequently mentioned in interviews with office employees (e.g. fu18\*, mu22, fu32, fg60, fg62), some of whom admitted that the most important things that affected their attitude towards their career and life in general were their home environment and early education. Two quotations from female employees support this:

“Although I am quite happy with what I do, I sometimes wonder whether I have fully achieved my potential. When I was young my parents had different expectations for me as a girl from those they had for my brother. They sometimes discouraged my academic ambition by saying, ‘You are a girl. You don’t need to aim that high. Just that will do’. When I faced some important decisions for my education and career opportunities, I seemed to choose easier alternatives, feeling that they were more sensible for a girl” (fg60\*, a graduate government employee).

“Compared with most of my female contemporaries, I would consider myself to be less affected by the traditional image of women as secondary citizens,

inferior or less capable than men. I believe that I am as capable as a man. This is, perhaps, mainly because of my childhood upbringing: both of my parents were middle-class professionals, and my father always regarded my mother highly, recognising her (professional) ability and supporting her career development - which was rare in their time. Also, the fact that for several years in my early teens I was able to live abroad and be educated in the West influenced the way I regard myself” (ff55, working in one of the most-privileged foreign companies in Seoul, with a Master’s degree from a highly-regarded American university).

In spite of the generally-improved access for women to public and higher education, the legacy of sex-discriminatory Confucian values and teachings (such as male-centred doctrine and patrilineal ideology) still holds a profound influence over the upbringing of family daughters in Korea. It is hardly surprising that parents still tend to concentrate their scarce economic resources on educating sons. Sons, after all, always remain within the family, carry on the family line, and traditionally bear responsibility for keeping their parents in their old age, while daughters leave on marriage – even though there are indications that this tradition is now weakening<sup>42</sup>. An example of girls being less-favourably treated by their family in educational opportunities is typically demonstrated by the following case of a female high-school leaver (fh49):

“When I had to decide which high-school I should go to, my brother was just entering university. Since it would be difficult for our family to afford sending two children to university, I was forced to chose a commercial high school rather than a normal one (which usually prepare students for university). At the time I accepted it as a fact of life, but now regret it and wish to go to university.”

Another case illustrates the different expectations and treatment for girls by the family. The following quotation is from a hard-working government employee (fg60) who is married with a child, and who thought she could have had a more successful career if she had been treated as her brother at home.

“My elder bother was sent to a boarding school in a large city for a better education, which enabled him to go to a good university and improved his chances of a successful career. Meanwhile, since I was a girl, I had to attend the local school in a small town where I could commute from home. I was also taught to follow my parents’ advice, with many restrictions, especially in major life decisions rather than doing what I wanted; my future was being directed by them. One important example was that they advised me to go to a teacher’s college, which I didn’t particularly wish to do. They must have thought it was

best for me since it was safe and secure, less competitive and an easier life for a woman if she wanted a career. Even though my parents loved me as much they did my brother, with little preference or discrimination, I believe that they brought me up as a 'girl' to adjust to the existing society and fit in comfortably, rather than be different, so that I could have a less-troubled life."

During my interviews with female employees it was interesting to discover that a substantial number of female high-school leavers (and sometimes graduates) expressed their deep desire and determination to educate themselves well in order to secure better employment opportunities (see Chapter 8 for further discussion on this matter).

Formal education in Korea is itself sexually discriminatory, not only in equality of opportunity provided by families but also in the teaching content at schools. The importance of formal education is well stated by Chung SW. (1986) who argues that schools accommodate socialisation through systematic organisation, and education plays a vital role in the democratisation of woman as well as in promoting equality in gender relations. Recognising the importance of school education as a major development process that has far-reaching effects on the position of women (and other disadvantaged groups), Boserup (1990) also argues that the role of school systems is not only to teach intellectual skills and scientific knowledge, but also to indoctrinate pupils with the dominant cultural values. According to her, however, cultural education for both girls and boys often (whether deliberately or unintentionally) consists of imparting traditional prejudices against members of the female sex. The early social experiences within the family, as well as later experiences in schools, serve to contribute to a feeling of superiority in boys and inferiority in girls (ibid.). One interviewee (fw63\*, married after her Master's degree; currently a housewife and part-time voluntary worker for a women's rights organisation) recalls her own school-days experience, which demonstrates how powerful the impact of schooling can be on girls in shaping their view of life and themselves as women.

"It was when I was in junior high school, a mixed school but with sex-segregated classes: one day a male ethics teacher came into the class to announce the overall examination results for the month, and compared the academic performance of girls and boys. He said that although the top three academic performers in the grade were girls (including myself) as usual, we (the girls) shouldn't be too smug since it was merely temporary, and when we reached senior high school boys would naturally outperform us as their real

potential emerges. It was the most disturbing statement I had heard during my school days. It must have deeply affected, and I began having some doubts about my ability and became afraid of competing with boys. Eventually, when I applied to an all-female senior high school it was partly because it seemed safer and avoided the possibility of being beaten by the boys I had previously surpassed, and also eluded any confirmation of the ominous prediction of the ethics teacher.”

The continuing legacy of Confucianism in the modern educational system ensures that this influence is still maintained in Korea.

The reality is mirrored in the traditional views found in educational goals, curricula, textbooks, and in all aspects of schooling in Korea (Chung SW. 1986; KWDI 1986; Wade and Seo 1996; Han JS. 1996). According to Wade and Seo (1996:45) in particular, school curricula in Korea continue in large part to derive from traditional conceptions of gender roles (and, no doubt, bureaucratic inertia) that are, in today’s world, often far removed from the realities of women’s lives. They further indicate that, for the most part, gender equality and women’s non-traditional concerns have not been of particular interest to educational authorities (who are, at higher levels, almost always men) (ibid.). For example, Chung SW. (1986) compared respective school mottos<sup>43</sup> for boys and for girls, and argued that those that represented educational goals that the schools wished to inculcate in the minds of their students illustrated sexual bias. She noted that the great difference in emphasis between the mottoes for boys and girls exemplified the reality of today’s education. According to her, the mottoes showed that boys were inspired to emulate the image of progress and achievement while girls were encouraged to foster an image of purity, endurance, service and other attributes befitting the traditional role of women. Chung consequently concluded that, even though schools do not appear on the surface to acknowledge or promote gender differences, today’s education in reality operates in accordance with prejudice based on sex - a prejudice which permeates the consciousness of parents, teachers, students and others.

More recently, Han JS.’s study (1996) of the effects of Confucianism on the development of Korean women’s education is particularly illustrative in this regard; it examined the school system and the philosophy and curriculum of women’s education at different stages of its development. According to Han, in spite of the fact that the system of formal education in Korea has been based on the notions of equality and

democracy, and the official goals and ideals of public formal education have been the same for both sexes, in practice the experience in schools has been quite different for women and men because sex-discriminatory Confucian teachings and values still maintain a strong negative influence on female education. She explains that the school curriculum in some areas had, for a long time, been clearly segregated by gender: for instance, boys were required to take technical-skills courses, while girls had to study home economics. In 1995, however, a new unified school curriculum was designed and implemented; this can be seen as progress in changing the sex-role-stereotype practices in schools (Han JS. 1996; see also Lee OJ 1996; Ro HS. et al. 1996). Improvement in education alone cannot eradicate the existing gender divisions, yet by narrowing the gap in educational opportunities and implementing a non-gender-biased system, the education of women can positively contribute to furthering gender equality in society. However, it is important to recognise that improved educational opportunities, including those at higher levels, for women do not necessarily lead to gender equality in society and at work. For example, female graduates working in chaebol that are as qualified as their male colleagues seem often to receive unfavourable treatment because of their sex. This will be further explored later, particularly in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the influence of traditional culture on the status of women and gender relations in Korea by demonstrating how the philosophy that originated with the teachings of Confucius has occupied a central role in the development of the country's culture and traditions. Apart from its influence on the political and economic climate of contemporary Korea, one of the most important legacies of the Confucian tradition, and one that is highly relevant to modern Korean society and especially to this study, is its discriminating attitude towards women and the resulting inferior status of women in society.

This ideological tradition required that the ideal woman should be passive, quiet, and chaste, and that she should be an obedient daughter-in-law, devoted wife, and dedicated mother. Now, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this traditional perception still has a strong

effect on people's lives and ways of thinking. Korean women are still widely regarded as inferior to men (*nam-jon-yeo-bie*), with their primary role being that of wife and mother remaining at home (*an-sa-ram*), are often segregated from 'privileged' male-only traditional practices (such as rituals) and excluded from male bonding in a male-centred culture. According to Palley (1990), inequality in women's opportunities is maintained through an elaborate system of role relationships that are rooted in and rationalised by Confucian customs; they are socially mandated and often legally condoned.

External influences, stemming from the political hiatus after the end of World War II and the country's later economic participation in international trade, naturally served to introduce changes to the working and living conditions of Korean women. However, despite being challenged by the forces of Western-influenced industrialisation and modernisation and more recently globalisation, Confucian influences undeniably still persist in the value systems of contemporary Korea, as my research shows. As Choi E. (1994) correctly argues, the social structure and cultural norms have not yet changed sufficiently to support the economic transition of the society. The modernisation and development process, which has seen major improvements in education for women, coupled with changes in the structure of the household and family, is serving to challenge the traditional dominance of the embedded Confucian culture and women's place in it. However, in spite of these modernising influences, and women's more active involvement in public life<sup>44</sup>, socio-cultural conditions still remain unfavourable for their participation in economic activities and often act as a deterrent to the achievement of an equal role in the labour market. Clearly, in spite of the impact of more recent external influences, the legacy of Confucian thought still permeates modern Korean society, as was confirmed by many of my respondents. As long as socio-cultural bias and the rigid attitudes of both men and women continue to restrict opportunities for women participating in economic activities on an equal basis, expectations of gender equality at work and in society will remain unfulfilled. Because Confucianism has undoubtedly played such an important formative role in the development of Korean culture and the national identity, in order to secure a permanent improvement in gender equality it



would seem necessary to engage directly, and prevail over, the still pervasive and malign influence of patriarchy in the nation's psyche.

The aim of this chapter was to explore gender relations in Korean society generally, to assist a better understanding of women's role and status in working organisations, such as chaebol. This is because rules within organisations operate to confirm wider rules of masculinity and femininity - the rules for being a man and the rules for being a woman (Harlow and Hearn 1995). These rules seem to vary between different cultures and societies and, in fact, different patterns of gender relations are found in different spatial locations. These variations are, according to Walby (1997:7), due to the balance of gender and class forces sedimented over time in local gendered institutions, including the local industrial structure and local political institutions; changes in the economy and the sexual division of labour occur unevenly through time and space. In the light of its strong influence on human relationships in society and the structure of social organisations in Korea, it is necessary to explore how far the special cultural tradition of Confucianism has affected the work culture and organisations of modern Korea, and thus still influences women's status and conditions in them. The deep-rooted sex-role distinction in Korean society may serve as an important ideological basis for justifying gender discrimination in the workplace. Not only do we need to ask what the rules are, but how they are constructed, maintained, re-interpreted and, on occasion, challenged in everyday practice. This, however, will be considered in more detail in later chapters (particularly Chapters 5 and 7) where it becomes relevant to a discussion of the office culture, and its gender relations, within chaebol. In particular, the following chapter (Chapter 5) offers a general introduction to chaebol as the context of the case study, exploring the nature of their working environment and organisational culture in order to discover the particular characteristics that produce the existing gender relations in their offices.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Every society uses biological sex as one criterion for describing gender but, beyond that simple starting point, no two cultures would completely agree on what distinguishes one gender from another (A. Scott 1986; Brett 1991).

<sup>2</sup> “Culture is generally taken to be the collective programming of the mind-set of members of a group which is then reflected in assumptions, beliefs and norms held in common by that group.” (Rowley and Lewis 1996:5).

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 5 for discussion on culture and institutions.

<sup>4</sup> One of the good examples of the Confucian legacy is ancestor worship that was found by a strong majority to be worth maintaining in the currents of modernisation (Helgesen 1998:136). Koh BI. (1996:195) argues that ancestral memorial rites and funeral ceremonies constitute the backbone of the Confucian heritage, and that probably nowhere else are these ceremonies more intensively and extensively observed than in Korea.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Helgesen (1998:139) argues that the majority’s acceptance of the traditional patriarchal family system and its ideology, and their reluctance to acknowledge the societal effects and consequences, support the idea that Confucianism in Korea to a large extent regulates human behaviour, regardless of people’s knowledge about this particular philosophy and its moral guidelines.

<sup>6</sup> In this connection, the following explanation by Helgesen (1998:105) is pertinent:  
 “When searching for the politically most important traditional influence on current Korean perceptions of politics, Confucianism stands in an exceptional position. Having assumed the role of state ideology as well as the essence of all educational efforts in a centralised state for more than 500 years, Confucian ideas and values, moral and norms have apparently been internalised as the right and cultured way of judgement and behaviour.”

<sup>7</sup> Such as the perpetuation of authoritarian, factional, gerontocratic, and male-oriented ideas and practices (Tu 1996:188).

<sup>8</sup> Given a strong leadership commitment, in a society where hierarchical loyalty and civil service are highly valued, bureaucratic energies were effectively focused on national priorities. The results-oriented pragmatism of Korean bureaucrats and their ability to show non-ideological flexibility at the policy implementation level emanate from this cultural heritage (SaKong 1993:205).

<sup>9</sup> The following quotation from Kim BW. (1992:81) helps understand the nature of human relationships in a Confucian context:

“For a long time, Confucianists agreed that the harmony of the universe depended upon a reciprocal relationship of justice from superiors and obedience from subordinates. One venerable Confucian scheme for ensuring this harmony is to rely on the bond of the Five Human Relationships. The Five Human Relationships and their attendant obligations are (a) affection between father and son, (b) righteousness between ruler and minister, (c) attention to their separate functions between husband and wife, (d) a proper order between the old and the young, (e) fidelity between friends. These relationships were often combined with Confucian virtues and stressed (a) filial piety to one’s parents, (b) loyalty to the state (or ruler/lord), (c) submission to one’s husband, (d) respect towards one’s elders and (e) faith towards friends.”

<sup>10</sup> Although strongly influenced by its neighbour’s culture, adopting Chinese legal and other institutions, Buddhist and Confucian ideologies (Eckert et al. 1990:30), Korea at the same time had to face a long history of conflict and struggle to preserve its independence. For example, in AD 612 the Chinese launched a strong attack against the country and, according to Eckert et al (ibid.:35), “had Koguryo [one of the Three kingdoms, approximately equivalent to modern North Korea] not beaten them back, all the

states of the peninsula might have fallen under long-term Chinese domination and ultimate absorption” and it was recognised that “Koguryo’s military prowess existed alongside Confucian education”. Korea was, in fact, “never ‘sinicized’, although it came close in the Choson period” (Cumings 1997:19). It may, therefore, be argued that the historical development and independence of modern Korea, with its strong self-identity as a nation, owes much to the country’s legacy of Confucianism with its strict discipline, moral teachings and impact on social institutions. It is, therefore, not surprising that the culture of modern Korea and its social organisation remains strongly influenced by Confucianism.

<sup>11</sup> Yi and Choson are interchangeable.

<sup>12</sup> During the later Sung dynasty in China (AD 960-1279), a form of Confucianism which incorporated elements of Buddhism and Taoism evolved and became known as neo-Confucianism. There were ultimately two distinct branches of neo-Confucianism, one inspired by Chu Hsui (1130-1200) was known as *Li* (principle) school, and the other developed later by Wang Yang-min (1472-1529) became known as the *hsin* (mind) school. It was the earlier *Li* school of neo-Confucianism which was introduced to Korea at the beginning of the Choson dynasty and promulgated by Yi Hwang that was formally adopted as the orthodox guiding philosophy for governing the country. Neo-Confucianism of the *Chu Hsi* School considered everything in the universe as having just two constituent elements: *Li* (non-material, formative, universal principles) and *chi* (changeable, material things); while placing emphasis on *Li*, both elements were considered an inseparable duality (Eckert et al. 1990:ch10; Deuchler 1992:15-24; Cumings 1997:ch1). By some accounts, the state itself was the church or the ‘body’ of neo-Confucian civil religion that permeated throughout the society; this was most pronounced during the Choson (Yi) dynasty – when neo-Confucians most effectively promoted their vision of achieving an ideal Confucian society in Korea (Kim KD. 1994).

<sup>13</sup> According to *Saryepyollam*, ancestor worship, which is the male’s main ritual, includes hierarchy, spatial division and role-division between male and female itself; such divisions contribute to the male-centred world view (Kim JM. 1995:168).

<sup>14</sup> Confucian principles characterised the “Five Relationships”: father and son, husband and wife, ruler and subject, elder and younger, and friend and friend. The son is subordinate to his father, the wife to the husband, the subject to the ruler and, finally, the younger to the elder (Paik 1990).

<sup>15</sup> According to O’Malley (1988:332), the duty of the subordinate in these relationships is to show respect, loyalty and deference, while the duty of the superior is to give the proper moral example and to act in the way that his status requires.

<sup>16</sup> However, it is worth noting some challenging views that bring a new insight to this discourse. For example, Chan’s work (2003) argues that the *yin-yang* based conception of gender is not an essential element of Confucianism (it was only when Dong Zhoughshu tried to seek cosmic justification for the social-political hierarchy that genders became codified as the exemplification of *yin-yang* forces) and, hence, it can be detached from Confucianism without tampering with core Confucian ideas.

<sup>17</sup> *Naehun* is a guidebook for women to teach the virtue of submissive behaviour, and was published by Queen Sohye (in spite of her nickname, ‘Tyrannical’ Queen). The queen edited male-chauvinist texts (for example, *Sohak*), collected the instructions which reflected the male-centred worldview, and published them as a collection; it was divided into several chapters: words and deeds; filial piety; married life; thrift, etc. The book became a model for all textbooks for women during the Yi-dynasty (Kim JM. 1995).

<sup>18</sup> The original reference is Pak Pyong-ho, ‘*Han’guk ui chont’ong kajok kwa kajanggwon*,’ *Hankuk Hakpo* 2.1:67-93 (Spring 1976).

<sup>19</sup> During the Neo-Confucian era, women who lost their chastity were punished by a now-defunct community court. Women’s remarriage was prohibited, whereas a widowed man could marry again three

years after his wife's death (or one year should the widowed husband be over 40 years old or his parents demand immediate remarriage). In today's society, concern with women's chastity is reflected in the continued desirability of a single, lifelong marriage. (Kim JM. 1995:167).

<sup>20</sup> See also Sorensen (1983) for the continuing practice of division of labour in modern rural Korea.

<sup>21</sup> A quotation from Kim CS.'s work (1992:200) may be useful here in understanding the meaning of 'modernisation' in Asia. Kim writes, "Eisenstadt (1966) states that modernisation is historically the process of change toward those types of social, economic, and political systems that developed in Western Europe and North America from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the south American, Asian, and African continents. Jacobs (1985:6) understands that for Asians modernisation is usually labelled as Westernisation".

<sup>22</sup> See Kim YC. 1976: ch.18, 'The Coming of Christianity'. It is interesting to connect this argument with Weber's 'Protestant Ethic'.

<sup>23</sup> The United States had played a critical role in the Korean economy until the mid-1970s (Eckert et al. 1990:395) and has been the decisive factor in the creation and maintenance of a political environment on the Korean Peninsula in which Korea's particular form of capitalist development has taken place (Eckert et al 1990; Cumings 1997).

<sup>24</sup> According to a more recent (1995) record of educational attainment, 34.8 percent of women had completed high-school education (in comparison with 41.4 percent of men) and 13.1 percent completed two-year college, four-year university or higher levels (compared to 26.6 percent of men). Source: National Statistical Office, Population and Housing Census Report, 1997. Cited in Moon and Joo (2000).

<sup>25</sup> Women represented 40.3 percent of waged employment in 1993: this included 31.2 percent of professionals or skilled engineers; 50.3 percent of clerical workers; 60.4 percent of service/sales work; 45.8 percent skilled agricultural and fishery workers etc. Source: EPB (1999), Annual Report on The Economically Active Population Survey, cited in Kim TH. (2000:65).

<sup>26</sup> The character of the women's movement in Korea is largely shaped by historical context. Korean history has been interspersed with colonialism, economic backwardness, national division, and authoritarianism. These circumstances have led women to participate in movements for national liberation, modernisation, re-unification, and democratisation of Korean society. Socio-political reform and the abolition of women's subordination have been the foremost tasks of the women's movement; as a result, issues of women's rights, especially in the private sphere, have been the subject of benign neglect in the movement. In many cases, women have been asked to put aside their own demands in order to support a struggle for independence or democracy (Cho SK.1994).

<sup>27</sup> Internationalisation [in Korean firms] implies expanding the sphere of competition around the world. It also means making institutions and practices comply with international norms and globalising public attitudes (Ha DM. 1994).

<sup>28</sup> It is often said that the world has entered the age of a global-village economy. The concept of a global village underscores the importance of those policies designed to open up Korea to the world, namely, 'internationalisation' and 'globalisation'. 'Opening' means unlocking the doors and exposing things to the outside world; 'internationalisation' denotes boosting Korea's relations with other nations; and 'globalisation' means approaching issues from a global perspective (Kim IJ. 1995:41).

<sup>29</sup> This is a partial text of a statement by President Kim Young-sam at the beginning of his New Year's press conference January 6, 1995, entitled "Great Strides into the World and into the Future". The Committee for the Promotion of Globalisation was also set up by his government in 1995.

<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, during the seminars attended and interviews conducted in 1997, the word globalisation came up frequently. Presenters and fieldwork interviewees from chaebol repeatedly emphasised the importance of their international strategy for their company's survival, and suggested that they regarded a capability for working in a global environment as vital both for companies and their staff.

<sup>31</sup> Internationalisation means expanding the sphere of competition around the world. It also means making institutions and practices comply with international norms and globalising public attitudes. The ultimate goal of internationalisation is to enhance Korea's role and presence in the world to yield greater competitiveness and more rationalised institutions (Ha DM. 1994:68).

<sup>32</sup> For example, *Monthly Win* (*wol-gan-sung-ri*, a Korean monthly magazine) surveyed Koreans on their current views on life and concluded that these have been moving away from those based on traditional values, thus signalling vast changes in Korean society (Kim IG. 1995). The survey was conducted by the Media Research opinion survey firm, which randomly polled 1,000 men and women over the age of 20 throughout the country.

<sup>33</sup> For example, there is an apparent contradiction in seeing Confucianism as a negative tradition and at the same time accepting and possibly cherishing the Confucian family system (Helgesen 1998:136).

<sup>34</sup> This is largely due to the fact that Korea is strongly nationalistic and considers itself the historical victim of great-power intervention (Eckert et al. 1990:416) - by countries such as China, Japan, U.S.A. etc..

<sup>35</sup> One good example is '*ho-ju-je*', which legitimises the head of the family who leads and controls the household members, manages the property and wealth, and handles ancestor rituals. This system helps maintain traditional patriarchy since men receive priority in inheritance (Cho H. 1996:ch4). See Cho H. (1996) for more on gender equality in the Korean legal system.

<sup>36</sup> Interviewee code: the first letter denotes sex, the second occupation (**s** - student, **f** - foreign company employee, **g** - government employee, **w** - housewife, and **b** - own business); the **number** identifies interviewee (from 52 to 64). See Appendix 1.2 for the codes and profile for non-chaebol interviewees.  
\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for women at work than for men).

<sup>37</sup> Interviewee code: the first letter (**f** or **m**) denotes sex; the second indicates educational attainment on joining: **h** (high-school leaver) or **u** (university graduate); the **number** identifies the chaebol interviewee (from 1 to 51); a final **m** denotes manager. See Appendix 1.1 for the codes and profile of chaebol interviewees.

\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for women at work than for men).

In instances where it is judged to be relevant, the identity of the employer chaebol is indicated after a hyphen with an upper-case postscript followed (where appropriate) by a lower-case letter for the particular affiliate. For example, 'fu10\*-S1a' indicates that the interviewee number 10 was female, university educated, married, and worked in affiliate 'a' of chaebol S1. However, reference to a particular affiliate is rare as in only a few cases is it deemed to be relevant.

<sup>38</sup> Among the chaebol employees (who are probably from a younger generation than E. Kim's subjects) whom I interviewed, the belief in the division between women as 'inside' and men as 'outside' people did not appear to be as clear as Kim found. Most female interviewees already working in chaebol did not believe that they should stay at home while their husbands go out to work, yet many still felt they were the ones who had primary responsibility for the household chores and childcare - even though they hoped that their husbands would help with these duties.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Kim IG. (1995). See note 32.

<sup>40</sup> However Kim (JM. 1995) also notes that women's attitudes toward patriarchal ideology are changing, as is reflected in their acts of resistance, in contrast to the accepted patriarchal discourse. In the context of rapid change, Kim argues, these acts of resistance may be associated with a new kind of power of young women.

<sup>41</sup> This markedly contrasts with Singapore (Pearson 1992a), where the extended family is very supportive of the working woman. There, family support enables women to continue working long enough, even after marriage, to acquire the tenure and skills necessary for upgrading as industries become more capital intensive.

<sup>42</sup> According to *Monthly Win's* survey in 1995 (see note 24), Korean families traditionally have placed considerable importance on having a son, if for no other reason than sustaining the family's lineage. However, the survey found that only slightly more than half (51.8 percent) agreed that having a son was important, though the survey also revealed that there were generational differences. Most of the older participants believed that "a son is a must." Increasingly those in their 40s (57.4 percent), 50s (72.9 percent) and 60s (79.7 percent) felt that having a son was essential. However, the younger generation (32 percent of those in their 20s and 49 percent of those in their 30s) claimed that having a son was not important (Kim IG. 1995:85-6).

<sup>43</sup> Some examples of mottoes (Chung SW. 1986: 180) are as follows:

For boys:

- 1) If you earnestly attempt something you will succeed, using faith, creativity and effort.
- 2) On to victory, having set forth with ambition.
- 3) Let us explore and develop.
- 4) Let us practice one good deed a day.
- 5) Let us seek truth, create civilisation and work for self-cultivation.
- 6) Let us become workers who lead the way to progress. ....

For girls:

- 1) Be tolerant, be patient, be helpful and be sacrificial.
- 2) Be gentle, be beautiful, and be soft of voice and deft of hand.
- 3) Enhance the virtue of women.
- 4) Purity, sincerity and diligence.
- 5) Love, faith and chastity.
- 6) Mother of wisdom, wife of wisdom and citizen of wisdom. ....

<sup>44</sup> In 1995, 48.3 percent of Korea's female population was participating in economic activities (Kim HC. 1996:78). Mimiko (1996:344) argues that the importance of this high rate of participation of Korean women in paid employment can only be fully appreciated when perceived against the backdrop of the extensive cultural inhibitions against women participating in activities outside the home.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CHAEBOL: Employer and Workplace

#### 5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to establish an understanding of the nature of chaebol as the context of this case study of Korean female office employees. For this it is important to understand the characteristics of chaebol as business organisations and as the locale where employees work and interact with each other. An individual's workplace experience depends on the organisation – which determines not only the career patterns, remuneration, and formal working conditions of those who work in them, but also shapes to a large degree the kind of social interactions that occur among employees (Carruthers and Babb 2000:84-86). Employees' work experiences and interactions between them in the workplace are influenced both by the way that the business systems are established and operated within the organisation, and by the corporate culture<sup>1</sup>. To analyse a business organisation, therefore, it is important to understand both its institutional and cultural aspects, which may be contrasting yet complementary at the same time (see Rowley et al. 2002; Warner 2003).<sup>2</sup>

For an institutional perspective, Whitley (1999:33) well describes the concept of business systems as “distinctive patterns of economic organisation that vary in their degree and mode of authoritative coordination of economic activities, and in the organisation of, and interconnections between, owners, managers, experts, and other employees”.<sup>3</sup> He (ibid.:47) further explains,

“Business-system characteristics in different societies developed interdependently with dominant social institutions during and after industrialisation, so that distinctive forms of economic organisation have become established in particular institutional contexts. Additionally, the distinctiveness and cohesion of business systems reflect the extent to which dominant institutions are integrated and their features mutually reinforcing.”

According to Quack and Morgan (2000:21), the directions of economic development of different sectoral and national business systems are dependent on historically-evolved institutional legacies. Thus no two economies are wholly alike - even one

Confucian ‘little Dragon’ differs from another in its business and management, as Warner (2003:20) points out. Referring to Korea, Whitley (1999) suggests that the dominant institutions structuring post-war Korean business systems stem from both pre-industrial Korean society and the period of Japanese colonial rule, as well as the Korean war and the post-1961 period of military-supported rule (for details see Whitley 1999:152).<sup>4</sup> He (Whitley 2001:30) further elaborates the business system as such:

“This kind of economy is dominated by very large firms that are highly vertically and horizontally integrated but display adversarial and zero-sum competitive relationships with other firms. Typically, growing rapidly with substantial state support – often through highly subsidized credit – these firms remain owner controlled, with the founding family in clearly dominant positions.”

In studying management and culture in Korea, Rowley and Bae (2003) recognise that while institutional perspectives remain important, culture also retains its salience for management and an understanding of its behaviour and practices. The importance of culture in business and economic development has been widely recognised. For example, examining how far culture shapes business, economic and management behaviour and values, Warner (2003:2) argues:

“It is clear that there are complex causal relationships between ‘culture’ and the economic and management variables it may shape. There are also feedback loops and ‘culture’ itself may be in turn reshaped by major economic and management innovations.”

Even for some non-culturalists, ‘societal culture’ is considered important, as Rowley and Bae (2003:191) recognise. Indeed, cultural underpinnings have consequences for institutional environments (see Whitley 1991, for a comparative discussion of Korea, China and Japan). Culture, together with institutions<sup>5</sup>, thus remains crucial to understanding management and behaviour in an organisation.

As shown earlier in the previous chapter, Confucian culture pervades the processes of economic and political development and administration in Korea; it maintains a hold over contemporary society and influences its social organisations, including workplace customs and practices. In view of its strong influence on human relationships in society and the structure of social organisations, it is pertinent to examine how far the Confucian tradition has affected the work culture and organisation of contemporary



Korean businesses. This chapter explores how the dynamics of a rapidly-changing national economy and traditional Confucian culture have affected specific business organisations, chaebol. The chapter is presented in two parts: the first describes the essential characteristics of chaebol and how they operate as employer and workplace for office employees. It includes an introductory description of chaebol and considers their position in the national economy, their relationship with the government and their role as employers of office workers. The second part focuses on their organisational characteristics and work culture which contribute to the social and cultural environment in chaebol offices - in order better to understand their system of employment and the gender relations operating within it. This will show the particular characteristics that help create and maintain existing gender relations at work, and that critically relate to women's position and conditions in chaebol offices.

## 5.2 Introduction to Chaebol

### What Are They?

Large business groups, known as chaebol, have been a major force behind the phenomenal economic expansion of Korea over the past three decades, as shown earlier in Chapter 3. Their dynamic growth mirrors that of the Korean economy and their entrepreneurship helped create a genuine capitalistic system in Korea (89/90 Business Korea). The extent of their importance and the concentration of their economic power can be illustrated, for example, by the fact that the ten largest chaebol accounted for 72 percent of total sales of all Korean manufacturing industries in 1987 (Bello and Rosenfeld 1990:63). Korea's burst of entrepreneurship has impressed many observers, and some of these large conglomerates have become worldwide household names: twelve Korean companies were listed, in 1996 and 2000, amongst the world's 500 largest corporations by revenues and Korea was the seventh most represented country in the *Fortune* Global 500 (*Fortune*, July 1996 and July 2000)<sup>6</sup>.

Although chaebol have been portrayed in many different ways by different academics and business economists, they most simply can be defined as 'family-owned-and-controlled groups of businesses operating in a number of unrelated industries'.

They are similar to the Japanese *Zaibatsu*, in the sense that their operations are diversified (spanning a wide range of products) but at the same time are highly coordinated<sup>7</sup> (Kim EM. 1991; Edwards 1992; Kang MH. 1996:ch.5; see also Whitley 1992:ch.2, 1999:ch.6). Chaebol, in short, are a unique form of Korean business conglomerate with the two defining characteristics of "family control," and what has been referred to as "multiple development"<sup>8</sup> (Kim W. 1994:102). Several academic definitions of chaebol can be offered. Hattori (1986), after reviewing a number of published definitions, confirms the two requisite features quoted above as inherent in all chaebol: ownership by a family and diversified business operations. Other characteristics typically associated with chaebol include: i) dramatic growth stemming from unrelated diversification, ii) monopolistic position in a market(s), iii) close relationships with government, iv) highly-centralised structure with top-down decision making, v) low degree of formalisation and standardisation, vi) flexible lifetime employment<sup>9</sup> policies, and vii) paternalistic leadership practices (cited in Kang MH. 1996:11). Besides these academic definitions, there are also technical definitions for the purposes of policy regulation and empirical study. Beginning in the early 1980s, the term chaebol acquired a technical connotation as the government decided to (a) restrict large business conglomerates' seemingly undisciplined expansion through interlocking, cross-shareholding structures and (b) control the growing concentration of bank credit to large business groups.<sup>10</sup>

While most of these characteristics will be discussed later in this chapter, the two most important features characterising chaebol, the ownership structure and diversified businesses, need special consideration. In defining chaebol as large diversified business groups owned and managed by a closed kinship group, 'diversified' denotes operating businesses in many unrelated areas, and 'closed kinship' refers to the founder and blood-related family members of the business group<sup>11</sup> (Kang MH. 1996:12). Because chaebol have a relatively short history, many founders are still active in top management positions (ibid.:95). Like pre-war Japanese *zaibatsu*, there is great family inter-penetration (Mason et al. 1980; Cumings 1987; Edwards 1992; Whitley 1992): the Harvard project found that, of current chaebol chief executives, 61.4 percent were the original founders of the group, 7.9 percent were direct descendants of founders, 12

percent relatives of founders, and only 18.8 percent unrelated to the founding family (discussed in Mason et al. 1980:277). In most chaebol, it is the traditional family structure that provides the basis for the organisation of the group (Cho and Yoon 2002). Even by the late 1990s, according to Whitley (1999:201), there seemed little indication that family owners were willing to hand over the reins of power to 'professional' managers, despite some restructuring of top management and the reduction in size of the chairman's secretariat in a few chaebol. Whitley (ibid.:203) argues that overall the owner-controlled chaebol remain quite strongly tied to the Korean economy and the state, despite their growing overseas investment and the weakening of the state's control over the economy which had become more complex and affected by political liberalisation.<sup>12</sup>

Not only is ownership in chaebol typically confined to a single family, but control is also usually concentrated in a single individual. Most groups are led by a chairman or president who, typically, established the enterprise, brought it to prosperity, then perhaps put it under the direction of a relative or trusted subordinate before moving on to found a new subsidiary (Kang MH. 1996:96). Generally, according to Kang MH. (p95), shares in these firms are often widely dispersed among members of the family for tax purposes, but control remains hierarchical and centralised<sup>13</sup>. Even in the mid-1990s the chaebol's major corporate activities – strategic governance, personnel management and finance – remained firmly in the hands of the planning department or secretariat of the president, according to Lee HK. (1996:92). Kang MH. (1996) further explains that in most chaebol the major stockholder (the effective owner of the group) intervenes in the decision-making process of affiliated companies through formal or informal control - even though each company has a structure specific to itself. As the ownership and management of most chaebol are not separated, and the transfer of both ownership and management is based on blood relationship, managerial succession has recently become an important issue. Although the proportion of professional managers has been increasing steadily, their role is still relatively restricted, primarily because of the family ownership and control structure (ibid.:107). As a result, the relative dearth of professional top management in chaebol has been one of their most characteristic and criticised features.<sup>14</sup>

As part of the planned economic development of Korea, a strategy of diversification has been a feature of the national economic policies of successive governments, and large chaebol groups have reflected this approach over the past three decades (Kim EM. 1991; Kim W. 1994; Kang MH. 1996)<sup>15</sup>. Because business groups in late-industrialising countries lack the technical or marketing expertise of advanced industrial enterprises, they cannot grow merely by developing new, related product lines or by moving into higher-quality niches in their existing markets; to diffuse risk or utilise slack resources they diversify by entering unrelated markets (Kang MH 1996:116). Both chaebol and the government have striven to create business organisations that can compete effectively in the international marketplace, and thus create an industrial base to facilitate future economic expansion and provide employment opportunities for the growing population. With governmental support chaebol were able, and encouraged, to pursue this 'octopus-like' diversification.

### **Chaebol, the National Economy and Government**

Although industrialisation in Korea began during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) when some present-day chaebol existed as small enterprises, there were few diversified organisations at that time; it was during the late 1940s and 1950s that the majority of today's largest chaebol were established (Baik SY. 1995; Kang MH. 1996; Cho DS. 1997). While a handful of Korean chaebol were founded under the adverse circumstances of the Japanese occupation and the Korean War, nearly all of today's successful chaebol owe their position to the economic policies of post-war government regimes<sup>16</sup>. The real growth of chaebol can be attributed to the aggressive business policies in the 1960s and 1970s of the Park government, which pursued rapid economic growth with a series of Five-Year Economic Development Plans. Decisions on the allocation of major investment licenses were often made personally by President Park himself (Lee H. 1968; Institute of Korean Political Study 1987). Park's emphasis was consistently on building economies of scale and securing the rapid economic growth that would result from them. His developmental orientation was inclined towards a somewhat unbalanced, concentrated pattern of growth over which the government attempted to exercise close supervision and guidance. The chaebol complied perfectly

with this orientation (Koo and Kim 1992). As a result, the vast majority of the projects specified in the first Five-Year Economic Development Plan were monopolised by a small group of chaebol – which subsequently were accused of unbalanced, and sometimes illicit, wealth accumulation.

What was it then that made the emergence of vigorous entrepreneurship in chaebol possible? Edwards (1992) considered that it was a combination of two factors: one was the strong intervention in the economy by government, whose pragmatic policies allowed the growth of an internationally-competitive, private capitalist industrial structure; another was the high standard of education among the workforce. Even Cho S. (1994:62), who suggested that “the innate drive and shrewdness of Korean business leaders” was essential, also gives equal importance to “the government’s guardianship of them, and particularly those leading large businesses”. While the emphasis might vary, most commentators would agree on one particular mainspring: strong intervention by the state and chaebol’s special and close ties with the government (as seen in Chapter 3). All the chaebol conglomerates grew with the benefit of significant state favour, including direct financial support, tax concessions and market-entry tariff barriers against competition, which helped them to capture markets and monopolise particular sectors of the economy (Kang MH 1996; Cho YJ 1997; Lew SC. 1997; Whitley 1991, 1999).<sup>17</sup>

However, the relationship between the government (bureaucrats and politicians) and chaebol could rarely be considered a partnership of equals; an element of hierarchy was involved, especially in the past. “The state is senior, the corporations lesser partners”, as Cumings puts it (1987:73). For most chaebol the government was an omnipotent entity, able to decide whether an enterprise should prosper or collapse. Entrepreneurs’ co-operation and loyalty to the government generated business prosperity, whereas disobedience meant alienation from the government’s strategic support (Choi YH. and Lee YH. 1995; Cho YJ. 1997). Part of this control was through state provision of loans and access to foreign currency.<sup>18</sup> This reliance was particularly strong in the 1960s and 1970s. Although subsequently declining,<sup>19</sup> their financial dependency has continued through government-controlled credit institutions (Edwards 1992; Whitley 1999, 2001; Hahm JH. 2003; Kim WB. 2003; Jeong SI. 2004).

In the late 1990s there were crucial changes, primarily due to the Korean financial crisis in 1997 and the subsequent IMF bailout programme.<sup>20</sup> The national economy went through a series of structural reforms in its financial sector (Cathie 1998; Chang HJ. 1998; Rowley and Bae 1998; Kirk 1999; Whitley 1999; Bustelo 2000; Kong 2000; Joh SW. 2001; Kim S. 2001; Haggard et al. 2003; Kim WB. 2003; Shin JS. and Chang HJ. 2003; Bae and Rowley 2004).<sup>21</sup> The Korean government was required by the IMF to regulate more closely the access of credit to chaebol who needed to maintain more transparent financial reporting systems (Min BS. 2003).<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the government acted to ease terms of trade and lower foreign exchange barriers (Kong 2000; Bishop 2001; Kwon O. Y. 2001). They also agreed to accept some chaebol and bank closures, as well as foreign investment (even including control) in selected Korean companies. These actions enabled the *Won* to find its market value in the wake of the exhaustion of the central bank's foreign currency reserves (Cathie 1998).<sup>23</sup> However, even after seemingly major changes the essence of the state-controlled credit institutions has changed little, as clearly shown by the following statement by a manager from chaebol D1 (mu30m<sup>24</sup>-D1<sup>25</sup>):

“Government often requests or gives instructions in relation to exports etc. since its power over chaebol is strong. If the chaebol does not cooperate, the government can apply pressure by controlling banking loans or by threatening a tax inspection.”

Another respondent (mb64<sup>26</sup>, a previous president of an affiliate of a major chaebol, S1) also confirms this by saying,

“There are many regulations made by the government. For a chaebol to borrow a big sum of money from a bank, it needs the permission of the government. So it is difficult not to agree to what the government requires from the chaebol.”

My interviews in 1999 suggested that, even in the late 1990s, the influence of the government on chaebol was still too strong for them to ignore ‘guidance’ affecting their corporate policies and business practices, including employment. The personal perception of the chaebol manager referred to above (mu30m-D1) on the relationship between his company and the government was expressed as follows:

“The government demands that chaebol do this or that. As the government's power over Korean companies is still very influential, when asked chaebol do

their best to obey the government, even if it is not in their best interests. If the company doesn't comply with the requirement, the government can apply pressure by affecting bank loans or initiating a thorough tax investigation."

Although the state's power over chaebol was strong, it was also beneficial. As Jenkins (1992:196) argued, "the prime beneficiaries have been a relatively small number of domestic chaebol which account for a large share of the economy's output".

While chaebol have contributed positively to the quantitative growth of the economy with special support from the state, they have also created some negative effects that are viewed as barriers to further economic development in Korea. Lee HK. (1996:92) explains that chaebol commonly advanced loans to subsidiary or affiliated businesses by guaranteeing payments between these firms. As a result, any insolvent affiliates of chaebols are rarely weeded out and, according to Lee HK., this has become a major stumbling block to the restructuring of the domestic economy, because mutual trading between chaebol affiliates is widely prevalent. Yet when chaebol affiliates do business with unaffiliated companies a variety of unfair practices, including discriminatory price treatment, tie-in sales agreements and deliberate disruption of transactions, are common.

It is also worth noting here that for many Koreans the term chaebol holds some negative connotations. These negative attributions have arisen in large part from the perception that some chaebol were able to accumulate their wealth either through unfair advantage or by exploiting government connections (Koo and Kim 1992; Kang MH. 1996; Soh BH. 1997; Kim EM. 1997). Concentration of economic power within a selected few leads to a deterioration in the structure of income distribution and gives rise to estrangement between members of a society. As Lee HK. (1996:93) argues, it hinders the establishment of a sturdy foundation for continuing economic development. Accordingly, the question of economic concentration in Korea has been raised, not only as an industrial problem linked to lower productivity but also as a social problem that leads to unfair distribution of wealth. For example, there has been an imbalance between conglomerates and small businesses, and the role of small and medium-sized enterprises has, in comparison, been markedly peripheral to that of the chaebol over some three decades of economic expansion. (McKay and Missen 1995; Chung UC.

1997). Further, public perception of chaebol as 'rentier' capitalists that have grown too powerful for the good of the nation was reinforced by the conviction that the state-chaebol relationship had become extremely corrupt under Chun Doo-Hwan (1980-1987), the successor of the comparatively austere Park Chung-Hee (Bello and Rosenfeld 1990:71). Chaebol still represent a concentration of economic power that dominates critical industries, and are themselves controlled by a closed ownership circle. It is therefore not surprising that, in a relatively closed economy, both government and big business see themselves as mutually dependent on each other, and strive to maintain close relationships (Soh BH. 1997). Such influential links can become corrupt<sup>27</sup>; Soh BH. (ibid.:57) refers to "the widespread collusion between politicians and businessmen". Another frequently-claimed problem was, of course, the exploitation of labour, particularly that of young women in the export-processing zones for unskilled assembly work, which has been discussed previously in Chapters 2 and 3.

In summary, it is clear that chaebol are closely linked to the government and that they have been very well cushioned by a supportive state. They have a history of relying on government for their capital needs, and for their corresponding obligation to accommodate government 'guidance' on strategy. Not surprisingly, chaebol strive to act in accordance with government's policies and demands. One of the disciplines in which chaebol were required to follow government 'guidance' related to human resources and employment (Kim DO. et al. 2000; see also Bae and Rowley 2004). An example of this was the government's developing policies concerning skilled female labour, which has influenced at least the formal practices of chaebol. In the early 1990s, improving gender equality at work entered the national agenda linked to the encouragement of globalisation, and this had a positive impact on female employment by chaebol in the mid-1990s (as referred to in Chapter 3) – although the elected government and the political and economical circumstances of the country have changed since then (see Chapter 8 for a more detailed discussion). It is important, therefore, to examine government policies within the prevailing socio-economic climate to determine how they influence chaebol, and in particular their employment policies and practices. As chaebol employees acknowledged, the promotion of gender equality in recruitment has been positively affected by government pressure on chaebol to hire more female



graduates - at least in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see Chapter 7 for further discussion).

### **Chaebol as White-collar Employers**

While chaebol perform a critical role in the Korean economy and have historically maintained close links with the government, they also create major employment opportunities and contribute vitally to the country's labour market. They are widely considered as role-model employers by other Korean firms with less advanced working conditions and organisational systems, and also as favoured employers by many white-collar employees. How then are chaebol really regarded by job candidates and office employees? What kind of employers do they make in the eyes of their staff?

Chaebol in general are considered popular by job seekers and among the most sought-after, prestigious employers of white-collar job applicants. Working for a chaebol, particularly those four or five that are considered 'the best'<sup>28</sup>, is highly esteemed in Korean society. During my interviews with chaebol employees it was quite clear that most people working in chaebol were proud to be part of their corporate culture, even if they did not always mention it specifically. When asked what were the most positive aspects of their present employment, many interviewees (both men and women) replied that it was the fact that their employer was a chaebol. Many employees whom I interviewed apparently chose their employer initially because it offered advantages provided only by chaebol. The reasons why they chose their present employer did vary, but more than 50 percent of the responses were directly related to the fact that the company was a chaebol.

Inevitably, though, there were some unsatisfying features. When asked to describe the negative or unsatisfactory aspects of their current employment, the responses of male chaebol employees varied widely: for example, "work too hard" (e.g. mu2-S1), "work not challenging enough" (e.g. mu16-S1), or "poor rewards or working condition" (e.g. mu22-H1, mu34m-S2). A number of respondents, both men and women, felt dissatisfied with their work and the management culture because it was "inflexible, too strict, hierarchical and authoritarian", and "too often typified by the rule 'boss orders, junior obeys'" (among others, mu15m-S1, fu20\*-S1, mu22-H1, mu41-P, fu44\*-P,

mu45-H2). These attitudes of chaebol employees will be discussed further later in this chapter. The responses from female staff were broadly similar to those of their male colleagues, but they often specifically included “sexual discrimination at work” (e.g. fh9-S1, fu10\*-S1, fh11-S1, fu18\*-S1, fh23-H1, fh29-H1, fu32-D1, fh36-S2, fu40-L, fu43\*-P, fu46-H2, fu47-H2, fu48-H2, fh49-H2, fu50-H2, fu51-D2). As we see from the interviewee samples, this was true for both female high-school leavers and university graduates, and applied in almost all the companies and chaebol studied (e.g. S1a, S1b, H1a, H1b, D1, S2, L, P, H2 D2).

However, many of my interviewees (both male and female, and high-school leavers and graduates) acknowledged that their chaebol employer provided them with a comparatively high salary, better training and educational programmes, more overseas visits, superior welfare benefits and a better future than most other employers, especially smaller or medium-sized companies in Korea (e.g. mu3, mu5, mh6, mu15, mu16, mu30, mu31, fu32, fu46, fh49). For some, the accepted image of chaebol as ‘being prestigious employers with high public recognition’ was one of the vital attractions. In fact, the “good image of chaebol” was the main reason that many gave for choosing to work for them (mu3, mu7, mh8, fh9, mu17, fu18\*, mu22, fh23, mu27, fu32, mu34, mu35, fh36, mu45, fu40).

On the other hand, when Korean companies that are not chaebol were discussed, no one expressed any desire to work for them. During the interviews with job candidates about their future employment, and employees who were already working for chaebol, the respondents hardly indicated any interest at all in working for small or medium-sized companies (with the exception of one man who wanted later to join a firm owned by a relative as a junior partner). A few employees (e.g. fh28, fu32) confirmed the assumption that small or medium-sized companies usually make less-attractive employers than chaebol. A female employee of chaebol H1 (fh28) was one of the few respondents who had worked both in a smaller company and a chaebol. She had joined the smaller firm after finishing high school, but left it after three months because of poor working conditions – disappointing welfare and fringe benefits, and in particular the unpleasant atmosphere at work caused by an authoritarian boss (who was its president). After that experience she now much favours her employment in one of the

largest chaebol (H1) - even though its culture is considered to be more traditional and conservative than other major chaebol (such as S1), and also less 'women-friendly' due to its primary involvement in 'heavy' industries. The view that (major) chaebol usually make better employers was shared by male employees, one of whom (mu5-S1) expressed his personal opinion as follows:

“In chaebol, women are not sexually discriminated against too much - while it can be much worse in smaller or medium-sized companies where women would find it difficult to survive. This would especially be the case where the owner or high-ranking executives are of an older generation believing in strict male superiority and who would treat women in a gender-discriminative way.”

Thus there seems little doubt that chaebol are generally considered, by both men and women, to be more desirable employers than small or medium-sized companies.

Interestingly, however, there was some disparity between men and women employees as to why they favoured chaebol. While the more general and positive reasons were common to both men and women, a few more specific (yet still positive) views were limited to women. Unlike their male colleagues, many women (half of those who chose their employer mainly because it was a chaebol) indicated that chaebol's apparently “less-gendered discrimination” or “better treatment for women” with “open-minded attitudes towards female candidates” was the main reason that they had applied for a job there (e.g. fu10, fu12\*, fu13, fu14, fu18\*, fu20\*). This was particularly true among female graduates, less so among high-school leavers; perhaps due to the former being more gender-aware and with a higher self-esteem as a result of their education. Some female respondents also added that many other Korean companies did not offer opportunities for women to apply for jobs on the same terms as men. In explaining why she had applied for work at the chaebol where she was now employed, one female graduate respondent (fu10) recalled that she chose this particular chaebol (S1) with an expectation that there would be less sexual discrimination than in other Korean firms. This was mainly because she particularly remembered a television advertisement by the chaebol in the mid-1990s: the image showed Margaret Thatcher (the former prime minister of the U.K.) with a message implying that even a woman could develop her full potential and be successful in this chaebol if she was capable and worked hard. The actual experiences of female employees in chaebol after they were employed will be

explored in more detail in the following chapters.

A significant finding on the appeal of chaebol as employers was that, whereas chaebol had been the first choice for most male job candidates from more-privileged universities, this was not always the case for women. When three female university students in their final year at one of the most privileged universities were interviewed, while expressing some interest in chaebol two of them specifically stated that they would prefer to be employed by a foreign (Western) company. These female job candidates believed that foreign firms make better employers, particularly for women, than Korean companies. The reasons given by the female interviewees, both chaebol employees (e.g. fu32, fu37) and job candidates (fs52, fs53, fs54), may be summarised as follows: foreign (typically Western) companies are known to be less gender discriminating, demand shorter working hours, offer more responsibility and provide longer and more secure employment for women. This was further confirmed when a number of female graduate employees, currently working for foreign companies (mostly Western), were interviewed. These women (ff55, ff57\*, ff58\*, ff59\* - the last three being married with children) expressed their satisfaction with their present working conditions, which they believed to be better than those in chaebol, and had little regret in choosing a foreign (Western) company to work for. The positive aspects of their working conditions were: less interference by others in their work, more responsibility, more autonomy, interesting and challenging work, fair chances for promotion and other job opportunities, good salary, proper appreciation of ability and good work, better attitude with little gender discrimination by male colleagues or bosses towards women, and less negative outcome after marriage or childbirth.<sup>29</sup>

Overall, chaebol were usually considered by women to be better employers than small or medium-sized companies, but often regarded less favourably when compared with foreign (Western) companies in Korea – but not Japanese firms. Whom, then, do chaebol prefer to employ? What attributes do ideal candidates for employment in a chaebol possess?

#### *Ideal candidates for chaebol*

The recruitment exercises of chaebol seeking to hire college and university graduates

have been regarded as major social events, and also of general public interest. Most recruitment is conducted during the same short period of a few weeks in the students' last university term before graduation. The pressure on candidates to find employment before they graduate is particularly high and competition between them is strong. It has become almost a matter of 'survival' and the gravity and importance for students is hard for those in Western cultures to understand. It is critically important in Korea for a graduate to enter employment at the same time as his contemporaries (a kind of conformity) in order not to be seen as a 'loser' who has to compete with more-junior graduates recruited the following year. 'Gap' years are not recommended: anyone who has been unemployed for a year is regarded as having poor employment prospects. However, as chaebol prefer to hire new college graduates rather than people with experience, they typically recruit their regular staff as graduates and school leavers direct from their educational establishment - a common practice for many large companies in Korea (Steers et al. 1989; Sohn KN. 1993; Janelli 1993). As a result, job openings for mid-career workers in chaebol are limited. Some older and more experienced managers might be hired, but in large chaebol this was considered exceptional and occurred only in special circumstances (Janelli 1993:139). My own research showed that only three out of 51 interviewees (6 percent) had previous work experience - and each had worked very briefly for only one previous company. According to Janelli (p140), setting strict age limits for recruitment restricted the mobility of more experienced and valuable employees and ensured that new recruits were young and (presumably) more pliable. When combined with the internal promotion system, he argues, these limitations also helped to ensure that a manager had more experience with the company than any of his subordinates.

Another feature prevalent in recruitment by chaebol is their tendency to give preference to male applicants, particularly those from a few privileged universities (Sohn 1993; Bai and Cho 1995). Historically, chaebol have explicitly considered male graduates from a few top universities more favourably, and would hardly entertain male applicants from less-privileged universities, or female candidates even from elite universities. However, due to mounting pressure against discrimination from the public, the media, and also from government, in the 1990s chaebol appeared ready to modify

their approach. Their discrimination against candidates from less prominent universities, and female graduates from any universities, consequently became much less apparent – or perhaps less explicit. For example, many chaebol in the mid 1990s claimed to use ‘open recruitment’ (*yeolin chae-yong*)<sup>30</sup> with an ‘open-minded’ attitude, while in the past they would consider applications only from a few top universities (Lee YS. 1996:89). Some chaebol even attempted to use an application form without a section specifying which university the applicant attended. When recruitment seminars (a few of which I attended personally in 1997) were given by personnel managers from a number of different chaebol, the importance of the status of the university was not mentioned – as if confirming this tendency (see also Pucik and Lim 2002:144). Yet it became clear later (from a university job placement counsellor, cs75<sup>31</sup>) that, apart from the few most-prestigious universities that chaebol always wished to visit, relatively few other universities were able to persuade the companies to give recruitment seminars to their graduating students. Furthermore, in spite of the ‘apparent’ effort by chaebol not to favour one university over another, the identity of the candidate's university would emerge sooner or later during the selection process.

Since there was little difference in salary or conditions for those who joined the company at the same time, companies naturally wanted to hire the best possible candidates for the same rewards (mu38m, mu41). This, according to a senior manager in chaebol L (mu38m), explained why candidates from sought-after departments of privileged universities were highly desired, while others found securing employment difficult. Clear evidence of discrimination was suggested by the fact that most of the successful recruits turned out to be male graduates from a few select universities, as later confirmed by interviews with job seekers and chaebol employees of both sexes. A personnel manager from one of the top chaebol (mu1m-S1) admitted this frankly, and explained why:

“It is naturally advantageous, for the company’s competitiveness and future, to have high-quality manpower. Even if top university graduates do not necessarily make the best employees, there is a basic assumption that job candidates from more prestigious universities are likely to be of higher quality and with greater potential. Furthermore, ever since the IMF economic crisis in late 1997, and the ensuing rise in unemployment and surplus of good manpower in the labour market, the company has recruited chiefly from a very few top universities, such

as Seoul, Yonsei and Koryo. Of course, exceptions are made for regional branches and factories where staff from a local university would probably fit in better and be more likely to accept a long-term commitment to living and working in the region.”

While chaebol prefer to hire male graduates from a few of the most-privileged universities, their ideal candidates for recruitment would also be capable, ambitious, loyal, positive, motivated and active, and also well informed and fluent in one or more foreign languages, according to managers from different chaebol (e.g. mu30m-D1, mu38m-L, cs66-H1, cs71-L). When interviewing job candidates the subjective opinions of interviewers are critical to the final decision and the focus is more on the candidate's character, attitude and interpersonal skills than specific job aptitude. This is because work in chaebol tends to be more people-oriented than work-oriented (referred to in the later part of this chapter). New recruits are hired, not for a specific position, but as loyal team members<sup>32</sup> with well-rounded personalities, common sense and basic knowledge, and who would be able to fit in easily anywhere in the group (mu25m, mu30m, mu41, mu42, cs71). One male employee (mu41) from chaebol P explained the reasoning as follows:

“A rounded personality is still advantageous in a Korean employment setting. Bright people with creativity might be good for the success of the company but would not necessarily be well appreciated in the firm if difficult for the company and superiors to handle. They tend to break the unspoken rules and customs of company tradition or culture. For this reason, they might be given challenging or important tasks to carry out, but would not necessarily receive the best evaluation by their seniors.”

In his study, Janelli also suggested that the common thread running through most accounts of his interviews was a cultural understanding that they favoured subordinates inclined toward docility (Janelli 1993:140). Overall, ‘generalists’ with a wide range of knowledge are preferred to ‘specialists’ in particular fields. Partly for this reason, chaebol H1 tends to distrust ‘over-qualified’ candidates. One male graduate interviewee (mu22) from this chaebol explained that people with an MBA or Ph.D. degree would probably leave eventually because of dissatisfaction with the conditions and remuneration offered by the firm. Companies prefer candidates who can accept existing working conditions and remuneration, who would not try to avoid demanding work

under less-than-perfect conditions, and who have sufficient patience and long-term ambition to anticipate what comes later.

Nevertheless, more recently the criteria for selecting staff seem to be changing, even though the extent of change may vary between companies. For example, in the past hard-working, sincere candidates with good academic records were most sought after, while nowadays candidates with creative, flexible minds and individuality are preferred (Chang and Sung 1996; also interviewee mu1m). According to Chang and Sung (ibid.:78), most companies now place greater emphasis on individual character and personality than on specialised knowledge or technical skills.

### 5.3 Characteristics of Work Culture and Administrative Style in Chaebol

While the previous section introduced chaebol as employers of white-collar office workers, and the attributes of their ideal employees, this section seeks to illustrate some of the characteristics of the administrative style and work culture within chaebol. As referred to in the introduction to this chapter, not only institutional but also cultural variables have to be considered to understand fully how the administrative organisation of a company works (see Whitley 1991; Harlow and Hearn, 1995; Rowley & Bae 2003; Warner 2003). While the first half of this chapter has examined the more institutional aspect of chaebol as employers, the remainder discusses the cultural aspects of their organisation.

There clearly is an interaction between social values and corporate culture; the country's social values and its traditional culture inevitably influence employees' perceptions and choices of action at work and relationships with colleagues. As Bae and Rowley (2001:411) argue, Confucian values and heritage, despite Japanese and American influences in the twentieth century, have remained important and strong in Korean culture and are reflected in the human resources management (HRM) practices of Korean companies (see also Whitley 1991; Kim BW. 1992; Kim KO. 1996; Song BN. 1997). The administrative style and working environment of chaebol cannot be truly understood unless Korean culture, and how it affects interactions between people on the work floor, are comprehended. The work culture within chaebol, and in



particular the way it is viewed by those working in them, is well illustrated in the interviews with chaebol employees. Some of the questions in the survey were designed to explore the main characteristics of the culture, and the extent to which traditional Confucian influences affect the workplace and the employees themselves – including gender relations. This section is based largely on these interviews, and attempts to elucidate contemporary Korean work culture and how it engenders and influences certain workplace practices.

### **Work Environment and Corporate Culture**

When discussing their chaebol as a workplace, many employees admitted that, on the whole, they enjoyed a ‘pleasant and comfortable working environment’ largely because their employer had encouraged a “pleasant working atmosphere” (e.g. mu34, mu17) or “good human relations” (e.g. mu42). However, they also pointed out several aspects of work culture and the environment that they found unsatisfactory or problematic. The first (and for men the major) concern referred to selfishness, individualism, or excessive personal politics at work. For example, many managers and members of staff were seen as “chiefly focusing on what benefited them or their section, rather than the good of the company in general” (mu42-P). Some senior managers would seek favourable company recognition by working solely for their own benefit to the detriment of staff or colleagues - for example by dismissing staff on their own initiative in order to demonstrate loyalty to the company during the 1997 ‘IMF crisis’ (as it was so referred) (mu45-H2). Even for ordinary staff, characteristics such as logical thinking, aggressiveness, and (if necessary) selfishness, rather than friendliness and consideration for colleagues, were encouraged to ensure survival at work and recognition by senior members of the company, as was convincingly described by one female employee (fh23-H1). Many interviewees found these situations unpleasant, serving to hinder the efficiency of the workplace. Some respondents drew attention to their company’s lack of concern for employees, and felt that working conditions, welfare systems and general infrastructure could be improved (e.g. mu22-H1, mu45-H2). However, they also acknowledged that this situation had arisen partly because the company had been going through a period of economic difficulty since the IMF crisis.

While these opinions may well be reflected in offices in other countries, some features appear unique to Korea - particularly those related to the cultural environment of the country. A large number of interviewees admitted that there were certain characteristics of their work culture which they believed to be part of a traditional cultural legacy, yet which they saw as a hindrance to their working life. When interviewees were asked about the influence of traditional Korean culture in their offices, most (88 percent) of those, both men and women, who worked in chaebol agreed that they considered that their work place was influenced to a greater or lesser extent by traditional (Confucian) culture<sup>33</sup>. Of the remaining 12 percent, half thought that the influence had been much reduced and half were unaware of any influence of traditional culture on everyday working life. Interestingly, when interviewees identified particular elements of traditional culture, their initial reaction was often negative. For example, there was a commonly-held view that some traditional influences at their workplace - such as authoritarianism, hierarchy, conservatism, formality, and collectivism - were too strong for their liking. Although this negative view was expressed by both men and women, it was my impression that women (e.g. fu13-S1, fu19\*-S1, fh24-H1, fu48-H2) had a clearer perception of the impediments that may be linked to their (usually) more-junior positions in the organisation (see later chapters for further discussion). Many of these influences, in fact, had been previously identified (e.g. O'Malley 1988; Paik W. 1990; Whitley 1992; Kang MH. 1996) as distinctive characteristics of Korean work culture in large organisations like chaebol. Among these influences, several are particularly relevant to this study and are considered in more detail.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of work culture that was frequently mentioned by chaebol employees (regardless of their sex or employer), was 'authoritarianism' and related features such as a strong hierarchy (e.g. mu5-S1, fu10-S1, fu18\*-S1, mu22-H1, mu27-H1, mu31-D1, mu41-P, mu42-P, fu44\*-P, mu45-H2, fu46-H2, fu51-D2). O'Malley (1988:336) earlier recognised that obedience to authority and deference towards superiors are fostered by Confucianism and are intrinsic to the functioning of the major institutions behind the economic success of Korea, as well as of Japan and Taiwan. 'Authoritarianism' can have different meanings in an office

context: for some it means simply the hierarchical boss-subordinate relationship in terms of its domination-submission characteristics; for others it is the tendency to force people to submit to one's own ideas and opinions. Many (e.g. Kim BW 1992; Whitley 1992; Kim KO. 1996; Kang MH. 1996; Compton, Jr. 2000; Kim DO. et al. 2000; Cho YH. & Yoon JK. 2002; Kim YT. 2003) agree that the basic leadership style in the Korean management system is authoritarian and paternalistic, suggesting that the company is seen as an extension of the family, and relationships in the company are similar to those within a family<sup>34</sup> (see Chapter 4 for a description of the philosophy of Confucianism). My interviewees most frequently recognised authoritarianism, together with other related characteristics, as the legacy of traditional Confucian culture in their everyday working life. Examples of these characteristics are: a strict hierarchical order, implying formality between superiors and subordinates (such as '*Sang-myeong-ha-bok*', the superior orders, the subordinate obeys); respect for age ('*Jang-yu-yu-seo*', between the elder and the young there is an order); a high degree of formalisation and centralisation of authority<sup>35</sup>. To illustrate the extent to which authoritarianism and related traits are manifest in Korean offices, the following quotations and extracts from interviews appear typical.

"Junior members of staff are supposed to follow orders rather than producing and presenting their own ideas at work" (mu5-S1).

"There is little freedom for criticising the employer or the superior. Once an order is given you are expected to obey, whether it is the best choice or not. Unconditional obedience to superiors is required. .... No answering back is allowed" (fu44\*-P).

"It is common practice in Korean offices that, even if members of staff have finished their day's work, they would (or would feel constrained to) stay on until the boss leaves, as a mark of respect for the senior person" (fu18\*-S1).

"Seniors or bosses believe, as they are usually older, that they are always right and don't want to listen to opinions from juniors, and they expect them to obey - whatever they are asked to do" (fu10-S1).

"The older you get the wiser you become, and therefore you cannot argue with the elder" (mu42-P).

“Work is performed not by the person but by his title: the more senior he is, the more he can achieve when dealing with other people, or in business generally” (mu22–H1).

“The emphasis on formality rather than practicality at the company is such that senior members of the company are often more concerned with giving a good impression to the chairman than with the work itself. This is demonstrated, for example, by accompanying the chairman to the airport when he leaves for an overseas business trip, or meeting him there on his return” (mu45–H2).

What kind of working environment do these characteristics then create? Most large Korean corporations with a people-oriented structure are organised into ordered hierarchies. With no clear allocation of responsibility to individual members of staff, an authoritarian, ‘top-down’ decision-making style has become typical in chaebol. This decision-making system, involving numerous operational rules and procedures and a strict hierarchy of authority and control, is typical of the bureaucratic organisation in the Korean workplace (Lee and Yoo 1987, cited in Kang MH. 1996:111). Another distinctive feature of chaebol management style is the high degree of formalisation and centralisation (e.g. mu27, fu40, fu48). Decision-making is concentrated in upper levels of managerial hierarchies and major decisions, especially those requiring financial expenditure, must pass through a formal procedure known as ‘*kyeol-jae*’ (“approval from upper levels of management”). Some interviewees (e.g. fu40, fu48) expressed their dissatisfaction with the ‘*kyeol-jae*’ procedure as being too slow and protracted, and breeding inefficiency by allowing new, perhaps brilliant, ideas to be destroyed during the extended process. As Lee HC. (1989) points out, while the formal approval process can be a means for discussion and consultation among employees and different levels of managers, in Korean organisations it is considered more a means of expressing authority and control than consultation and participation. Important decisions typically are made at the top-most level of management, with little evidence of consensual agreement, and then filtered down to lower levels.

One female interviewee referred to her shock when she realised the extent to which rigid conservative tradition was reflected in her everyday working life. For example, at a social dinner for departmental employees all the junior staff had to sit and wait for one hour, with food served but growing cold in front of them, until the departmental

manager (the most senior among the party) arrived (fu13–S1). Nevertheless, according to Kang MH. (1996:110), there is little overt resistance to this decision-making system, primarily because of its Confucian ethic incorporating paternalism, loyalty, and respect for elders and seniors.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the possibility that Confucian tradition is not the only source of authoritarian culture in chaebol. Other scholars have identified influences from traditional but non-Confucian cultures, which they believe have contributed to the authoritarian and hierarchical nature of current administrative culture in Korea. In his study of a chaebol (Taesong), Janelli (1993) found certain analogies drawn by workers between military and office life which were centred on a unified chain of command that suppressed even the appearance of collective decision making or autonomy at lower levels (see also Whitley 1992: ch.6; Janelli & Yim 1998). He further argued that management at this chaebol was usually described as ‘top-down’, with decisions emanating from the head of the chaebol and then passed down to its lower ranks. Military service gave Taesong workers the knowledge that strict ranking and a unified chain of command were militaristic, and these workers used that knowledge to interpret company experiences. Interestingly, whereas the company claimed that relations between superiors and subordinates were ‘family-like’, younger office workers viewed them as militaristic. Thus, even army experiences could foster both subordination and resistance (ibid.:49). This was confirmed during my interviews; some respondents suggested that their organisational culture was positively related to army culture, such as ‘*sang-myeong-ha-bok*’ (the superior orders, the subordinate obeys) (e.g. fu44\*, fg62)<sup>36</sup>.

However, despite these negative effects on administrative behaviour, authoritarianism has been used as an effective means to mobilise human and material resources in order to achieve developmental goals in a short time (Paik W. 1990:55). An interviewee identified the positive aspect by remarking, “once one gives orders to junior staff, they manage to make it happen against all the odds, which works perfectly well for the existing organisation” (fg61, employee in a governmental organisation)<sup>37</sup>.

### Inter-personal Relationships at Work

In Korean society the family, kinship and extended forms of familism were and still remain the basic units of political, economic and all other social life (Paik W. 1990:35; Song BN. 1997; Helgesen 1998; Hahm CB. 2003; Lew SC. et al. 2003). In Korean companies, if the relationship with the owner is based on kinship it is called '*hyul-yun*' (literally, blood-related); if it is based on geographical affinity it is '*ji-yun*' (locality-related); and if it is based on educational links it is then referred to as '*hahk-yun*' (school-related) (Kang MH 1996:112).

As previously described, chaebol are normally family-owned and controlled businesses, centred around the founder and his blood-related family members. In chaebol, '*hyul-yun*' is the most important relationship, especially within the central core of the company's management structure. In many chaebol, power groups of key managers are formed on the basis of shared geographical and school ties (Pucik and Lim 2002; Kim YT. 2003; Lew SC. et al. 2003; also confirmed by interviewees mu26-H1, mu27-H1, mu30m-D1, mu34m-S2, fh49-H2). Owners recruit from their hometown or school, just as they bring relatives into management. In some companies, the top management group is dominated by executives who are all from one geographical area, for example from Seoul, or Yeongnam (a south-eastern province), or Honam (a south-western province), reflecting whichever region the owner came from. It is also quite common for the executive group to be dominated by graduates of certain universities (e.g. Seoul National, Yonsei, or Korea) or high schools (Kyunggi, Seoul, or Kyungbook). For example in DaeWoo, one of the five largest chaebol, many members of its top management are from Kyunggi (K) High School and Seoul National University (Kim W. 1994; Paik SY. 1995). Outnumbered by graduates from K High School (where the chairman, Kim Woo-Jung, was a student), employees speculate that a manager who did not attend that school could never hope to be successful in DaeWoo (Paik SY. 1995:71). Interviewees from the same chaebol also confirmed this in my research:

"In chaebol D, '*jul*' [connection] is the most critical factor for a successful career. It is called the 'KS Line', which refers to a career path leading from K High School [for boys] through Seoul National University to the chaebol" (fu33-D1).

“Chaebol D has a comparatively strong tendency for *hahk-yun* [school-related], especially at upper managerial levels since the chairman is KK and a Seoul graduate. This is much criticised” (mu30m-D1).

This propensity was also shown in other chaebol, such as chaebol H1, where members of staff (e.g. mu26, mu27) claimed that most colleagues and senior staff of their department went to the same university and that, therefore, those that had not felt they would be regarded less favourably for promotional and other job opportunities.

*Hyul-yun*, *ji-yun*, and *hahk-yun* operate not only in the power structure at the highest executive level, but also in informal relationships within groups and cliques at all levels.<sup>38</sup> *Hahk-yun* (school-related) is particularly strong in informal relationships, and gives a feeling of common identity and of belonging. It places particular attention on the year of graduation, which identifies older employees as *sun-bae* (a senior) and the younger employees as *hoo-bae* (a junior). These relationships, which operate within all types of organisation, serve as important factors affecting employees' behaviour. Similarly, *ji-yun* (locality-related) gives those from the same region a feeling of sharing a common background and promotes compatibility - and likewise affects personnel decisions and social interactions between employees<sup>39</sup>. This provincialism based on a region can be strongly felt and permeates into every corner of every social organisation in Korea, according to Paik W. (1990:38). All of these bonds are important factors that affect the power structure and informal groupings in Korean businesses (Kang MH. 1996:113; see also Kim YT. 2003; Lew SC. et al. 2003). However, familism based on loyalty to family and the above-mentioned primordial social groupings necessarily leads to the development of a form of exclusive collectivism, and restricts the natural growth of human beings as individuals (Paik 1990:38).

This ‘factionalism’, based on loyalty to a family, a locality or a school, extends throughout Korean society. According to some interviewees (mu34m, fu46), there is too much ‘factionalism’ (and ‘opportunism’) within their chaebol - and is seemingly common in other large companies. In relation to factionalism and opportunism, one female chaebol employee commented:

“If you happen to be working well in a good relationship with a particular senior

manager who becomes successful, you too become successful as he makes sure that his loyal subordinates also do well. On the other hand, if you work for someone with whom you don't have a good relationship, or you are sent to work for someone doing less well, you face a gloomy future in the company. That is why it is so important to line up well in the first place. Of course, this might be common in other countries but here the importance of these issues is worth paying particular attention to" (fu46-H2).

According to Choi JS. (1994:129), a person who is particularly loyal to his or her boss is more successful in a Korean business setting than a person who works hard for the company. This was confirmed by an interviewee from chaebol D1, who said:

"Once you become part of a group you effectively belong to the senior person in the group; he will look after you and influence your career in every possible way (for example, by arranging a favoured job allocation or an overseas appointment) as long as you are 'his man' by being loyal and devoted to him. This factor is more important than objective work ability" (fh33-D1).

This implies that company loyalty can be of secondary importance to displaying personal loyalty to a boss.<sup>40</sup> This interviewee strongly suggested that offering allegiance and devotion to a superior could be more effective in ensuring a successful career than merely working hard for the company. This is particularly relevant to gender relations at work since such close bonds between superiors and subordinates in traditional male-dominant workplaces serve further to disadvantage women (see Chapter 7).

### **Lifetime Employment and Loyalty**

Korea has effectively been operating on a lifetime employment system (Choi KS. 1997) - although the precise nature and extent has been a subject of debate (see below).<sup>41</sup> Lifetime employment refers to the practice whereby an employee enters a company after school or graduation, receives in-company training, and remains an employee of the same company until retirement (usually at the age of 55) (Janelli 1993; Choi KS. 1997; Kim DO. et al. 2000). Although some recognised a weakening of this practice in recent years (see later for current changes), a number of interviewees (e.g. mu25m-H1, mu34m-S2, mu35-S2, mu42-P, fu46-H2) viewed lifetime employment as a distinctive feature in their chaebol.



In the past, chaebol would seldom lay off staff even in times of recession<sup>42</sup>, although some more-talented employees might voluntarily leave the company to obtain better positions or opportunities elsewhere, especially in high-tech industries (Kang MH. 1996:113). Until the mid 1990s, it was usually considered that once a person (typically a male) was employed by a chaebol he was effectively assured of lifetime employment until retirement, unless he committed a crime or a major managerial mistake (Janelli 1993; Ungson et al. 1997).

This practice was supported and reinforced by the seniority-based wage and promotion system (see Chapter 6 for further discussion), whereby wage increases are based more on age, length of service and education than on job performance. This wage system reinforced a high level of commitment to the company, because leaving would mean giving up all the accumulated seniority and promotion opportunities. This mutual long-term commitment by both employer and employee constituted the most important aspect of the employment system in large companies such as chaebol, and to some extent also in medium-sized firms. The economic security that the prospect of lifetime employment within a chaebol offers, when compared with that in smaller companies, seems to appeal strongly to job applicants and employees. When asked why they chose to work for a chaebol, both male and female employees frequently answered that it was for this security and lifetime employment.

However, some academics (e.g. Kang MH. 1996; Chang HJ. 1998; Bae and Rowley 2004) regard the Korean interpretation of lifetime employment as flexible in practice, and view this as a high degree of mobility in comparison with the immobility of Japanese employees<sup>43</sup>; Chang HJ. (1998:230) referred to this system as 'quasi-lifetime employment'. Bae and Rowley (2004) interestingly suggested that, although until the mid-1980s Korean HRM was characterised by seniority-based lifetime employment systems, after 1987 (facing high labour costs and international competition) firms adopted many new practices, including ability/performance-based remuneration systems. This trend was accelerated by the 1997 crisis, since when firms have moved towards flexible HRM systems (see Kim WB. 2003, for the increasing labour market flexibility). Consequently, according to Bae and Rowley (*ibid.*), Korean HRM systems seem currently to be characterised by a medium-level numerical flexibility and mixed

remuneration systems based on both seniority and ability/performance.

While the concept of lifetime employment, albeit flexible, has long prevailed in chaebol, the loyalty of an employee to superiors and the company seemed to come naturally. In exchange for committing himself wholly to his superior and the company, the subordinate expected both to take care of him in his private, as well as in his business, life. In exchange for the insurance of 'lifetime employment', the subordinate offered limitless loyalty far beyond that normally required at the work place, and provided his superior with many free services unrelated to work (Kang MH. 1996:112).<sup>44</sup> For example, managers commonly kept subordinates in the office until certain documents had been completed or other assigned tasks accomplished, even after normal working hours and without over-time payment. Expecting a high degree of loyalty from an employee towards superiors and the firm was possible largely because of Korean norms and value system that were based on Confucian tradition and heritage (ibid.).

However, these concepts of assumed lifetime employment and compensating loyalty were not immutable and seem now to be changing, particularly after the economic downturn of 1997 (as specifically stated by mu34m, mu35, mu42). The severe economic crisis of 1997 forced Korean employers to face up to restructuring their employment - through 'downsizing', early retirement systems, performance-based incentives and employing contingent workers (Oh JJ. 1998; Kim TH. 2000; Bae and Rowley 2004). Many chaebol were forced, unprecedentedly, to release significant numbers of staff, a process made easier by the relaxation of legal restrictions (see Chang HJ 1998; Rowley and Bae 1998; Kong 2000; Kim S. 2001).<sup>45</sup> This enhanced labour flexibility (see Chapter 2 for the discussion of the flexibility of markets), yet it inevitably eroded the practice of lifetime employment (Chang HJ. 1998; Lepage and Gross 2001; Bae and Rowley 2004).

The effect that these changes have made on employees' perceptions and attitudes featured forcefully in a number of interviews. One employee stated:

"In the past, every employee was part of the organisation, with a family-like feeling and a sense of belonging. However, since the IMF economic crisis and the subsequent structural adjustments, many employees were forced to leave – employees who had devoted their life for the past 10-15 years to the company.

Yet the company didn't seem to care much about that and hasn't made much effort to improve the situation, which shows that the company is inhuman and indifferent in their treatment of staff. Furthermore, when the company is going through a difficult time it would be nice to share the bad news rationally and openly with the employees. Staff members are usually left in the dark without much information, understanding or discussion about what is going on in the company: it is mostly a top-down, one-sided style of giving orders" (mh8 – one of the few male high-school leavers working in S1a<sup>46</sup>).

Another employee admitted that seeing colleagues leave had lowered the spirit of remaining staff, while it made them feel somewhat under pressure to commit themselves to working harder. However, this newly-generated dedication comes not from loyalty to the company but more from fear of being one of them in the future (as mu7 put it). One female employee (fu10, from S1a), even though she knew that the company would keep her under any circumstances because the nature of her work could not easily be performed by others, also felt that the company was heartless to lay off its staff without much notice (even if compensating them with several months salary) and consequently realised that she should concern herself more with her own future, rather than remain complacent and over-confident about her security of employment.

Chaebol are now less prepared to guarantee the future of their staff members. In most cases, this has had a negative effect on the morale of employees. Since their previous belief in 'lifetime employment' seems no longer valid, and their traditional security of employment appears to be disappearing, their loyalty towards their company has become less strongly felt than before. This reduced expectation of lifetime employment has led employees to revise their whole way of thinking about coping with the changing labour market environment.

"When 'lifetime employment' is changed to the concept of a 'contract', it means that a company can exploit its employees for its own benefit; in this event, each employee can reciprocate. In reality, companies have already changed but employees have yet to adjust themselves to the new environment and work conditions. The safety and security of 'lifetime employment' previously offered to employees is fast disappearing, yet people's attitudes and expectations are not catching up with the changing situation. For example, senior employees still expect the same loyalty from their junior staff, expecting them to remain in the office until they themselves leave - even after working hours and when there is little work to be done. It could have made sense in the past but it doesn't sound logical any more" (fu14 – S1a).

The new concept of a 'lifetime career' seems now more acceptable, especially to the younger generation of workers who have joined the company relatively recently (as pointed out by mu1m-S1, mu7-S1, mu25m-H1, mu42-P, fu43\*-P, fu44\*-P).

A 'lifetime career' was mentioned frequently in the interviews, not only by men but also by women, and implies that they now prefer to focus on developing their own career rather than devoting themselves exclusively to one company under the assumption that long-term employment until retirement is guaranteed. The following quotation well describes this view, which is becoming increasingly common among office workers:

"When first employed I intended to stay with the company until retirement. However, since the IMF crisis, the trend is changing from lifetime employment to 'lifetime career'. Therefore, while staying with the present company I will do my best by learning as much as I can, and move on to another firm whenever any better offer is given to me" (mu7-S1a).

The changes in attitude among members of staff have also been recognised by companies. Some senior managers confessed that now there are more staff who believe that they are able to leave this company at any time, and correspondingly that the company could dismiss them if they did not meet expectation or had some problem (mu1m-S1a, mu15m-S1b, mu30m-D1). However, the gap between the commitment which employees are ready to make and the expectation and demands that employers set is ever widening; this is clearly expressed by a staff member as follows:

"In this transition period from 'lifetime employment' to 'lifetime career' in the minds of many white-collar workers, and possibly in the labour market as a whole, employees have become more aware and concerned about their own career path rather than their commitment and loyalty to their employer. However, in reality the demands that Korean companies make on their staff have remained unchanged and therefore no longer correspond with the changing attitudes and priorities of their employees" (fu14-S1a).

This trend has also been recognised by others. Bae and Rowley (2004:85-90) suggest that there are HRM trends in Korean companies from 'job security (lifetime job), flexibility through attrition, and no service for leavers', to 'job mobility (lifetime career), early (or honorary) retirement, and outplacement activities'. According to them,

the general trend has been away from lifetime employment towards easier and more flexible working adjustments; yet it is not just a question of 'pure' lifetime employment versus complete flexibility, as there are a range of options and degrees.

A senior manager (mu1m) in chaebol S1, where employee loyalty had been considered stronger than in most other Korean companies, said that as a result the group is no longer able to expect their staff to be as fully committed and loyal as they used to be. For example (as noted by another manager, mu25m-H1), some younger employees no longer necessarily identify their company's success with their own happiness, as employers have historically encouraged. The senior manager (mu1m) further added that it has now become more important for employees to develop themselves academically, and gain higher qualifications, so that their value as employees increases and prepares them for any possible change of employment - or even promotion within the same company.

It is clear that the idea of 'lifetime employment' with one company has begun to weaken in employees' minds and, as a result, so has their willingness to remain devoted and loyal to one company. It is too soon after the economic crisis of the late 1990s, and the resulting reduction in employment by chaebol, to be sure whether these changes are temporary or more permanent. In any event, it is clearly influencing the Korean labour market and introducing changes affecting both employers and employees. As a consequence the work culture in chaebol offices, and the dedication of staff, seems to be changing from the traditional Korean attitude to a more modern and rational approach towards work and employment. Nevertheless, these are new trends and, in spite of them most relationships appear still to be founded on strong commitment and loyalty to the company with an assumed security of employment.

It is also interesting to note that there are some new changes in values bearing on working for chaebol: some employees now hold less-conforming ideas in relation to the merit of their employer, and their commitment to lifetime employment. In contrast to the usual image of a chaebol executive as ambitious, committed and prepared to dedicate his life to the company, one male employee (mu5-S1) expressed his misgivings about working for one of the country's most desirable employers. Although perhaps not unusual in Western countries, it was somewhat surprising to find this different

perspective in a chaebol employee – particularly a man in a success-driven yet conformist society. Such views would have been very unusual in the past. He revealed his thinking, and his new doubts about his ‘dreamed-for life’ as a successful chaebol executive, as follows:

“Because making lots of money wasn’t my priority in life, as long as it is reasonably comfortable, I had a strong sense of life-time employment when I started, and I wished to remain working till I become a senior manager or top executive (or even one of the directors), and be well respected for my achievement and who I am. Then after retirement I wanted to enjoy the rest of my life the way I wished, with the money saved. However, when I consider what and where I am now, after having worked for the last 5 years, the reality and future doesn’t seem as positive or ideal as I had dreamed. If I stay in the company until I become a top executive, I would become someone whom I don’t want to be - in personality and in a moral sense. Therefore, I would like to leave the company before I turn into someone whom my present values would not approve of, and who would be living a life with little meaning” (mu5–S1).

### **Group-oriented Culture and Bonding**

Overall, the organisational culture of chaebol emphasises the importance of the group rather than the individuals within it. It can be argued that this group-orientation has contributed to the rapid development of the national economy; one male respondent (mu31 - from D1) pointed out that ‘group culture’ is one of the major factors contributing to the business success of chaebol. He recited a common slogan in the workplace that encouraged workers to advance together as a group or team: “one step forward by 10 people together as a team is more valuable than ten steps forward by one person”. He further explained that this spirit enabled workers to help their colleagues if they were lagging behind. This consequently fostered strong bonds between colleagues (especially among men<sup>47</sup>), who frequently socialised together after work by going out for drinks, meals or sometimes to cinemas, as was explained by some interviewees (e.g. mu31, mu35, fu37, fu46, ff55). One female interviewee (fu46-H2) explained clearly how this could affect work positively since it would help employees feel comfortable with their colleagues, and encourage mutual support and assistance. The importance of this socialising in chaebol offices should not be underestimated<sup>48</sup>.

“Socialising after work is very important in this company. Usually we work from eight in the morning until eight in the evening; after finishing work for the day we often go out for dinner and then drink with colleagues until midnight.

Home is almost like an inn or hotel for us. Since most hours in a day have to be spent with colleagues, relationships with them are very important. If there is any conflict and trouble with them, we try to resolve it by open and frank discussion over a drink. Such a frank chat usually involves an exchange of mutual criticism or forthright opinions with each other, often including complaints about bosses, and eventually leads to mutual understanding and bonding. We also trade informal but pertinent information about work and company politics” (mu31-D1).

The work culture in Korean companies respects and values human relationships among employees that is so important for their survival at work: employees are mutually dependent on each other, often with strong emotional bonds, and work as a team for a collective goal. A good understanding of colleagues (including personal matters), a readiness to help team members when needed, and maintaining a harmonious atmosphere, are highly desired features (as was expressed by a number of female staff, such as fh33, fu39).

However, this type of working environment, and the employees’ life style it demands, is sometimes subject to doubts and criticism. A manager expressed his view that this “human-relationship-based” work culture might be good for teamwork, but he was not sure whether the teamwork-oriented system was as efficient and beneficial as one which considered each individual’s capability and allocated jobs accordingly (mu34m-S2). Another respondent also argued that the work culture is based on a strong group bond, which is a typically-Confucian feature, and could be considered one of the major reasons for the success of Korean companies; however, it can also be an obstacle for further development because it can stifle creativity and restrain brilliant employees who might bring positive change to the organisation (mu41-P). In an environment where formality, strict job hierarchy and flattery towards senior members are prevalent, normally-desired characteristics such as loyalty and diligence can also produce less-appealing practices at work. A substantial number of employees (particularly female) have complained about the common practice of many (male) staff who remain after working hours – waiting until their seniors leave even if there is little work to be done. According to some female respondents (e.g. fh36-S2, fu37-S2, fu44\*-P), this was because senior executives consider an employee who stays late to be hard working and praiseworthy (see Chapter 8 for a discussion of how this practice influences women’s

job evaluations). Some are also dissatisfied with the extent of socialising required, stating that even after working hours they have to spend time with colleagues (including those whom they do not like) as a group; they considered it an extension of work and a duty since they are criticised if they are absent too often (fu39-L). In relation to work commitment and loyalty to the company, one hard-working manager said,

“I am very proud of working for this chaebol and it is an important part of my life. But we also need to live a normal life, as well as devoting time to work and our company. We work very hard and are usually too busy to think about our lives; we don’t even know where we are going” (mu25m-H1).

In summary, it is clear that the workplace environment of chaebol has been strongly influenced by traditional Confucian culture, and reflects employees’ ways of thinking and attitudes that are still undeniably Confucian-influenced. Naturally, cultural facets differ between chaebol and even between firms within the same chaebol, according to their respective characteristics.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the pervading work culture currently combines traditional and Western influences, and will probably become even more Western (or modernised) in future, as affirmed by chaebol employees themselves (e.g. mu41-P, mu45-H2). The new changes could arise from further development, modernisation and globalisation of the businesses and Korean society, as well as from a different outlook and way of thinking about work and private life by a new generation of employees who “tend freely to express their thoughts, unlike the older generation which tended to suppress their personality” (Chang and Sung 1996:82). Chang and Sung (ibid.:83) further argue that companies are being overwhelmed by the new generation, and that one reason for their efforts to transform themselves is that the concurrent demands of the information age, liberalisation and globalisation, are now drastically altering Korea’s business culture. As a workplace that is influenced by traditional culture, yet modernising at the same time<sup>50</sup>, Korean chaebol present a unique environment which positively reflects, and critically influences, general employment practices and gender relations in the nation as a whole.



## 5.4 Conclusion

The first half of the chapter described how chaebol emerged from entrepreneurial family businesses after the turmoil of the post-war period and grew to become the central force of the Korean economy. In close partnership with government, their growth mirrored that of the economy; with assisted finance they expanded by diversifying into new government-favoured industries. As major employers of skilled, educated workers, they began to assume role-model status in the employment marketplace; this status, opportunity for growth and the security of employment that they offered allowed them to recruit candidates of high quality. Their importance as a valuable context for studying white-collar employment and its gender relations in Korea was explained. The characteristics of chaebol as major economic enterprises and important employers of office staff were examined, suggesting that they offer privileged white-collar employment with good working conditions for both male and female employees. They have clearly been regarded as favoured employers: chaebol employees, particularly men, enjoy the privileges of long-term employment in one of the most sought-after white-collar environments in Korea. It was also shown that many female employees considered a chaebol as one of the few employers with which they could find security and remain for a comparatively long-term, and that chaebol, in spite of some negative elements, demonstrated positive aspects of gender equality when compared with smaller firms.

In the second half of the chapter, the characteristics of work culture and administrative style in various chaebol were more closely examined. It is clear that the culture and organisation of chaebol offices remains strongly influenced by a legacy of traditional Confucian values - although the extent of this influence may vary according to the specific culture of the company or chaebol. This is reflected in the authoritarian, formal and hierarchical nature of the organisation, and the way its administrative systems operate. Confucian family-based values and customs are also still exhibited through proprietorial blood kinship and the existence of power groups of key managers originating and bound together by locality and educational affinity. On the other hand, there is evidence that this traditional Confucian ideology is progressively being diluted

by modern, Western cultural influences, as well as by changes in attitude on the part of those working in the organisations. This steady erosion of Confucian ideology by Western influences, spurred by international economic developments and pressures from a global marketplace, has intensified since the 1997 crisis. For example, there has been a gradual transformation of the traditional practice of 'lifetime employment' towards the new concept of 'lifetime career', while the recognition of work ability and performance has increasingly replaced the importance of seniority in remuneration and promotion (see Chapter 6 for further discussion). Recent influences are encouraging a new generation of employees to pay more attention to their own 'lifetime careers' and personal values and aspirations, rather than offering blind loyalty to one company.

In brief, this chapter anticipates and provides groundwork for the succeeding chapters that will focus on the main issues relating to employment practices and gender relations in chaebol. Recognising the characteristics and mode of operation of chaebol, where modern employment practices are often combined within a traditional administrative work culture, will assist an understanding of gender relations at work that are particular to Korean chaebol. In the next chapter the employment policies and practices of chaebol will be examined.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Throsby (2001:63) argues that the corporate culture may be one of concern and care for employees and their working conditions, and that these values may mitigate the importance of profit-seeking or other economic goals in the firm's objectives - thus acknowledging culture as influencing, or even determining, the economic and social objectives of the group.

<sup>2</sup> According to Warner (2003:2), there are two interesting and possibly useful perspectives that have emerged in recent years in the academic literature dealing with organisations. The first may be called the 'culturalist' school and focuses on variances in values across cultures; the second may be termed the 'institutionalist' school, stressing the historical and political structures influencing economic and organisational activity. He further argues that using 'culture' in its widest sense might be seen as more encompassing, in that it might include both values as well as institutions.

<sup>3</sup> According to him (p33), differences in the nature of relationships between five broad kinds of economic actors are particularly important in contrasting business systems: (a) providers and users of capital, (b) customers and suppliers, (c) competitors, (d) firms in different sectors, and finally, (e) employers and different kinds of employees. These vary in both the extent of organisational integration, and whether this is achieved primarily through ownership-based hierarchies, formal agreements, personal obligations, or informal commitments, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Whitley (2001:29-30) also compares economies in terms of the degree of ownership-based coordination and the extent of non-ownership or alliance-based organisational integration of economic activities. From this he generates four ideal types of business system: they are i) fragmented business systems ii) coordinated industrial districts iii) compartmentalised business systems iv) collaborative business systems. While he categorises these four ideal types, he considers Korean chaebol as a state-organised business system, a sub-type of 'compartmentalised business systems'.

<sup>5</sup> In this context, Lowe (1996:121) helpfully explains the relationship between culture and institutions. According to him,

"Culture is assumed to act as an intervening variable, in the form of 'societal norms' as value systems, filtering an interpretation of the environment which accumulates to the development and pattern maintenance of institutions in society. These institutions (including the category of organisations) in turn reinforce the societal norms and environmental conditions that created them, a 'loop' which enables cultural patterns to remain in stable equilibrium for long periods. Thus, institutions, in this view, are both a 'consequence' of culture and an instrument in its formulation and reformulation."

<sup>6</sup> According to its 1999 ranking (*Fortune* July 2000), the list includes a total of 12 Korean companies; they are Daewoo (234<sup>th</sup>), Hyundai (107), Hyundai Motor (202), Korea Electric Power (382), Kyobo Life Insurance (450), LG Electronics (308), LG International (301), Pohang Iron & Steel (460), Samsung (115), Samsung Electronics (131), Samsung Life (257), SK (105). See also Sklair and Robbins (2002) for an historical perspective since 1980s on transnational corporations (including those from Korea) from the developing world.

<sup>7</sup> The size and diversity of chaebol mean that they are much more self-sufficient than their Japanese counterparts; complementary and dissimilar activities are co-ordinated through authority hierarchies rather than through networks of relational contracting. Consequently, enterprises are less dependent on each other than in Japan and have less need to organise market connections to reduce risks (Hamilton et al. 1990; Whitley 1992:46).

<sup>8</sup> In effect, diversification. Diversification characterises the range with which it internalises externalities, and the 'family control' affects the ease with which it does so (Kim W. 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Kang MH. (1996:113) explains 'flexible' lifetime employment as follows:

"Lifetime employment is evident in many Korean organisations. Once a person (typically a male) is employed by a company, he is guaranteed lifetime employment until he retires, unless he commits a serious crime or managerial mistake. An employer will seldom lay off employees, even in times of recession. However, some of the more talented employees will voluntarily quit the company to obtain better positions or opportunities elsewhere, especially in the high-tech industry. This can be expressed as a high degree of mobility in comparison to the immobility of Japanese. As a result, the concept of lifetime employment in Korea is flexible."

According to Song BN. (1997:199), who shares a similar view by calling it 'semi-lifetime employment', the ideal of a long-term commitment to the firm based on lifetime employment generally appears more appropriate to Korea's circumstances than a short-term commitment based on a fixed-term contract. However, in recent years the concept of 'flexibility' has become more acceptable due to the unstable labour market since the economic crisis of the late 1990s. For example, according to recent work by Kim YT. (2003:186), although Korean employment resembled the Japanese lifetime-employment model for a

long time, now even senior executives are forced to retire whenever chaebol owners find it necessary.

<sup>10</sup> To address these two major concerns in relation to the activities of chaebol, the Economic Planning Board (EPB) and the Central Bank drew up a definition of chaebol. The EPB defined chaebol in terms of combined total assets, including those of subsidiaries; the threshold level was set at 400 billion won (equivalent then to about US\$550 million); as of 1992, a total of 78 business groups exceeded this threshold and were consequently subject to guidelines relating to cross-shareholdings and equity investment in affiliates. The Central Bank defined chaebol in terms of combined bank credits (i.e., borrowings and guarantees); business groups with credits in excess of 150 billion won (equivalent then to about US\$200 million) were ranked by combined total assets and the top 30 such groups were put on a credit control list; using this criterion there were 40 large business groups as of 1990 (Kang MH. 1996:12-13).

<sup>11</sup> There are exceptions to this definition among today's largest chaebol. Several chaebol are controlled completely by professional managers instead of a closed kinship group. A typical example was the Kia group, which specialises in the manufacture of automobiles. Kia Motors subsequently was taken over by Hyundai in 1998.

<sup>12</sup> This was the case during my field research. Although important changes in the governance and regulation of chaebol had recently been introduced, especially during and after the financial crisis of 1997, in those chaebol that were the subject of my research, any modifications to the traditional family structure that provided the basis for the organisation of the group were not yet evident in the subsidiaries and affiliates where the fieldwork was carried out. A recent study of Hyundai by Kwon SH. and O'Donnell (2001) also confirms the still-significant role of family owners, as well as professional managers (in a central, if subordinated, role implementing the decisions of top management), in the coordination and control of large diversified conglomerates.

<sup>13</sup> Exceptions to this pattern occur in a small but growing number of older chaebol where control has passed to a second generation (for example, Ssangyong and Lucky-Goldstar) and where the reins of control are held in the hands of two or more successors (*ibid.*).

<sup>14</sup> However this is changing, according to Kim W. (1994:91): as the general trend is toward the separation of ownership and management, one could expect to see the increasing importance of professional, non-family managers vis-à-vis family members. Kim YT. (1998 & 2003) also argues that there are signs that the family-dominated structure of the Korean chaebol is beginning to collapse in the succession process. For example, in recent years the Daewoo group and the Dong-Ah group openly announced that in the next generation they plan to transform their chaebol into more institutional corporations under professional managers - suggesting a beginning of the end of family capitalism (Kim YT. 1998:232).

<sup>15</sup> The chaebol's diversity is crucial to their position within the Korean economy since their influence is derived from their ability to be more or less self-sufficient through ownership of a wide variety of firms, among them the often-lucrative retail and service-oriented businesses. Their flexibility in mobilising and utilising personnel, capital, and technology within their member firms greatly enhanced their power (Kim EM. 1991:287).

<sup>16</sup> Following the definitions offered by Kim SK. (1987), Kang MH. (1996:38) explains how the recent economic history of Korea is mirrored by the growth of chaebol, and as such can be considered in three stages: the consolidation period, leading to the expansion period, and finally the mature period. The consolidation period occurred in the 1960s, which was a time of high, sustained economic growth, strong political commitment to development, extensive and effective intervention by the government, and a reversal from an inward-looking to an outward-looking national strategy. The expansion period of the 1970s saw an accelerating growth of chaebol, as well as that of the national economy. Although the basic attitude of the government towards business remained largely unchanged, this was a period of even stronger political commitment to economic growth, the establishment of an outward-looking internationalist strategy, and a change in emphasis from labour-intensive light industry to more-capital-

intensive heavy industry. The mature period covered the 1980s, when economic growth began to slow. The Chun government then in power aimed for more stable growth with reduced direct government intervention and a greater reliance on market mechanisms, while at the same time increasing indirect regulatory pressures on chaebol. While the growth of chaebol was able to continue, it was a growth that was based largely on lateral product and market diversification.

<sup>17</sup> Kang MH.'s (1996:127) view on this matter is particularly indicative and is summarised below:

"The government is largely responsible for the concentration of economic power in Korea. Because strategic industries emphasised by the government required a huge capacity in technology, capital, manpower, and organisation, the chaebol were favoured over other firms. It was then natural that the benefits of the tax credit and trade policies should accrue primarily to these chaebol groups. In other words, the growth of chaebol groups through diversification, attributable to the original advantages provided by their business capabilities, was further aided by the growth-first policy of the Korean government. Since many chaebol owe their success entirely to government support, a close relationship between government and business has been inevitable. These benefits included preferential access to the disposal of government-vested properties during the period of confusion (1945 to the end of the Korean War in 1953); preferential allotment of foreign aid and grants during the period of reconstruction (after the Korean war to the late 1950s); preferential consideration for obtaining loans during the period of development (the 1960s to the early 1970s); preferential treatment in taxation and financing; and inclusion in the five-year economic development plans of the government."

<sup>18</sup> The government used the nationalised banks to reward companies that conformed to government policies and to attract firms into sectors that they otherwise regarded as insufficiently profitable or too risky (Kang MH. 1996:147). According to Edwards (1992), their ratios of debt finance to equity (or 'shareholders funds') rose from around 1:1 in the early 1960s to almost 4:1 in the late 1970s. This has been a central element in Korean government-business relations and has had an important bearing on the extent of private economic power (Edwards 1992; Mason et al. 1980:286).

<sup>19</sup> Kang MH. (p151) suggests that the close relationship between the government and chaebol continued through the 1980s, but with the government's pre-eminent power beginning to fade.

<sup>20</sup> On 21 November 1997, the Korean government made a request to the IMF for financial assistance and by 3 December an IMF-supervised rescue package worth \$57 billion had been assembled (Kong 2000:ch.6).

<sup>21</sup> The new Kim Dae-jung government at that time initiated transformation programmes, and most corporations responded to these changes by making efforts to restructure (Kim S. 2001; Shin JS. and Chang HJ. 2003; Bae and Rowley 2004). Restructuring programmes included adjustments in business, financial, ownership and governance elements, according to Bae and Rowley (2004). Institutional contexts (that is, labour, product and venture capital markets) also have been changed: with the increase in venture capital firms, it became easier to raise funds for start-up enterprises (ibid.:100-101).

<sup>22</sup> This had the effect of forcing chaebol to seek to withdraw from peripheral (often marginally profitable, or even loss-making) activities and focus on fewer (perhaps just two or three) core enterprises (Kwon O.Y. 2001; see also Shin JS. and Chang HJ. 2003).

<sup>23</sup> This had the effect of opening domestic markets to imports and international competition and also encouraging FDI (Foreign Direct Investment). Foreign capital was attracted to Korea as direct investment, often bringing technological benefits, through mergers, joint ventures, and even acquisitions of domestic companies. This significant increase in foreign currency investment provided an alternative source of finance for chaebol, yet one subject to the discipline of the international marketplace (Bishop 2001; Kim WS. 2001; Kwon O.Y. 2001; Seo JS. 2003; Shin JS. and Chang HJ. 2003; Yun M. 2003)

<sup>24</sup> Interviewee code: the first letter (**f** or **m**) denotes sex; the second indicates educational attainment on joining: **h** (high-school leaver) or **u** (university graduate); the **number** identifies the interviewee (from 1 to 51); a final **m** denotes manager. See Appendix 1.1 for the codes and profile of chaebol interviewees.

\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for women at work than for men).

In instances where it is judged to be relevant, the identity of the employer chaebol is indicated after a hyphen with an upper-case postscript followed (where appropriate) by a lower-case letter for the particular affiliate. For example, 'fu10\*-S1a' indicates that the interviewee number 10 was female, university educated, married, and worked in affiliate 'a' of chaebol S1. However, reference to a particular affiliate is rare as in only a few cases is it deemed to be relevant.

<sup>25</sup> See Appendix 2.1 for chaebol codes and business sectors.

<sup>26</sup> Interviewee code: The first letter denotes sex, the second occupation (**s** - student, **f** - foreign company employee, **g** - government employee, **w** - housewife, and **b** - own business; the **number** identifies interviewee (from 52 to 64). See Appendix 1.2 for the codes and profile for non-chaebol interviewees.

\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for women at work than for men).

<sup>27</sup> As an example, President Chun Doo-Hwan (1980-87) apparently promised favours if chaebol contributed to his personal and political slush fund (Bello and Rosenfeld 1990:72).

<sup>28</sup> Usually Samsung, Hyundai, Daewoo, LG, and SK were regarded as the most powerful, 'top five' chaebol in the 1990s when my research was undertaken.

<sup>29</sup> However, this did not apply to Japanese companies in Korea. According to female employees of these firms, in contrast to their initial expectation that a foreign company would be a better employer than a Korean firm, they found that the working conditions and status of women in them could be worse (fu47, ff56). A female respondent (fu47), who had recently been laid off by her financially-struggling chaebol employer (H2) and then joined the Seoul branch of a major Japanese *zaibatsu* (conglomerate), said that the working conditions in the chaebol were far better than in the current company (M). In particular, there was a clear sexual division in job allocation with a strict gender hierarchy: female graduates in M were allocated to tasks that would usually have been given to female high-school leavers in her previous employer. Furthermore, there was a large wage gap between male and female graduates working in M.

According to these women this was due to a combination of factors, such as the 'imported' work culture and strict Japanese hierarchy, inflexibility in Korean offices that have retained the rules and customs of the 1960s when their office first opened, and the local climate of gender discrimination prevailing in Korea. It seems that while the status and conditions of female office workers in Japan have been improving over decades, however slowly (e.g. Carter and Dilatush 1976; Lebra 1984; Condon 1985; Carney and O'Kelly 1990; Saso 1990; Lam 1990, 1992, 1993; Iwao 1993; Shinotsuka 1994; Makoto 1996; Ogasawara 1998), the work culture and administrative systems of Japanese branch offices in Korea have apparently changed little as far as gender issues are concerned. This evinces the complexity of inter-relationships in the global marketplace between foreign MNCs, national culture and enterprises, and specific workplace practices.

<sup>30</sup> Samsung introduced 'open recruitment' (*yeolin chae-yong*) in 1995 to allow anyone who wished to apply, and selected them for their ability and potential rather than their personal background, education and *ji-yeon* etc. For example, about 80 people who did not attend university were hired at the same level as graduates. Women were also expected to represent 15-20 percent of their new recruits (Lee, YS. 1996:89) Samsung's announcement that it would abolish discriminatory assessment based purely on academic background and initiate a "first generation of open recruitment", has sparked a flurry of these kinds of advertisements considered sensational in Korea (Chang and Sung 1996:77).

<sup>31</sup> Interviewee code: **cs** denotes chaebol seminar, the **number** identifies the presenter (from 65 to 75). See Appendix 1.3 for codes for presenters at chaebol recruitment seminars.

<sup>32</sup> It is not unusual for workers to stay after working hours to help colleagues with allocated tasks since they consider themselves as team members in the same group (mu25m-H1).

<sup>33</sup> Their understanding of “the influence of traditional (Confucian) culture” at work naturally varied between individuals. For some it was almost unnoticed (possibly because they were used to it, and accepted it as ‘natural’ without giving it much thought) while for others it was too great to ignore (such as “influencing 70-80 percent of their work culture” (e.g. mu16-S1)). As clear evidence of this influence at work many interviewees identified strong hierarchical relationships between elder and younger, authoritarianism, male superiority and many others. See the later part of this chapter for more details.

<sup>34</sup> For example, in chaebol offices interactions between people take place on an unofficial and emotional plane as well as an official level. While the employer or superiors somewhat represent father figures to both male and female staff, women are often viewed as playing a role as a daughter or little sister to superiors or male colleagues. Even among female staff, they often call their female seniors (in age) as ‘*Uni*’ (meaning ‘sister’ in a family context). In this working atmosphere similar to an extended family, women often find themselves in a lower position in the (family) hierarchy - not only for their work-related tasks but also to serve men and undertake private errands for them as expected in the family. Chaebol’s tendency to maintain a family-like work atmosphere, due to the strong influence of familism, will be further discussed in later parts of this chapter.

<sup>35</sup> While stating that one of the important organisational characteristics of chaebol is their degree of control (that is, how tightly and hierarchically the internal relationships are organised), Kim W. (1994:89) explains that the degree of internal control affects the ease with which external influences are absorbed, and that the tighter and more hierarchical is a chaebol’s internal structure, the easier it should be to implement change among member companies.

<sup>36</sup> In this regard, the following quotation well explains the relationship between Korean militarism and its influence on organisational culture:

“Successive military governments, together with compulsory military training for most young men of nearly three years each, saw the principles of military organisation disseminated through much of Korean society. The predominating learned hierarchical structure was one where every lower station is subordinated to a higher one. With management and labour alike well drilled in this ethos, it is little wonder that such a militaristic attitude is so accurately reflected in industrial relations. Some analysts suggest that what a Confucian heritage does do, however, is to make it easier for such a system of authority to be implemented” (Asia Monitor resource Centre 1987:27).

Whitley (1992:195) also argues that the transfer of military systems of organisation and control to many parts of the state bureaucracy after 1961 was echoed by their influence on private business organisations, not least through the recruitment of military officers. According to him, military styles of management thus became important models in the rapidly expanding chaebol and matched traditional patterns of authoritarian supervision.

<sup>37</sup> These characteristics are not unique to chaebol; they also appear in other Korean organisations, such as government offices (fg60, fg61)

<sup>38</sup> Similar practices are also quite common outside Korea: for example, see Scott (ed.) (1990).

<sup>39</sup> An interesting, yet indicative, example is that when some chaebol managers were asked (as a favour through personal channels) to introduce me to members of staff for interview, they would suggest male and female employees working at different levels in different departments – but who, in many cases, just happened to have graduated from the same university attended by the manager himself.

<sup>40</sup> This contrasts with the Japanese concept of loyalty whereby the commitment is primarily to the

organisation as a whole and its collective goals (see Whitley 1991, for a detailed comparative discussion).

<sup>41</sup> According to Janelli (1993:235), while the low level of mobility between firms and ponderous career paths of most white-collar workers reflect the somewhat similar situation in Japan (see also Kumazawa and Yamada 1989; Nakamura and Nitta 1995; Broadbent 2003 - for the discussion of Japanese lifelong employment), in Korea lifetime employment was never even implicitly guaranteed. Ungson et al. (1997) also argue that, in contrast to Japan, layoffs in Korea are not uncommon and that the concept of lifetime employment is rarely seen in practice. However, from my personal experience of the interviews, the concept of 'lifetime employment' was very familiar to most male chaebol employees – especially in view of their perception and attitude before the 'IMF crisis' and the subsequent severe redundancies (this view is also strongly supported by Kim DO. et al. 2000:141-2).

<sup>42</sup> However, this seems no longer to be the case since many Korean companies have reduced the number of their staff in the wake of the IMF crisis in 1997. The details will be discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>43</sup> According to Baba (2004), although the seniority system may have weakened since the breakdown of the bubble economy in Japan, long-term, or 'lifetime', employment (another principal characteristic of Japanese-style management) has remained almost unchanged.

<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, Song BN. (1997:197) interestingly points out that the lifetime employment ideal also encourages employees to become familiar with the variety of skills they are likely to need during their lengthy employment with the firm.

<sup>45</sup> The IMF bailout requirements forced the Korean government to override union objections to easing laws restricting the ability of large companies to lay off staff, which had previously been virtually impossible in Korea (Chang HJ. 1998; Rowley and Bae 1998; Kirk 1999:ch.7; Kong 2000; Kim S. 2001). According to Kim S. (2001), the railroaded bill of December 1996 was designed to broaden the scope of layoffs; however, due to procedural defects, this law was re-amended in March 1997 after a general strike. The financial crisis in November of the same year changed the assessment again; in order to fulfil requirements of the IMF bailout package it was no longer possible to delay the layoff procedure for two years as re-amended by the congress in March that year (see Kim S. 2001 for more details). As the economic shock of 1997 deeply affected every aspect of life in Korea, the depressed economy pushed the unemployment and poverty rates up. Before the 1997 crisis, national unemployment was usually kept under 3 percent (Park NH. 2002); a year later unemployment reached 8 percent and peaked at 8.4 percent in the first quarter of 1999, before declining then plummeting to 3.7 percent in the fourth quarter of 2000 (King 2000; Park NH 2002). Kong (2000:240) explains that organised labour's acceptance of lay-offs (implying acknowledgement of its weak position) was contingent on its perception that the burdens of the crisis would be shared fairly (see also Kim S. 2001).

<sup>46</sup> S1a denotes company a from chaebol S1. See Appendix 2.1 for chaebol codes and business sectors (companies).

<sup>47</sup> This practice seemed to be more common among male employees, most of whom were frequent participants, while many women tended to be more individualistic and less enthusiastic than men in after-work group socialising. This may also be due to the fact that men sometimes implicitly exclude women from their 'male-bonding' occasions.

<sup>48</sup> However, this trend has been declining due to various factors, such as economic pressures arising from the IMF crisis, changing individual attitudes towards work commitment, and outlook on life in general. For example, many would nowadays spend more time investing in their career (e.g. by studying for better qualifications) or on their private life (e.g. on family or leisure activities) rather than hanging out drinking with colleagues (mu35) - which is often seen as a positive change.

<sup>49</sup> A quotation from a female employee can illustrate the point well here:



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“For chaebol H and its related companies (e.g. H2) traditional influences are stronger. Other companies that have been influenced a lot by modern Western or Japanese culture, such as S, are said to be much less influenced by traditional Confucian culture. As an example in the everyday working life in our company, when there is an excellent idea suggested by a staff member, if the boss doesn’t buy the idea and wants to do it in his own different way (which can be seen by others as clearly less efficient or effective) everyone has to obey. But, to my understanding, in some companies like SS, staff members were given opportunities to discuss and challenge things more freely, and if a junior’s opinion is more sensible the boss may find it difficult to stick to his own way all the time” (fu46-H2).

<sup>50</sup> For example, the study of a chaebol, Taesong, by Janelli and Yim (1998) demonstrated that the cultural understanding and practices of its office workers for achieving harmony had multiple origins and disparate qualities; they were simultaneously traditional and modern, in that past ideas and practices had been transformed and adapted to modern circumstances.

## CHAPTER SIX

### EMPLOYMENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN CHAEBOL: A Gender Perspective

#### 6.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this chapter is to examine policies and practices for both male and female office employees in chaebol. The source material is derived mainly from an analysis of interviews with employees and managers, supplemented by additional published information relating to employment policies and practices in chaebol. The chapter is ordered into four sections covering the key elements of human resource management: i) 'recruitment', ii) 'development', iii) 'rewards', and iv) 'termination'. Each of these four sections embraces both general considerations and specific gender-related aspects of the topic; in each case, the chaebol's general policies and practices relating to the subject are considered together with their application from a gender perspective where appropriate.

The 'recruitment' section covers the general methodical approach, the availability and access of information to *kongchae* (open recruitment) candidates, the procedures and criteria used in the selection process and the allocation of successful recruits to departments and jobs. In the 'development' section, the way chaebol train and prepare their employees for promotion will be examined, including staff training (both general and 'on the job'), task assignment, job rotation and transfers. In the 'rewards' section, performance evaluation, promotion and remuneration issues are discussed, while in the final section, 'termination', the topics of retirement, resignation and dismissal will be examined.

To undertake a general evaluation of labour employment processes from a gender-aware perspective, a number of important questions must be addressed. Such questions would relate to whether women are treated less favourably than men in recruitment and staff development; whether their work performance and attitudes toward their job are

evaluated differently from men; whether one sex receives better opportunities for promotion and rewards than the other, or perhaps is less likely to advance rapidly with poorer career prospects, and also whether one sex is more likely to be dismissed or leave voluntarily (perhaps as a result of pressure from the company or the working environment) than the other.

## 6.2 Recruitment

### a) Recruitment Method

Chaebol have customarily recruited most of their new staff by *kongchae*, which takes place once (or sometimes twice) each year at the same time when prospective candidates seek employment. For example, Janelli's study (1993) of one of the major chaebol showed that by the mid-1980s the group's annual hiring was concentrated into two major recruitment drives – one in the autumn (*habangi*) and one in the spring (*sangbangi*). The former was aimed at college seniors who were about to complete their last semester, and the latter for commissioned ROTC<sup>1</sup> officers soon to be discharged from military service. Other workers were recruited in smaller numbers whenever a special need arose (ibid.:135; also mu34m<sup>2</sup>)<sup>3</sup>.

The perceived security, high wages and good working conditions in chaebol have resulted in intense competition for employment by them<sup>4</sup>. Benefiting from this, chaebol often show preference for male over female workers (as noted in the previous chapter) and, even though the tendency may not be as explicit as formerly, some of their recruitment methods naturally favour men. Examples of these are recruitment through the intern system and from among ROTC-commissioned officers about to be discharged from military service. The intern system allows university students from particular faculties of more-privileged universities to work in industry for a short period (which varies from a couple of weeks to 6 months) while they are still students; apart from providing quality temporary labour, it enables chaebol subsequently to attract them into full employment on graduation<sup>5</sup> (mu1m, mu38m, mu41, mu42, cs73). To employ ROTC-commissioned officers, chaebol use special, focused recruitment advertisements and a selection procedure using interviews and aptitude tests. A good reason for

preferring ROTC officers, according to a chaebol manager, is that their army service marks them out as having leadership qualities, which gives them priority over other candidates. In the past, especially in the mid 1990s when it was hard to secure top-quality recruits, this approach was also practised at particular universities. Continuation of these selective practices in the future will depend on the labour market and the economy. Staff hired through the intern system are mostly men (fh28) and ROTC officers are always men (mu5, fu18\*, fu19\*). Therefore, both these recruitment methods can be considered male-centred and effectively exclude women.

### **b) Information Access**

The usual chaebol *kongchae* recruitment process follows an established path: advertisement in the press and at selected universities, collection of completed application forms, initial short-listing of promising candidates from these application forms, and finally two or three face-to-face interviews, sometimes followed by some written tests – as confirmed by chaebol HR managers and representatives during their recruitment seminars (cs67<sup>6</sup>, cs65, cs69, cs71)<sup>7</sup>.

During the major recruitment drive by chaebol each year, which begins with large advertisements in leading newspapers and on bulletin boards at selected universities, for candidates seeking employment it is vital that they can secure relevant information about jobs and employers. Expectant graduates have to seek information on employment from the job centre of their university, their departmental notice board, newspaper advertisements and established job information centres. On occasion, individual subsidiaries within a chaebol might initiate direct contact with particular universities, or even particular faculties, in order to seek access to superior candidates. This is usually arranged by members of chaebol staff who are also alumni of the particular university or faculty in question. The company would then select new staff from the pool of those candidates through a process of interviews and tests (such as aptitude tests) (mu1m, fu14, fu19\*, mu38m, mu41, mu42, cs73).

However, there seems to be some disparity between the sexes in their access to this recruitment information, in making direct contact with companies, and in benefiting from these special approaches to their university or faculty. It is quite common for male

job candidates to have easier access to alumni contacts within companies and their promotional visits, as well as recommendations by their faculty, even though the recruitment process is ostensibly by open competition. The corporate climate appears more supportive and welcoming for men, especially those from more-prestigious universities (also see Brinton et al. 2001). On the other hand for female job candidates, many of whom are from women's universities (even if prestigious ones), it is more a process that they have to handle by themselves. For example, as indicated by my field research interviews (see Appendix 2.5), all female employees were hired by the open competition (*kongchae*) method, yet only 81 percent of male employees were hired in this manner; the remaining 19 percent were initially contacted by their future employer through a faculty or company-sponsored scholarship, or an internship, or recommended by an already-employed alumnus - even though most of these cases were considered as part of *kongchae*. In terms of pure 'open' recruitment, while 48 percent of male job candidates learned about and applied for the position through university or faculty contacts (e.g. through alumni, by faculty recommendation or by company promotion at the university), only 16 percent of female graduates interviewed specified this involvement and assistance from their university, faculty or other alumni. Further, while 33 percent of male graduate interviewees learned about and applied for jobs through public notices and newspapers, the majority (84 percent) of their female counterparts made no particular mention of their university or faculty, suggesting that most of the information gathering and application process was carried out by themselves.

### c) Selection Process

A valid application usually specified a maximum age of 29 years<sup>8</sup>, a bachelor's degree from a four-year university, a specialisation (usually) in one of several specified fields, and completion of (or exemption from) military service (Janelli 1993:135; also cs66, cs73). The application form would also disclose the candidate's academic performance at university, prizes awarded and other qualifications (e.g. foreign languages, computer knowledge, and additional courses attended), while interviews would reveal the personality and character of the candidate (Lee JK. 1996). For the selection of new

recruits, academic performance and the impression made in interviews seemed to be the most important criteria for success (cs73). In evaluating academic performance, the criteria varied according to the university attended by the candidate. For example, a personnel manager (mu1m) in chaebol S1 revealed that, for candidates from a top few universities 3 points (out of a maximum 4.5) would be considered sufficient to qualify for recruitment, whereas for those at less-privileged universities (including most universities outside Seoul) 4 points might be required. However, this manager also added that, provided candidates meet this basic academic threshold, chaebol would nowadays tend thereafter to ignore academic performance and interview all candidates without prejudice. The purpose of interviews is to make a general evaluation of the candidate, judge personality and character, assess motivation and desire for the job, in addition to appraising the candidate's general knowledge and common sense, verbal ability, overall approach to life, as well as likely loyalty, co-operative and leadership aptitude (Chang SJ et al. 1992:38; also cs67-H1, cs69-D1, cs71-L).

In spite of an increase in the proportion of female graduates employed by chaebol since the late 1980s, which reached a peak in the mid-1990s<sup>9</sup>, the ratio of women to men in chaebol offices has remained comparatively low. At chaebol recruitment seminars in 1997, the recruiting representatives (e.g. cs66, cs69) claimed that their companies aimed to select a new-staff induction pool comprising, on average, approximately 10~12 percent women in the forthcoming recruitment season. However, this aim seemed rarely to have been achieved in any of their companies, either in that or the following years: according to female interviewees (e.g. fu37, fu43\*, fs53<sup>10</sup>), top chaebol, such as S1, usually hired one woman for every ten men when they were actively recruiting female staff, and in recent years, especially after the economic crisis, this ratio has declined with very few women now being hired.<sup>11</sup>

Since the Sexual Equality in Employment Act (first enacted in 1987 and subsequently amended three times) intended to improve gender equality and eliminate obstacles to women's participation in employment (Kim and Park 1992; Kim E. 1999), Korean employers have been more aware and careful about their employment policies and practices (fh33, mu34m). However, they still show either a strong preference for male recruits or have little real awareness of gender equality, as one manager even

admitted (e.g. mu34m-S2). While a significant number of interviewees (not only men but also women) stated that there was no or little apparent gender discrimination in recruitment and other employment policies and practices (e.g. mu1m, mu2, mu4, mu5, mh8, fu18\*, fh24, fh29, fu32, mu34, mu35, fu37, fu40) the following statement by a male interviewee involved in recruitment (mu35-S2) demonstrated an inherently contradictory perception and understanding of gender issues.

“Since I, as a recruitment team member, had first-hand experience of hiring new staff, I know for sure that there is no gender discrimination in recruitment. We hire fairly based only on the candidate’s record in the application form, and interviews. However, one thing to mention is that in recruiting new staff there are two approaches: one is to employ a certain number of people and allocate them accordingly; and the other is to hire according to the specific demand from each department. In the latter case (which we used for the last recruitment process), most departments specifically required male staff and we naturally followed their requests. In that situation there was no need or reason to employ women, was there? So even though there were many good female candidates, with good academic records and impressive interviews, we had to cut down on employing them.”

It is clear that gender discrimination still exists in recruitment, as one female staff member from the same chaebol (fh36-S2) pointed out: “even if women are better qualified objectively, they are less likely to be hired because of their sex and companies’ gender-biased attitude”.

#### **d) Job Allocation**

While formal policies may show little overt gender discrimination, the practical aspects of implementing the policies are somewhat different and display clear evidence of gender discriminatory practices in recruitment. Even if women have a similar level of educational attainment and qualification, the distribution of jobs between the sexes often differed. This propensity has already been observed elsewhere. The work of Chung and Chang in the mid 1980s (1985:32) identified the sectors in which companies employed female graduates by hiring through *kongchae* (open recruitment). Female graduate employees in these companies were mostly confined to certain tasks, such as secretarial work, designing, computer programming, translating and research work, where the assumed ‘feminine traits’ suited best<sup>12</sup>. More recently Hahn JH. (1997)

criticised the fact that, when the Samsung Group launched its large-scale female recruitment programme in 1992 and employed 200 female graduates through *kongchae*, the female recruits were employed mainly as professional secretaries, software experts and design specialists, while successful male candidates suffered no such restrictions in job allocation.<sup>13</sup>

When a small number of female graduates are selected by chaebol at the same time as men for the same jobs, they tend often to be better qualified and more capable than their male colleagues. This is not only because these women are recruited in competition with men but also, as fewer women are hired, they are selected from a proportionally larger and very competitive pool of female candidates, as some interviewees (e.g. fu18\*, fu19\*, m42, fs53) recognised. Of personnel managers interviewed in a study by Sohn and Jo (1993), 80 percent admitted that their employed female staff had generally scored higher than their male counterparts in their recruitment evaluation (which included academic performance at university, foreign language skills etc.). This was also confirmed by many of my interviewees (e.g. fu18\*, fu19\*, fu37, mu41, mu42, fu44\*), both men and women, who acknowledged that in their experience the female candidates tended to be brighter, more capable, and better qualified than most of the men recruited at the same time.

The next question, then, is to ask whether these highly qualified women, having been hired by a chaebol, would be treated by their employer as equally as men and as favourably as they deserve? Would they be able to forge a successful career in their companies as their male colleagues do? These issues are explored in the remainder of this chapter while examining chaebol's policies and practices in relation to staff development, rewards and separations.

## 6.3 Development

### a) Staff Training

Once they are recruited, the development and training of members of staff is widely recognised by chaebol as being of paramount importance. The nature of this training varies from chaebol to chaebol, and also between subsidiary companies within the same



chaebol. Typically, however, after a relatively short induction period the new employees are assigned to core departments, such as planning, finance and accounting (Steers et al. 1989:112). Staff training and education in chaebol primarily involves induction courses for new staff and OJT ('on the job training'), supplemented by specific development programmes, which include external courses (such as foreign language and computer courses) and educational visits overseas (mu38m, cs65). In addition, training for management, preparation for promotion and instruction in general etiquette (typically for female staff) are also common. For example, in chaebol S1, where the commitment to training and developing new staff is regarded as among the best in Korea (according to mu15m-S1, mb64), the usual process was described by a manager in charge of staff recruitment and training (mu1m-S1) as follows:

- i) The initial inductive training of newly recruited staff<sup>14</sup>, both recruits employed directly by the chaebol and those hired by subsidiary companies, is usually organised by the chaebol as a large group forum. This formal training would last some 3-4 weeks and take place away from home, after which the recruits would be sent to their particular companies. When a company received its new staff it would devote the next 6 to 12 months to providing further intensive training, usually involving an introduction to each department, computer and data processing instruction and field training. Occasionally, if a particular department urgently needed staff, recruits might be allocated to it immediately and receive their on the job training there.
- ii) Apart from formal inductive training, the subject chaebol provides frequent opportunities for staff to receive classroom training by specialist lecturers. Increasingly, of course, many training and educational courses are disseminated by computer (available to all staff) and through the internet.
- iii) At each managerial level staff can be offered training for promotion to the next level.
- iv) For more senior executives, the company provides general management development programmes.
- v) Occasionally, the chaebol sends members of staff away on external courses and programmes. If this is at the staff member's initiative, a small (10 percent or less) contribution by the employee towards the cost is normally taken to encourage commitment and diligence. Many such courses are attended in the evenings after work.

Staff training and education are considered by chaebol as vital for long-term success. In chaebol, where the idea of lifetime employment has been historically important (as seen in the previous chapter), the close attention paid to personnel matters and career development has been based upon the assumption that employees commit themselves to

long-term, if not lifetime, employment. As far as employees' views on staff training were concerned, while some (both male and female) interviewees were pleased to learn new skills (e.g. mu17, fu47) and felt that their employers were supportive and better than medium or smaller-sized companies in developing staff (e.g. mu15, mu16), others expressed some dissatisfaction with their company's lack of effort in promoting education (e.g. fh23, mu34). Even though the views of individuals varied according to their personal experiences and impressions, working conditions in chaebol were generally regarded as superior to those in non-chaebol companies.

From a gender perspective, the majority of the female graduates interviewed indicated that, in terms of formal training offered by the company, men and women were treated equally if they were assigned to the same jobs. However, some women (e.g. fu32-D1, fu47-H2, fu50-H2, fu51-D2) pointed out that, despite the multitude of formal training programmes for staff, OJT still constitutes the most important type of staff development and that there were major differences in treatment between the sexes in prolonged OJT and in the type of work assigned to individual employees. "As far as formal policies are concerned, it is believed that there is no gender discrimination. Yet, when it comes to opportunities, I admit that fewer chances are given to women", stated one male interviewee (mh13) from company S1a (textiles), which was well regarded for its modern and less-gendered working atmosphere. Even though there appears to be no apparent gender discrimination in formal company policies, chaebol are often regarded as preferring to invest in the development and training of male, rather than female, employees – which was pointed out by many women (both high-school leavers and graduates) and admitted even by male staff members (e.g. fh9-S1, mh18-S1, fh23-H1, fh29-H1, fu39-L, mu38m-D1, mu42-P, fu43\*-P, fu44\*-P, fu47-H2, fu50-H2, fu51-D2). For example, while training and overseas educational visits are motivating incentives for staff, and regarded as a long-term investment in human resources, they seem to be somewhat restricted as far as women are concerned. Women are given fewer opportunities than men, and their chances are usually worse if they are married (as was specifically pointed out by fh23-H1, fu43\*-P, fu44\*-P, fh49-H2). It is quite common for a woman to be excluded from educational training or attending a symposium with a superior because developing junior male staff is often favoured over training (even

more-senior) female staff, as was stated by a female graduate (fu51) from a minor chaebol D2.

One of the main reasons for this general tendency of chaebol and senior executives to invest less generously in training and development for female employees seems to be the superiors' discriminating attitude and treatment toward female staff. "Work allocation for female staff largely depends on the boss and his attitudes towards women", said one employee (fu50-H2). Even though managers' ways of thinking and attitudes have changed considerably, many still believe that women (especially those who are high-school leavers) are not really suitable for the job or the company in the long-term. Even if a woman is very good, superiors usually have little intention of investing in her as they would with men - as was recognised by both men and women (e.g. mu3-S1, fh33-D1). The training and development of staff naturally incurs heavy costs and chaebol seem to focus their human resource investment mainly on employees whom they believe to be more likely to provide future benefit to the company. The perceptions, biased or not, of employers and male superiors on female staff will be further discussed in Chapter 7. Meanwhile, the following quotation from one male employee of chaebol S1 (mu3-S1) offers an interesting insight into this apparent partiality:

"Some superiors or bosses, when male and female members of staff have completed work which does not satisfy them, tend with women to take the easy way out through half-hearted acceptance, while with men they criticise harshly to make sure that they produce better work the next time. Superiors are more likely to be hard on their male staff, but at the same time they are more supportive and concerned about their future career development. And I do not find this treatment fair for both men and women."

#### **b) Task Assignment**

Although the organisational structure in chaebol is centralised and its functions formalised, individual jobs are not formally structured as in other Korean business firms, according to Kang MH. (1996:111). He suggests that job descriptions and specifications rarely exist, and that job tasks and work responsibilities of individual employees are largely determined by the supervisor while the jobs are being performed. Kang further argues that, although the absence of job descriptions may cause

inefficiencies, such as duplication and an unbalanced workload, it may also increase flexibility in work assignment and allow an organic adaptation to changing conditions. Under this arrangement of unstructured responsibilities with a high degree of centralisation and formalism, individual and departmental performance depends importantly upon the ability of the individual or supervisor to get things done with the support of other people (*ibid.*). As pointed out by a male employee (mu41) of chaebol P, few tasks and little responsibility are given to individuals, but they are given to the team collectively (see also Chapter 5 where the group-oriented work culture of chaebol is considered). As a consequence, individual workers have to report to senior staff even trivial matters that are beyond their own decision-making limits when, in the view of the respondent, allocating clear responsibilities and authority would have helped to create a more efficient working environment. Similar practices seemed to be common in other chaebol, according to my personal observation during interviews.

When assigning jobs to newly-recruited employees, according to Janelli (1993:139), limited recognition was given to the students' university major: only graduates of business schools were put into finance or accounting departments, for example, and an international trade or foreign-language major stood a good chance of being assigned to exports work. He further suggested that the training acquired in college rarely provided sufficient knowledge of detailed procedures, skills, or even special terminology needed for permanent work assignments, and the company's decision was based only partly on the students' academic specialism. In making job assignments in chaebol, claimed some managers (e.g. mu1m-S1, mu38m-L), the company tries to reflect as far as possible the wishes of the individual in the light of available openings, and also in view of the vocational aptitude and performance shown during the job interviews and in the induction training period after recruitment, when they received extensive information about each department and its main tasks.

In allocating work, a supervisor or manager may tend to give more-important, core tasks to his favourite members of staff, while those less favoured would receive ancillary work which is less likely to allow the demonstration of skills and potential - as was confirmed by both men and women, managers and employees (e.g. mu1m-S1, mu5-S1, mu31-D1, fu37-S2, fu46-H2). In this type of situation, establishing a special

relationship with a boss and ‘pulling strings’ can influence the job assignment and subsequent career development. As a male employee (mu5-S1) comments,

“Once an employee has established a special rapport with his or her boss or senior [usually a man], and is favoured over other colleagues, the employee has a much better chance of receiving support and developing a career faster in the company. A good relationship with the boss makes the allocation of core tasks with higher responsibility more likely, and the reverse, where a poor relationship results in less important work, is also true. Initially, until the first supervisory (*daeri*) level is reached, this effect can be comparatively insignificant, but at more senior levels it can become very important. This may ultimately cause less-favoured employees to leave the company.”

Even though it was not unusual to find some male staff who expressed dissatisfaction with their work assignments for being less challenging than expected or for not being what they had wanted (e.g. mu16-S1, mu17-S1), it was more common to come across female employees who were not satisfied with their assigned tasks. Many female graduates and some high-school leavers felt that important or responsible work was not usually given to female employees regardless of their capabilities and that they found their given tasks somewhat boring or unchallenging (e.g. fu13-S1, fu18\*-S1, fh23-H1, fu37-S2, fu47-H2). Even if worthwhile work was allocated to them, it was often less important than that given to their male colleagues (Janelli 1993). Some women also expressed frustration because they felt that they had not been so well trained, and had received less coaching from their superiors, mainly because of being women, and that if a male employee was as capable as a female employee the opportunity was likely to be given to the man because the company favoured him more (e.g. fu13, fu18\*, fu47). A quotation from a female graduate employee from chaebol H2 (fu47-H2) illustrates their situation as follows:

“In training and job allocation, the company is more supportive towards men and allows them more time to develop themselves. Superiors, on the other hand, would give women work left over from men, or less interesting and fragmented work that men didn’t wish to do. For this reason, women have less time to invest in developing themselves and learning how to do proper work.”

This tendency of women to be allocated less-favourable tasks than their male counterparts was also recognised by some men themselves, from different chaebol (e.g. mu4-S1, mu26-H1, mu42-P, mu45-H2) – even though one man (mu4) added that it was

the fault of women themselves because they tended to avoid difficult tasks instead of making efforts to accomplish them (see Chapter 7 for further discussion on this issue). A good example of gender discrimination in training and development is well illustrated by an experience of a male interviewee in chaebol P (mu42): an opportunity to travel overseas on an educational trip was offered to him, although it was obvious that his female colleague, who had joined the department before him, was more deserving. The male interviewee took the opportunity, but felt guilty and sorry for her because it was in conflict with accepted practice based on seniority according to the length of time worked. Another male employee, while being interviewed, voluntarily expressed his shared frustration that his wife (working in a different chaebol) felt discouraged because very little challenging work had been given to her over the last ten years (mu45-H2). Importantly, this kind of unfair treatment towards women was acknowledged by a manager who had work experience in a human resources department of chaebol S2 (mu34m-S2), as follows:

“There is no discrimination in recruitment; we hire according to performance and potential. That is why we have some female employees in our company. However, a problem arises when we allocate them to different departments since the managers from certain departments are often reluctant to take female staff. For example, the sales department don’t want to have women due to practical restrictions, such as the need to make overseas business trips. In such cases, we tend to allocate them to other supporting departments, where many female high-school leavers work. But then these female graduates seem to create other problems - like conflicts with the existing non-graduates.....”

### **c) Job Rotation and Transfers**

Career development and promotion in chaebol often involves job rotation and transfers. Regular job rotation is used both as a means to acquire different skills and to enhance a worker’s administrative ability, as well as providing increased flexibility for the organisation. According to the manager quoted above (mu34m), a staff member with high potential is likely to receive a succession of tasks and training opportunities to assist promotion to general manager or specialist<sup>15</sup>. He considered himself well appreciated by his seniors, but also admitted that he had been well circulated among a number of the best departments, and that his career prospects within the company were good - even though he was secretly planning eventually to move to join a relative’s

company, where he would have more power and authority. On the other hand another male interviewee from a different chaebol (mu5-S1), who thought he was doing reasonably well in his allocated job, felt less confident as a company employee because he had not been well circulated; he knew little about other departments and doubted he would be successful in them. He (mu5) also added that, if the current situation continued, he would leave the firm within five to seven years to change his career path. This comparison seems to indicate clearly the importance of training and job rotation in Korean companies.

Women, however, tend over time to lag behind their male colleagues in career progression, even when assigned the same jobs as men. This is partly because of the difference between men and women in opportunities for job rotation and transfers (see Chapters 7 and 8 for their actual experiences). An example of this was described by a female graduate from a less-known, smaller chaebol (D2) where the discrimination was probably worse than in most other chaebol studied:

“When I first started working for the company, two men also joined the same department at the same level. After almost four years of working I have remained in the same department and am still the most junior of seven staff members - while the two men have moved up to a higher level. The main reason is that the company has kept me in the same department doing the same work, depriving me of the opportunity to learn and gain experience elsewhere within the company, while the two men have circulated through a number of departments learning different work. In our company, it is only women who remain in the same department for a number of years, which is clearly gender-discriminatory. Even if women were promoted to a managerial level after many years experience, they would usually be allocated to a position assisting men, as in administration. Even though there is no obvious discrimination in written promotion policies (women are usually promoted after due time, and I have accordingly been promoted to a *ke-jang* level), the differing job assignments and rotation greatly affects promotion opportunities, making for a huge difference between men and women” (fu51-D2; 28 years old).

The view that when a female and a male employee compete on similar terms priority was given to the man, was held not only by female employees but also recognised by some male staff. In a business environment where this kind of job assignment system is common, women benefit less than their male colleagues and often find themselves in situations less favourable for their career development. For instance, as one female

respondent (fu50–H2) reasoned, if a woman usually receives less-important work than the core tasks given to a man, this will inevitably result in fewer opportunities for promotion and further career development, and she will become disheartened.

This perceived gender bias in relationships between senior management and members of staff will be further examined in the following chapter where employers' perceptions and attitudes towards their female staff are considered. These differing perceptions and attitudes can lead to quite different treatment of staff, in turn resulting in different outcomes for their careers. As Park SJ. (1989) correctly argued, there was a positive relationship between the employer's attitude towards (and perception of) female employees and the way they recruited female staff and treated them.

## 6.4 Rewards

### **a) Performance Evaluation**

For any employment reward system encompassing remuneration and selection for promotion to function properly, an impartial process of performance evaluation must be in place. One of the most distinctive features of performance evaluation in Korean employment is, however, “the ambivalent criteria for evaluating work”, as noted by some interviewees (e.g. mu1m, mu4, fu14)<sup>16</sup>. This is partly because the actual performance of a task tends to be a joint effort of a work group or team, which makes the evaluation of an individual's performance difficult (as recounted by mu1m, fu14) in an environment where teamwork as part of a group is considered more important than individual achievement (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed consideration of the work culture of chaebol). This has led to a work climate where, apart from a few who are either outstandingly good or similarly bad, the capability and performance of most staff members are regarded as broadly similar. Moreover, in evaluating work performance there is always a tendency that the process becomes an assessment of the person rather than the job, since human relationships are valued more highly than the work itself. This fact was readily admitted by a senior manager from chaebol S1:

“In a people-oriented work culture, the work cannot be clearly divided between individuals, whereas in a work-oriented culture an employee's work is



appreciated for the performance of the work itself. And human relationships play an important role in work evaluation” (mu1m-S1).

Most employees interviewed regarded the performance evaluation system in their chaebol as being generally fair, but on occasion less so for a variety of reasons. One of the most common reasons for dissatisfaction, which was related to ambivalence about performance evaluation in chaebol, was that managers tended to give good assessments to employees under consideration for promotion and poor ones for those who were not, regardless of their real work performance (as confirmed by mu4-S1, fh24-H1, mu41-P, fu43\*-P, fu48-H2; see also Pucik & Lim JC. 2002). The interviewees (e.g. mu4, fh24) explained that, apart from a few whose work was clearly outstanding, for most employees evaluation related less to their work performance and rather more to a consideration of their promotion prospects or possible salary increases. According to a female graduate employee from chaebol P,

“It happens often. In the company’s performance evaluation system, merit grades from A to D are allocated to each individual, and they are supposed to be evenly distributed. As a result, if someone is under consideration for promotion, the grades of other workers might be sacrificed to give the promotion candidate a better grade” (fu43\*-P).

It was a widely held view that the company’s evaluation process was not fully rational since staff were promoted when they had reached the ‘right time’, rather than whether they had earned it<sup>17</sup>.

Another aspect of the process with which the interviewees were not satisfied was the fact that performance evaluation was not usually open to the employees themselves, and that staff who were assessed by their managers knew neither the result nor any particular comments (as pointed out by mu22-H1, fu48-H2). Rather than being candid and open, it was a one-way, ‘top-down’ system from managers and directors to the staff, and the resulting evaluation was officially kept secret even from the staff themselves (mu22). This system of evaluating performance was also confirmed by other studies, such as the one by Kang MH. (1996:115), in which he revealed that most Korean firms did not hold appraisal interviews, and that there was no feedback or discussion between the superior and the subordinate. As a result, appraisal data are used

more for reward decisions (ibid.) than to evaluate performance. The problem with this, according to one male interviewee (mu22-H1), was that employees did not know the result of the assessment and this made them uncertain and insecure. Discrimination was more likely to occur in this situation, yet it was difficult to detect, said another respondent from a different chaebol:

“Since the evaluator is often not the direct superior but usually a more senior manager, in my opinion the system gives assessments that are 60 percent fair and 40 percent unfair. The unfairness comes from a lack of communication or awareness of the real situation, plus other factors such as the interpersonal relations between them. The relationship of the staff member with the direct boss is as important as that with the evaluator, because the intermediate direct boss plays an important role. The better and closer the relationship between the evaluated staff member and the manager (and between the manager and the evaluator), the higher is the chance of the employee securing a good assessment” (mu5-S1).

Because an objective evaluation of the work performance of individuals is not easy to establish, it was usually the team manager’s personal opinion that played a critical role (as argued by mu5-S1, fu48-H2). As a result, assessment of the performance of members of staff is, inevitably, to a large extent subjective. In his study, Kang MH. (1996:115) came to a similar view that in many cases seniority or the top manager’s personal evaluation played a large part in the reward decision. In these circumstances, individual favouritism could be important and affect the performance evaluation as well as job allocation, as admitted by both male and female staff (e.g. mh8-S1, mu22-H1, fu50-H2). A human resources manager (mu1m-S1) who frequently evaluated staff performance, was well aware of the dissatisfaction of some employees with the system, and the difficulty of making fair and objective assessments of performance where the nature of work is different for each member of staff. However, unlike those employees who found some aspects of the company’s job evaluation system biased and unsatisfactory, an apparently confident member of staff from the human resources department, whose career appeared to be going well, held a slightly different view, as follows:

“I consider the work evaluation by seniors and the personnel department as fair and non-discriminative. Work performance evaluated by figures or data can be important but the impression and intuition of the senior [boss] is generally

correct. Anyone who is considered by others as capable and good at work is also equally well regarded by the person in charge of evaluation” (mu2-S1).

It was interesting to see this junior member of staff, in the same human resources department as the previously-quoted manager, having such a strong positive view with few doubts about the firm’s evaluation system, while his direct boss (mu1m) and seemingly his ‘protector’<sup>18</sup> in the company had a more balanced, less categorical outlook on the same matter.

As shown earlier, it is generally (if superficially) accepted that women who are hired through a chaebol’s *kong-chae* (open recruitment) procedure are as capable as men and have similar, or sometimes better, qualifications than their male colleagues. Newly-hired female graduates are usually appreciated both for their potential and for their ability to learn and perform their responsibilities. Their employers and managers viewed them as being well qualified and focused. According to Sohn and Jo (1993), personnel managers were usually satisfied with the work performance of their female staff and held a high regard for their sincerity, their capacity for work hard and attention to detail, and their consistency. However, they were considered as quite different from men in the way they carried out their tasks and their attitude towards work, and this often affected their progress and career development unfavourably. Women usually considered themselves, and were so regarded by male colleagues, as quick learners, creative thinkers and rather better than men in their attention to detail (e.g. mu5, mh6, mu17, fu18\*, mu27, mu35, mu42). There were, therefore, some disciplines in which women were considered to make better workers than men - such as design, public relations and advertising, computer programming, management and storage of data, and financial administration and planning - where their more-delicate ‘feminine’ characteristics and attention to detail could be effectively employed (as suggested by male respondents, such as mu1m, mu5, mh6, mu35)<sup>19</sup>.

In comparison, men were viewed as excelling in situational judgement and more determined, forceful, loyal, and good at networking - often regarded as essential for a successful career, as stated by men as well as women (e.g. fu18\*, mu17, mu42). This also implied that, to a certain extent, women were correspondingly lacking in initiative, leadership and dedication to the company as a lifetime (or at least long-term) employer.

While women usually undertook 'desk work', mostly in supporting departments (such as planning, finance and human resources), men were assigned to tasks that required action, quick judgement and decision-making, communication with clients or suppliers, and frequently involving 'working outside' - as recognised by women themselves (e.g. fu27-H1, fu37-S2). With a few exceptions, women were not considered to like, or be active enough for, sales or related disciplines; while men were eager to take initiative and meet clients, women tended to remain behind and consequently miss opportunities (mu1m-S1, fh23-H1, mu34m-S2). Women would either find sales work difficult because of the frequent business trips and meetings with many people (often involving meals and drinking), or the (usually-male) clients preferred to deal with men, with whom they felt more comfortable socialising (fh23-H1, fh49-H2). Even though all jobs and disciplines were considered important for the company, 'men's work' normally undertaken by male staff members was usually seen as more important and offering better career-prospects (fu27-H1, fu37-S2).

While women saw themselves as less likely to be corrupted, and more objective in dealing with projects or contracting with suppliers (fu13-S1, fu43\*-P), they admitted that they were less likely to be good at office politics involving superiors and colleagues<sup>20</sup> (fu43\*-P, fu39-L). Men were usually considered to have better social skills and more likely to achieve progress through networking and personal relationships with clients and superiors (almost always men), to the benefit of their careers (mu7-S1, fu13-S1).

Sohn and Jo (1993) suggested in their study of chaebol that while personnel managers (mostly male) evaluated women's work performance (and potential) as being as good as men, or even better in certain tasks, when it came to an overall evaluation they tended to consider male staff as superior. My own research confirmed this in that women, in spite of their recognised abilities, appeared to be evaluated less favourably than their male colleagues. Unless demonstrably exceptional, women were usually excluded from the highest grades and typically assessed as 'mediocre'. The reasons for these less-favourable performance evaluations may be numerous and are probably complex. There is little doubt that it is partly because work performance assessment in chaebol is informally geared to assist those being considered for promotion, and that

women were less likely to fall into this category (as suggested by fh9-S1, mu4-S1, fu43\*-P) - this is considered further in the following section. Another possible explanation, supported by my findings, is the fact that work relationships and interaction with their (male) bosses are intrinsically different from those of their male colleagues. Due to their usually superior ability to network and participate in office politics in the male-bonding culture of Korea, men have established closer relationships with their superiors and male colleagues, yielding benefits of mutual cooperation, loyalty and commitment. This has clearly benefited men and, as a result, women have often missed important information, and also opportunities to develop their career.

### **b) Remuneration and Promotion**

Korean companies generally take both seniority and performance into consideration when making their reward decisions. The reward system is traditionally based on seniority even though, with the growth of Korean business and the increasing sophistication of its management, companies are gradually moving towards considering performance evaluation as a factor in reward decisions (according to mu34m-S2; see also Kim S. and Briscoe 1997; Bae and Rowley 2004). On the whole, however, seniority is still seen to be the most important factor in reward decisions in most Korean business firms (Lee HC. 1989; Kim DO. et al. 2000) and promotion is more likely to be based on '*yeon-kong-seo-yeol*'<sup>21</sup> (length of service) than work performance (as reported by fu18\*-S1, fu44\*-P). However, the criteria used for evaluation depend on the type of reward decisions. In promotion, according to Kang MH. (1996:114), seniority tends to be more important at lower levels of the organisation, while at higher grades, especially those with general management and executive status, performance is usually more important than seniority. Janelli (1993:144) also noted that employees in Korean firms had been regularly promoted to the next-higher level after a certain period of time, and advancement (particularly among the lower white-collar ranks) depended primarily on years of service and annual assessments by the two most-immediate superiors. Clearly, as in other hierarchical organisations, in chaebol the more senior the position the fewer there are available.

In chaebol, as in other Korean companies, staff performance evaluations embrace an assessment of work performance and a procedure known as '*Insakokwa*', both of which are reflected in promotion decisions (fu44\*-P). *Insakokwa* means, according to the definition used in one of the major chaebol (S1), "a regular assessment, evaluation, criticism and guidance on the performance ability and achievement of employees, to help them with their self-development and work progress, and to promote a harmonious growth between individual staff and the company" (Strategic Business Consultants 1997:7; see also Lee HY. 1996). While the evaluation of work performance is 'work-centred', *insakokwa* is 'person-centred' (Strategic Business Consultants 1997:8). Even though employees are regularly promoted to the next higher level after a certain period of time, the average duration between promotions was not usually a matter of public information.

According to *Monthly Recruit* magazine<sup>22</sup> (July 1987:37), variations in the speed of promotion existed not only between chaebol but also between sister affiliates of the same chaebol, according to the company's rate of growth. Major chaebol typically required a new recruit (*sawon*) to work for about fourteen years before qualifying for promotion to department head. The reported average time before preferment for current department heads in 1987 was 14.7 years (*Maeil kyongje sinmun*, Jan.26, 1987:2), but some individual promotions had taken several years longer (*Monthly Recruit* 1987:37). At one chaebol company (S1a), for example, there used to be 11 mini-promotion levels (*sung-kyeok*), each of which was supposed to take approximately two years. However, currently this two-year period has been extended to some three years. As a result, it would now take three years for a graduate recruit to be promoted to '*ju-im*' (between general staff and *daeri*), another three years to '*daeri*' (supervisory level), a further three years to '*kwa-jang*' (junior/section manager) and so on (mulm-S1)<sup>23</sup>. In a different chaebol (L), in comparison, each mini-promotion requires four years for a new staff member to reach *daeri*, *kwa-jang*, and then *cha-jang* levels respectively (mu38m-L).

However, new changes in the assessment and promotion system are beginning to appear: some firms recently have started to stress the importance of 'merit' and 'job performance' in their promotion system (see also Kim S. and Briscoe 1997; Kim DO. et

al. 2000; Lepage and Gross 2001; Pacific Bride, Inc. 2001; Bae and Rowley 2004).<sup>24</sup> One of the most important new changes is the introduction of '*yeon-bong-je*', whereby employees are promoted according to their work performance<sup>25</sup> rather than mainly on their length of service (*yeon-kong-seo-yeol*). In a number of companies, this system has already been introduced and applied to some more senior levels in the organisation. For example, this *yeon-bong-je* system was implemented at *daeri* (supervisor) level and above in company S1a in 1999, whereas in company S1b it had only been introduced at managerial level, with the *daeri* level to be included during the following year (mu1m-S1a, fu18\*-S1b). With the practice of *yeon-bong-je*, each employee of *daeri* status and above would receive a different salary, which could vary between individuals by up to 20-30 percent. This, according to a manager (mu1m-S1), could lead to pressure and serious stress among those staff members whose work performance was less-favourably assessed. Further, the applicability of this system was questioned by some (e.g. mu34m-S2) since the nature of Korean work culture, with its person-oriented rather than task-oriented focus, made an objective evaluation of an individual's work difficult (Ungson et al. 1997). Nevertheless, it was clear that the general trend was moving towards *yeon-bong-je*, with its more objective appreciation of employees' work performance rather than length of service (mu1m-S1, mu34m-S2, mu45-H2)<sup>26</sup>.

On the whole, however, in the chaebol studied it was still seniority that was the most important factor in reward decisions, as in most other Korean business firms shown in Lee HC.'s study (1989).<sup>27</sup> It also appeared that, although performance evaluation did recognise work achievement, employees in chaebol were still promoted by a system based largely on seniority, dedication, loyalty and their personal relationship with their superiors and top management, rather than on their objective contribution to the company through work performance.

Women in chaebol generally seemed to be considered less seriously for promotion, which they were achieving slightly more slowly than men (according to mu4, mu5, fu43\*, fu46, fu47, fu50). This was not only felt by women themselves but also recognised by their male colleagues. For example,

"There is a tendency that when both a woman and a man are under consideration for promotion, the company or superiors tend to support the man instead of the woman by giving him a better work assessment" (fu43\*-P).

“There are some women who are hard working and equally appreciated by the company but I am not sure whether they have an equal chance to be promoted, and with as good a future as men” (mu4-S1).

Some respondents added that gender discrimination in promotion could be more obvious, especially in those companies where the main industry was less female-friendly, such as heavy manufacturing and construction. In such companies it was considered very difficult for a woman to be promoted to managerial status alongside men - even though a few women could have reached the *daeri* (supervisor) level. Furthermore, the nature of a department or its work does affect promotional opportunities (as suggested by fu21-S1, fh33-D1, fu43\*-P, fu47-H2). As mentioned earlier, women were usually allocated to certain ‘feminine’ departments (e.g. designing, planning, administration, public relations) where their chances of career development and promotion were considered better. However, there were very few instances of a chaebol employee doing purely administrative work being promoted to a senior level, however long they served. As pointed out by one female member of staff (fu14) from chaebol S1, most of the long-serving senior executives are men promoted from the management department, while the highest position achieved by a man from an administrative discipline was departmental manager (*bujang*) of a less-popular department, such as planning. This has important implications for women and their career development since they usually work in administrative or supporting, rather than core, departments.

Even for those few female workers who had been promoted to *daeri*, and had so far experienced little discrimination, when it came to being considered for further promotion to a higher level (such as middle management grades and above) they were less confident and feared that there might be some gender bias (as stated by mu5-S1, fu10\*-S1, fu18-S1, fu37-S2, fu43\*-P, fu44\*-P).<sup>28</sup> This uncertainty was further increased by the fact that there were few instances of a woman having reached managerial level in their company.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, there was little indication of how far a woman could progress and no role model for new female staff to aspire to (fu18\*-S1). In a way, however, this is perhaps understandable since chaebol only began hiring



female graduates through *kongchae* (open recruitment) in the late 1980s, and in larger numbers in the early and mid 1990s. As one female interviewee (fu39-L) pointed out, considering the short history of hiring female graduates it might be too early to judge objectively whether or not women have been discriminated against in promotion. Women have, so far, often reached *daeri* (supervisor) level, a promotion that can usually be achieved by staying with the company for a certain length of time rather than through superior work performance. Therefore, only in the future, when the time comes for women to be promoted to managerial level where more responsibility is involved and work evaluation is considered critically important, will the truth about gender equality or otherwise in promotion be revealed. Nevertheless, it is worth considering the case of a newly-launched affiliate of a chaebol which had to headhunt some managers because, due to their short five-year history of *kongchae* recruitment, the highest position reached by a new employee was only at the *daeri* level. Although the company's target market comprised women as potential clients, and it therefore hired a high proportion of women (50 percent of their new recruits in the first year were women), among all the managers headhunted by the firm there was only one woman selected for a junior managerial position (*kwa-jang*), whereas all the other managers were men (fu39-L).

Overall, the likelihood that women have fewer opportunities for promotion is chiefly for the reasons discussed earlier in this chapter: the fact that women appear to their superiors as less suitable than men to be considered for promotion is compounded by the resulting lower likelihood of favourable assessments.

In concluding this discussion of rewards systems, there is another important element to consider - remuneration. Like promotion, basic salaries are largely based on seniority in chaebol. Most Korean companies determine an employee's base salary after considering the level of education<sup>30</sup> and seniority of the employee, and then add appropriate special allowances to arrive at the gross salary (Kang MH. 1996:115). In addition to the salary paid monthly, Korean companies pay seasonal bonuses (such as at Christmas, New Year, Korean Thanksgiving Day, and for vacations) (Kang MH. 1996; Ungson et al. 1997), and frequently also performance bonuses distributed according to work accomplishment, particularly at the end of the year. According to Janelli

(1993:147, 149), an employee's salary correlated closely with his or her rank, yet base pay was not determined by rank but by the system of pay grades and salary steps. He also suggested that salaries increased with the size of the company and that bonuses increased with age, years of service, education, and occupation (ibid.:151). It is worth noting, however, that due to the recent economic crisis and the consequent IMF-inspired structural adjustment, there have been particular difficulties in staff compensation involving reductions in salary or (at least) fringe benefits. It has been common practice in many companies to reduce employees' bonuses or fringe benefits. For instance, in company D1a there were no salary cuts for general staff (while there were at managerial level and above) yet fringe benefits, including housing loans for (usually married) employees, have been reduced (as reported by one of its employee fu32).

Basic starting salaries for male and female graduates recruited at the same time were usually the same.<sup>31</sup> Some male employees (mu4, mu25m) claimed that there was no difference in payment between male and female graduates when he started, unlike in the past when men were better paid. He also added that the policy of equal pay was being maintained and was expected to continue in the future. However, according to Bai and Cho (1995:140), because the wages paid by Korean firms include a number of fringe benefits (such as cost-of-living, housing, family support and children's education allowances) that are normally offered only to male workers,<sup>32</sup> there are additional factors that help create a wage differential between male and female workers. A female respondent (fh9-S1) also confirmed that fringe benefits were not equally distributed to all staff, but were affected largely by marital status and seniority: for example, a married man with children as a household head received special benefits, such as housing benefit, family support and children's education allowances, whereas unmarried women like herself received almost no benefits.

## 6.5 Termination

There are three main pathways out of regular employment: retirement (natural conclusion of a working life), resignation (voluntary termination of employment) and

dismissal. For white-collar employees, retirement at present predominately involves men, as female graduates have been recruited in any number only since 1985 (see Chapter 1) and few female high-school leavers remain at work after marriage or childbirth (see later chapters); for female white-collar employees natural retirement is currently rare.

Dismissal has certainly become more common since the recent economic crisis, together with the gradual erosion of the concept of 'lifetime' employment, as discussed in Chapter 5. However, chaebol often prefer to manoeuvre selected employees into 'voluntary resignation' or 'honourable retirement', which may be considered a blurred combination of all three pathways. How 'voluntary' a resignation or retirement is can be hard to determine, in view of the work culture and many subtle means of applying pressure on an employee. The main discussion in this section, therefore, will focus on dismissal in its various forms.

For ordinary male employees, apart from a few high-achieving top executives and directors, the usual age limit for retirement is around 50 to 55 years in most chaebol<sup>33</sup> (Steers et al. 1989; mu15m, mu41). Traditionally, it was accepted that once a person (typically a male) was employed by a chaebol he would usually remain until he retired (mu5-S1, mu7-S1, mh8-S1, fu14-S1, mu15-S1, mu22-H1, mu41-P). However, according to Ungson et al. (1997), estimates of annual voluntary labour turnover in Korean firms range from 10 percent to 20 percent<sup>34</sup>, but much of this is attributed to women leaving the company to get married or have children. In fact, as they argue (ibid.), it is estimated that more than 70 percent of all employee turnover is among women.

Even though overt dismissal was not common, there were discrete mechanisms by which the company would be able to dispense with less-suited staff members before they reached retirement age. For example, when layoffs are necessary companies often encourage older workers or female employees of marriageable age to leave - and provide a financial incentive to do so (Steer et al. 1989:123; Ungson et al. 1997:207). For some other cases, the company might repeatedly exclude someone from timely promotion or allocate him or her to a position that was obviously unattractive; the employee would probably feel uncomfortable or embarrassed and eventually decide to

leave (fh24-H1; see also Janelli and Yim 1998). Further, in the very hierarchical work culture of chaebol where seniority is a vital element in interpersonal relations, should the company promote a younger person to a higher position than an older employee, leaving the latter to serve under the former, neither would feel comfortable working together (fu18\*-S1)<sup>35</sup>. In this case the elder (usually), feeling less capable and abandoned by the company, would soon leave (f18). A similar practice was also identified elsewhere; according to Janelli's study (1993:153), when asked how the company would go about getting rid of someone, several junior managers explained that instead of firing a man outright the company would humiliate him into resigning by giving him no work to do or by transferring him to an undesirable post.

Dismissal or redundancy of chaebol staff had not been the object of particular attention until about 1997. As discussed earlier in Chapter 5, the concept and practice of lifetime employment has been changing, especially since the 1997 economic crisis when many chaebol were forced to release large numbers of employees while 'downsizing' their business organisations (cs73; see also Kim DO. et al. 2000; Bae and Rowley 2004). The response of chaebol to the crisis was to introduce a new policy to encourage their unwanted employees to leave, since they could not force them to do so. This policy was known as 'voluntary resignation' or 'honourable retirement system' under which employees were encouraged to leave honourably rather than facing more severe action (as explained by mu4, fu51).<sup>36</sup> The following quotations from interviewees well illustrate the practice:

"Before the economic crisis, typically 7-8 percent of employees left each year through resignation or retirement. Since the crisis, however, almost 50 percent of the staff members have left as the company could not afford to keep them. Because the company did not wish to force its employees to leave, it introduced a 'voluntary retirement/resignation' scheme under which anyone who had worked for seven years or more would receive a bonus of nine months salary on leaving, while anyone who had worked less than seven years would get five months salary. Realising the situation that the firm was facing, many men and women left voluntarily under this scheme" (mu4-S1)

"At the end of 1997 when the financial situation became difficult, the company closed a number of departments by combining them with others (e.g. a previously-separate staff training department was absorbed into the HR department) and wanted to reduce the number of staff. That was when they

introduced the policy of ‘voluntary resignation’. The immediate future of the company looked gloomy and I thought that it would be wiser, and that I would be better off, if I resigned immediately with a cash payment (5,000,000 *won*<sup>37</sup>, including overdue bonus) since there was speculation that cash benefits might cease if the financial situation got worse. Also, there were rumours that after the voluntary resignation period many employees were going to be asked to leave anyway. As a result many members of staff, who considered that they were being kept in the dark and felt insecure, eventually decided to leave voluntarily before the time ran out. So like many others, I hurried to resign. However, we later learned that the company’s financial situation wasn’t as bad as had been rumoured, and in the end the company managed to reduce the number of staff to almost half (from 1,500 to 700-800 employees) by getting rid of most of those whom they considered least needed in the company” (fu51-D2).

In fact, due to the ‘voluntary resignation’ scheme many chaebol employees left their companies. The number of voluntary resignations and the extent of pressure applied to staff varied between chaebol: some forced all their staff to hand in ‘voluntary’ resignations, which they then accepted from those least needed and refused from those they wished to retain. In other cases, superiors would have a ‘direct and frank’ conversation with their staff, along the lines of “we only need so many in this department and you rank outside this number” (mu4-S1). In this case, the employee would have little choice but to leave. Although by this process the company might lose some of its most capable staff, nevertheless they did manage to remove many less-capable or less-wanted employees, or those who did not get along well with their superiors - regardless of their true capability (mu4). One incident is particularly illuminating in this respect. A senior HR manager claimed that, since officially there were no forced dismissals, there was no seniority or gender bias among those employees who left. However, when he further explained the situation as follows, the reality seemed to be somewhat different:

“An instruction (or an order) came down to each department with an indication of the desired number of employees to be retained in the department, and asking the senior manager of the department to make the critical decisions in selecting those people he needed to keep, considering the efficiency and best interests of the department” (mu1m-S1).

In these circumstances, where the power to decide resides in the person in charge of the department, his choices are likely to be largely subjective and depend on his personal opinion and relationship with each member of staff.

The people who have left the company by the process of ‘voluntary resignation’ or ‘honourable retirement’ could be categorised into different groups. These included: i) experienced members of staff and middle managers who had worked long enough but seemed to be struggling or lagging behind their peers and who consequently had poor future prospects; they were often regarded by their employers as not cost-effective, being less valued than their remuneration justified; ii) capable employees who were not well suited to the company, or unappreciated by their superiors - often recent graduates who were bright and confident, yet felt unappreciated and who took the opportunity to make a major career change; iii) women, especially, who felt they had little future in the company - particularly those who had worked for an extended period, such as married female high-school leavers (as recounted by mu4-S1, fu13-S1, fu51-D2).

Even though these separations were voluntary and the choice was offered to the employee, some claimed that the prime targets of this policy of ‘indirect dismissal’ or ‘voluntary resignation’ were women, especially those who were married (such as wives whose husbands also worked in the company, or women on maternity leave) or long-serving, junior staff. Even before the economic hardship, Korean companies had a long history of laying off married or pregnant female employees in an ‘unofficial’ way. Women in the office were prone to informal, indirect pressure to leave when they married and, more often, on becoming pregnant. One male employee (mu27) from chaebol H1 suspected, although there were still some married women in the office, that they would face difficulties once pregnant: since it was not possible to force their resignation directly, managers would put the women under a certain amount of pressure to leave, assisted by the gender-biased working atmosphere that would contribute to their discomfort. Women themselves understood the situation well; a number of interviewees said that even if there was normally little discrimination, when it came to reducing staff women were usually the first to go (e.g. fu12\*-S1, fu13-S1, fu14-S1, fu44\*-P, mu45-H2, fu46-H2).

Resignation was often encouraged by bosses who pleaded the company's hardship, or warned of a posting to less-privileged work. In some cases where the number of staff had to be reduced, bosses would even ask female employees to "be sympathetic" by giving up their own position in favour of a male colleague who was the main breadwinner of his family (fu19\*-S1). One female employee expressed her dissatisfaction with the different way the company treated men and women in a similar situation as follows:

"It seems that there is normally no sexual discrimination here. However, in a critical situation like this [suggested resignation] sexual discrimination does apply. This is largely due to the conventional way of thinking and the attitude of the employer and superiors. When the company has to reduce the number of staff, there is no doubt that women would be the first to be laid off since men need work as they have a family dependent on them, while women can depend either on their parents or their husbands" (fu12\*-S1).

Kim TH. (1995) also noted that many chaebol have recently introduced an 'honourable retirement' policy to reduce costs. According to his study on the honourable retirement practice of several banks, the major targets of this practice have turned out to be female employees in their 30s, or those whose work conflicted with the demands of their children's upbringing or education, or women who have passed the promotion examination for *daeri* (supervisor level) but were still waiting for actual promotion.

The treatment of women in the context of dismissal and resignation is a complicated issue. Further discussion of this matter will be reserved for the following chapters, when other related factors are also considered while exploring in more detail women's work experiences, and their reactions and adaptations to those experiences.

## 6.6 Conclusion

Even if some female employees do not feel strongly that there is an overt policy of sexual discrimination, it is clear that fewer recruitment, training, education and promotion opportunities are being offered to women, in practice demonstrating discrimination. In spite of the increase in recruitment of female graduates in the early and mid-1990s, chaebol have more recently failed even to maintain the female

proportion of recruits at the level then achieved. Further, female employees have clearly received less beneficial OJT, having been assigned to less-important or less-challenging jobs, or to functional areas traditionally regarded as more suitable for women. This also implies that female workers are given little opportunity to transfer to more important jobs that would enable them to learn more about the company, and acquire different skills in preparation for further career advancement. Gender discrimination in training and job assignment, however small in degree, inevitably leads to further discrimination in work evaluation, promotion and remuneration, and must adversely affect career prospects. In most cases men's careers were taken more seriously, and consequently their work was more favourably evaluated by their superiors - while promotions for female staff to higher positions (such as *kwa-jang* and above) were restricted. Although overt direct dismissals were not common in chaebol offices, women traditionally have been under pressure to leave on marriage or pregnancy. More recently, when the economic pressures of the late 1990s led chaebol to introduce tougher and more robust policies involving staff dismissals (e.g. by 'voluntary resignation' or 'honorary retirement'), women have been the easiest targets.

Consequently, even in chaebol that are regarded as better employers than most other Korean companies, the number of female employees is still small and women who command managerial jobs are very rare. One good example, that demonstrates how difficult it is for women to survive in this gendered environment, is that among 400 female graduates recruited by DaeWoo Group in 1985 (the first year that their graduate recruitment programme officially accepted women) only 12 remained in the company at the beginning of 1995 - a survival rate of just 3 percent (*HanKyeoRe Sinmoon*, 27 February 1995). Referring to the low survival rate of women in chaebol, one female worker (fu20\*-S1) explained that most women, even those showing the same capabilities as men, were undervalued at work and their opinions ignored; as a result they tended to become discouraged, lose interest and leave the job after a few years.

The extent of these gendered practices appeared to vary from company to company and chaebol to chaebol, according to the size and sophistication of the organisation and the characteristics of the firm's work culture. Further, gender discrimination also varied according to the industry in which the company operated, the role of the department, as



well as the education level of the women concerned. However, my findings clearly confirmed that in all the chaebol and companies studied sexual discrimination existed from the initial recruitment process through to the end of employment.

The aim of this chapter has been to describe the employment policies and practices that operate in chaebol, and view them from a gender perspective in order to promote a more objective understanding of these practices and their scope. The following two chapters will examine the essential nature of gender relations in chaebol offices and how both employees and employers (superiors) consider gender discrimination. Even though the study of company-wide policies promoting gender equality are valuable and necessary, it is clear that people's actual behaviour, ways of thinking and attitudes are far more important in influencing interactions at work and gender relations in the office. For example, how do employers and male colleagues really regard female employees, and what types of explanation or excuse do they give to justify gender discrimination? What are women's actual experiences and feelings about unequal treatment at work, and what practically can they do about them, and how do they affect their future plans? These questions and issues will be examined in Chapters 7 and 8.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> ROTC denotes Reserve Officers Training Corps (or called '*hak-goon-dan*' in Korean).

<sup>2</sup> Interviewee code: the first letter (**f** or **m**) denotes sex; the second indicates educational attainment on joining: **h** (high-school leaver) or **u** (university graduate); the **number** identifies the interviewee (from 1 to 51); a final **m** denotes manager. See Appendix 1.1 for the codes and profile of chaebol interviewees.

\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for women at work than for men).

In instances where it is judged to be relevant, the identity of the employer chaebol is indicated after a hyphen with an upper-case postscript followed (where appropriate) by a lower-case letter for the particular affiliate. For example, 'fu10\*-S1a' indicates that the interviewee number 10 was female, university educated, married, and worked in affiliate 'a' of chaebol S1. However, reference to a particular affiliate is rare as in only a few cases is it deemed to be relevant.

<sup>3</sup> Apart from kongchae, there are other less-known recruiting methods used by some chaebol at different times, such as by recommendation ('choo-cheon'), special hiring ('tuk-chae'), internship ('intern'), or company-sponsored scholarship ('san-hak-jang-hak-saeng') (mu38m, mu41, cs73). As far as the quality of recruited labour is concerned, the scholarship method is usually the best, intern and recommendation being good, and kongchae less good. However, once employed working conditions and rewards are the same since in Korean companies (unlike foreign firms) the starting salaries are identical for all new recruits (mu38m, mu41).

<sup>4</sup> This has changed somewhat since the 1997/8 economic crisis: some traditional benefits flowing from working in chaebol (such as job security) have diminished, while recruitment has become even more competitive. See the remaining chapters for further discussion.

<sup>5</sup> This practice, however, has been less popular in recent years due to adverse changes to the economy and labour market since 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Interviewee code: **cs** denotes chaebol seminar, the **number** identifies the presenter (from 65 to 75). See Appendix 1.3 for codes for the presenters at chaebol recruitment seminars.

<sup>7</sup> In recent years most chaebol have hired their new staff mainly by application form and interview (in some cases with an aptitude test), rather than by written examination that was commonly practised in the past (typically until the mid 1990s).

<sup>8</sup> Which means that the candidates should be no more than 28 years old (by western age count). This does not allow much flexibility as most students enter university for their 4-year degree course when aged 20 years; males then have to complete two-and-a-half years of compulsory military service.

<sup>9</sup> As already shown in Chapter 3, the ratio of female graduates hired by the top 50 chaebol had risen steadily from 4.2 percent in 1990 to 12.1 percent in 1996 (*Minwoohoe*, 1997:2). The percentage of women hired through kongchae by the top 30 chaebol reached only 13.6 percent in 1995 when this trend was in its full swing (*Minwoohoe* 1997; Hahn JH. 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Interviewee code: the first letter (**f** or **m**) denotes sex, the second occupation (**s** - student, **f** - foreign company employee, **g** - government employee, **w** - housewife, and **b** - own business; the **number** identifies interviewee (from 52 to 64). See Appendix 1.2 for the codes and profile for non-chaebol interviewees.

\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for women at work than for men).

<sup>11</sup> It was not possible to obtain the precise figures.

<sup>12</sup> Company A: secretary, staff management, translator, industrial design, architectural design, computer programmer for display rooms (sales display), researcher, nutritionist (for company canteens), employee counsellor, preparer of papers in English, management of exhibition hall/room.

Company B: designer, translating and researching data and information, editing work papers, in-company broadcasting, electronics, designer/projector (architecture), company librarian.

Company C: copywriter, company newspaper editor, librarian (collecting and managing data, translation), market researcher, design of products and clothes, architecture and interior design, research.

Company D: secretary, general administration, architecture, industrial design, translation, computer, and editorial work (Chung and Chang 1985:32).

<sup>13</sup> This practice seems to have continued after my field research. According to Pucik and Lim JC. (2002), compared to their male colleagues women still face considerable obstacles in finding desirable white-collar jobs in major companies. However, because skill requirements are changing in many business areas and the number of female graduates is increasing, companies are trying to hire more women for

specialist jobs: for example, Samsung is now placing particular emphasis on recruiting female graduates - at least in professional fields such as software design and international business (ibid.).

<sup>14</sup> Concerning induction training, the case of chaebol Taesong, studied by Janelli (1993), offers some interesting insight into the nature and purpose of induction training for new recruits:

“The Taesong company staff who conducted and supervised the training of new employees were charged with imparting substantive information about the company’s history, organisation, products, and production processes in a way that supported the ideological claim, impressing on the new recruits the company’s contribution to South Korea’s economic development and its advancement of high technology. In addition, the staff attempted to forge among the recruits a new identity as Taesong company employees. But perhaps the most ambitious goal of all was to alter their ways of dealing with social relationships. What I would like to highlight here is how training practices attempted to inscribe subordinates with habits of acquiescence and to reshape their understandings of how to deal with others” (ibid.:140-1).

<sup>15</sup> However, some companies prefer not to encourage frequent transfers to different departments. This leads staff to acquire particular professional skills and experience in relatively few areas (according to fu13-S1).

<sup>16</sup> This is also recognised by Ungson et al. (1997:203) who argue that most managers believe that, in view of the cooperative nature of work, it is simply not possible to differentiate performance between employees with any degree of accuracy (except at higher levels of management).

<sup>17</sup> See the “Remuneration and Promotion” section later in this chapter for new changes in the assessment and promotion system, such as the introduction of *yeon-bong-je* which shifts the emphasis in job evaluation from employees’ length of service to their work performance.

<sup>18</sup> During a number of meetings with the manager to arrange interviews, it became clear that the junior employee (mu2) was working closely with him as if he was his personal assistant and handling many trivial matters (both work related and private); they would frequently even go out for meals together. It was apparent that this junior staff member was the manager’s favourite, and that he had good career prospects as long as his relationship with his boss continued and his boss retained importance in the firm.

<sup>19</sup> This point was discussed in the early part of this chapter. Please see the earlier note for more details of areas where women are considered to be better suited.

<sup>20</sup> A female respondent (fu39) explained that men are usually more patient and better at controlling their feelings when necessary, especially with their superiors, and argued that their easier employment of flattery and hypocrisy makes them better than women at office politics.

<sup>21</sup> This means literally “ranking according to length of service”. In the past it was the system of *yeon-kong-seo-yeol* whereby, when the time came staff were promoted (fu18\*). In this previous ‘*yeon-kong-kup*’ system, the basic salary would remain the same with a varying bonus added according to work performance (mu1m).

<sup>22</sup> A monthly publication devoted to the white-collar job market.

<sup>23</sup> According to recruitment literature distributed by one chaebol (H2), the employee grades of seniority were as follows (fu46; printed company policies):

1 gup (gap) *bu-jang* : senior manager

(ul) *cha-jang* : manager

2 gup *kwa-jang* : junior/sectional manager

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3 gup <i>daeri</i> :	equivalent to supervisor level
4 gup <i>sawon</i> :	four-year university graduates or those promoted from 5 gup.
5 gup <i>sawon</i> :	starting position for two-year college graduates (degree courses require four years), or those promoted from 6 gup.
6 gup <i>sawon</i> :	starting position for high-school leavers.

Although seniority grades and promotion systems in other chaebol are not necessarily identical, this example fairly represents general practice in Korean companies. Some companies also have '*ge-jang*' (between *daeri* and *kwa-jang*), and '*ju-im*' (between *sawon* and *daeri*).

<sup>24</sup> For example, in the recent study of the human resource management (HRM) practices of Samsung, Kim S. and Briscoe (1997) show that, under their new policy established in 1995, rewards are more performance-oriented with the company aiming to foster and recompense individual accomplishment and creativity - unlike the previous group-based system which promoted team spirit among employees but also tended to foment mediocrity.

<sup>25</sup> Salaries in this *yeon-bong-je* system are rather more based on ability and achievement, than on age, educational qualification and work experience that had been considered important hitherto. This means that there is a different salary level for each individual, based on a regular evaluation of their work performance for the year. The evaluation consists of both 'potential (*bo-yu*) ability' and 'performance (*bal-hye*) ability': while the former relates to basic abilities and skills, the latter is to do with actual work performance (*Monthly Recruit*, Aug 1996:171).

<sup>26</sup> According to one employee (mu45), this change is evident as the administrative systems become more Westernised and modernised to compete better in the world marketplace: the more predictable, less threatening *yeon-kong-seo-yeol* system of promotion seems to be breaking down, and is gradually being replaced by the new '*yeon-bong-je*' approach. While under the traditional *yeon-kong-seo-yeol* system employees found office life easier and more harmonious, the '*yeon-bong-je*' system probably implies a less-friendly, more-competitive atmosphere among colleagues, since it is more focused on individuals' ability and work performance. Although the former approach encouraged teamwork and harmony, its work efficiency was probably lower than in the newer system (mu45).

<sup>27</sup> However, in recent years there has been some modification to this system; as already pointed out in Chapter 5, Korean HRM seems to be moving towards remuneration based both on seniority and ability/performance (see Bae and Rowley 2004, for current trends).

<sup>28</sup> This fear was clearly confirmed by the research findings: of the interviewees, 65.2 percent of men were in supervisory positions and above (39.1% were *daeri* and 26.1% in managerial positions) while only 17.9% of women were *daeri*, without any single woman at managerial level (Appendix Table 2.4).

<sup>29</sup> This sometimes excludes female designers hired for their professional and technical skills (mu5). According to a recent study by Kim A.E. (2004:232), women comprised a mere 0.7% of those at managerial level in chaebol - while the proportion of Korean women generally in management reached 5% in 2001 (original sources: *Hankyoreh* 8 January 2001; *Dongailbo* 7 March 2002) (see also Pacific Bridge, Inc. 2001:8).

<sup>30</sup> There is a salary differential between college graduates and high-school graduates. One chaebol manager (mu1m) stated that the starting salary for female high-school leavers is usually about 75% of that for university graduates. For comparison, in 2002 high-school leavers earned, on average, 69.7% of university graduates' salaries generally across Korean industries, according to a Korea Labour Institute report (Jeong JH. et al. 2004).

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<sup>31</sup> Although official data from chaebol themselves were unavailable, some other published sources throw light on this. According to a 2002 survey of wage structures by the Ministry of Labour (2003), the regular monthly per capita payments to female graduates in the clerical/white-collar sector were 94% of those to male graduates within the same 25-29 years age group - although, on average, it was 73% across all age groups (derived from data on p72-73).

<sup>32</sup> There is no national survey of the amount of fringe benefits paid to workers or its composition. But the ILO-ARTEP survey in 1991 of the manufacturing sector in Seoul shows that a much smaller proportion of females than males reported receiving cost of living allowances (17% vs. 38%), educational allowances (23% vs. 42%), and severance pay (37% vs. 47%) (Bai and Cho 1995). According to the Survey Report on Wage Structure by the Ministry of Labour (2003:72-3), annual special payments received in 2002 by female graduates in the clerical/white-collar sector were 54% of those received by their male counterparts.

<sup>33</sup> In most cases retirement is mandatory at age 55. Retiring employees typically receive a lump-sum payment equal to one month's salary for each year of service (Steers et al. 1989: 123).

<sup>34</sup> It should be recognised that these figures may only be valid for the period before the 'IMF crisis' in 1997.

<sup>35</sup> According to the study of Samsung Chaebol by Kim SS. and Briscoe (1997), seniority-based promotion allowed Samsung to maintain the Confucian tradition that precludes younger persons from supervising older colleagues.

<sup>36</sup> A similar practice has been also identified in Japan. According to Nakamura and Nitta (1995:325), when industries face a severe market downturn, companies often encourage 'voluntary severance' (seen by some as a euphemism for 'layoff with severance pay') in order drastically to reduce the number of workers.

<sup>37</sup> Equivalent then to approximately £2,500.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **AN ANALYSIS OF CULTURE AND GENDER RELATIONS AT WORK**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter it was shown that while formal written policies may not have been in essence gender discriminatory, actual employment practices in chaebol were gendered and female employees were experiencing sexual discrimination at work. The personal attitudes and views about women held by individuals in the organisation, particularly (mostly male) superiors who were implementing the policies, strongly influenced the actual practices and general environment where women worked. It is, however, unlikely that they would openly admit to discriminatory practices, and perhaps would not even be fully aware of their gender-biased attitudes and actions. Moreover, even if employers and male colleagues did not discriminate intentionally, or explicitly, many of the customary rules and practices that characterise management in Korea still operate to the disadvantage of women. The office floor, as the working environment, is where employees and their superiors interact on a daily basis, and where each individual's beliefs and attitudes play a critical role, often as informal office discourses, in producing and influencing gender relations at work. Therefore, while the previous chapter was devoted to an objective examination of employment policies and practices from a gender perspective in general, this chapter focuses on actual gender relations in the office by examining real, if informal, attitudes and practices of both employers and employees.

While most characteristics of work culture (discussed in Chapter 5) were similarly identified by interviewees of both sexes, many women (and some men) particularly recognised that traditional gender roles, often combined with other Confucian characteristics, have been affecting women's status and conditions in Korean workplaces. How then are gender relations and women's status at work actually

affected by the influence of Confucian tradition still prevailing in work culture? The broad examination of chaebol organisations earlier in Chapter 5 showed that the work culture of contemporary chaebol does exhibit a strong Confucian influence. This chapter explores how the characteristics of traditional Korean culture create and perpetuate certain gendered discourses in the workplace and, therefore, still to this day influence the condition and status of women at work.

Before doing so, it may be helpful to clarify the use of the words ‘Confucian’ and ‘traditional’. In everyday discourse, ‘traditional Korean culture’ effectively implies ‘Confucian influence’. As already pointed out (e.g. in Chapters 1 and 4), although Korea is a nation of mixed religions with many non-Confucian influences, the crucial and distinctive impact of Confucianism has been both enduring and profound, and undeniably permeates the culture and institutions of contemporary Korea and the psyche of its people.<sup>1</sup> Ordinary contemporary Koreans confirm the strong influence of Confucian culture and customs on their everyday life - even that Korean culture *means* Confucian tradition (e.g. mu26, fg61; see also Chapter 1). One interviewee (fg61) particularly states that “while the organisational structure may be borrowed from the West, the content is Korean, Confucian”.

As shown previously (Chapters 4 and 5), while Confucianism has been a common feature throughout East Asia, its influence has varied within the region - as it interrelates differently with diverse cultural configurations in each society. Since Confucianism is itself a multifaceted value system, it is interpreted differently in each political or social locale; Confucian culture has been made, reshaped and regenerated by different groups with different purposes (Kim KO. 1996). In this regard, when considering Korean culture as Confucian, the following statement by Moon S. (2003:123) may assist a better understanding of the interchangeable usage of ‘traditional’ and ‘Confucian’ in Korean society:

“The focus on Confucianism does not mean that it is the only system of meaning in contemporary Korea. The tumultuous history of colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism industrialisation has complicated the normative domains employed by different social groups. Therefore, I approach Confucianism here as a hegemonic system, not only widely internalised and accepted, but also as contested by alternative systems of meanings in the context of socio-political democratisation.”

Confucianism, therefore, may be viewed as a body of flexible guidelines that can be employed in everyday life to uphold and justify social relationships and interactions between ordinary people in Korean society. In this context, Confucian ideology has been used as a bedrock to legitimise and sustain gender inequality and female subordination in Korea, just as other religions or ideologies in different cultural settings may also have been used for the same purpose elsewhere in the world.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first, largely based on interviews carried out in the subject chaebol, explores how common beliefs, office discourses and customary rules and practices affect women at work, and how they relate to Confucian tradition. For this, the following issues are examined: i) is there any gender bias, prejudice or gendered assumption in the attitudes of (male) employees and managers? If so, how is it justified?; ii) what are the customary gendered discourses on women's traits and roles?; iii) do these influence women's ways of thinking and behaviour, and adversely affect the evaluation of their performance and their career development?; and iv) how do they relate to Confucian influences, and are manifested in the workplace?

The second section describes and analyses gender segregation and the assumed gender roles of women at work, drawing chiefly on relevant features of Confucian tradition affecting women's status and roles (introduced in Chapters 4 and 5) augmented with opinions expressed by interviewees. Even though some women's views are included in this chapter, these are mainly examined in the succeeding chapter, the focus of which is on women's own experiences and perspectives.

## **7.2 Evaluation of Female Employees by Superiors and Male Colleagues**

In examining possible gender bias or male prejudice on the office floor, I will first consider how male colleagues and superiors view gender equality, and how they regard their female co-workers and their roles. One of the most revealing questions posed in connection with gender relationships at work is whether men are aware of gender discrimination, and whether they are really prepared to acknowledge it. When an influential personnel manager from chaebol S1 (mulm<sup>2</sup>) was asked, for instance,



whether women in his company were discriminated against, he protested, “absolutely not” and quoted examples involving job assignments and career developments:

“If a woman is familiar with computers, she is more likely to be allocated to computer-related tasks that are ‘feminine’, such as designing informative web-pages in the public relations department. Job assignment is ideally based on each individual’s disposition and vocational aptitude. In general, job assignments are made on ability, attitude and commitment regardless of sex, not on the assumption that certain tasks are more appropriate simply because the employee is a woman - which used to be normal practice in the past. Since allocating work critically depends on the ability of individuals, some capable female employees (often more capable than men) are given responsibilities that are as important as those given to men. For example, certain women are assigned to sales or trading tasks where they have contact with foreign buyers. Therefore, there is no gender discrimination in this company” (mu1m-S1).

However, when asked again whether women were usually given exactly the same tasks as men, he added,

“Naturally, there are some gender differences which we take into consideration. If you, as a superior, are responsible for allocating work, or need to execute a particular task, you are more likely to give the work to someone whom you can trust to complete it successfully on time. Therefore, it is normal that some important tasks may go to male members of staff in whom you have more confidence. On the other hand, some less important or less urgent work can be given to female staff, since they often tend to find certain tasks too daunting. This is mainly because they consider themselves as women, with a ‘feminine’ approach towards work. Yet this is not always the case” (ibid.).

Another manager from a different chaebol L (mu38m) was more open in expressing his dissatisfaction with female employees’ attitudes towards work and, attempting to justify the gender differentiation and different treatment of women in his office, he said:

“I try not to discriminate against women but sometimes I can’t help it since I’ve realised from my experience that women are different from men. For example, women usually like routine tasks, and make little effort to push their boundaries. Also, partly due to their household responsibilities, many women consider their work temporary until marriage or having a family. As for married female employees, since they have to manage both work and home they don’t like to expand their work tasks and instead prefer easy and routine, rather than that intellectually demanding and creative, work. Women often prefer to complete given tasks well rather than undertake creative projects or solve problems. However, the company needs employees who like to push their limits, be intellectually challenging and creative, and contribute to the company’s survival in the very competitive domestic and world market” (mu38m-L).

Although some female employees, both high-school leavers and graduates, (e.g. fh9, fu21, fh23, fu39) acknowledged that certain aspects of women's attitude to work can be less desirable, such as a tendency to give up easily, poor inter-personal relationships with clients, reduced drive and sense of responsibility, they also protested that these perceptions could have been derived from male prejudice, and certainly have the effect of isolating women from the heart of the workplace (see Chapter 8 for more details of women's experiences). Even though the criteria of gender equality and the validity of perceptions applied by these managers can be questioned, what they said undoubtedly showed an attitude towards gender that was discriminatory. Moreover, it provided an interesting insight into how women are often regarded, and their performance evaluated, as employees by male superiors and colleagues. It also suggested a further question to explore, which is what typical 'feminine traits' men use as reasons to justify, in their own eyes, gender differentiation in allocating job tasks and career opportunities.

What then are the common gendered assumptions on women's traits and roles? Chaebol usually have been reluctant to employ women in any substantial numbers and, although often better qualified than their male colleagues, they are also frequently regarded as making poorer employees to whom core tasks should not be given. The varied reasons for this belief, as revealed from interviews with managers and male staff (and sometimes from women themselves), may be considered as either referring to their attitude towards work and commitment to their employer or their social skills in interacting with their colleagues and 'the team'.

In considering men's attitude towards their female colleagues, three major elements should be borne in mind: first, the continuing influence of Confucian culture, conferring on Korean men an historical belief in their 'inherent superiority' over women, which has led some (if not most) men still to consider women as less capable at work because they are 'women'; second, men's perceptions, rightly or wrongly, of the capability and attitude of women towards their work: some men may accept that women are potentially as able as men, but consider them lacking in certain qualities and attitudes required for working in chaebol; third, the acknowledgement by some men that women

find it difficult to compete on an equal basis because of the male-oriented work culture with little support for their reproductive role – that it is the working environment and societal system which functions against women's interests. These separate elements are neither mutually exclusive nor each fully explanatory by itself.

While a woman who excels at her work is considered exceptional (fu19\*-S1), some men seem to believe that in general women are inherently inferior to men – at least at work – and do not regard women as their equals. Typical examples of this attitude are:

“I am not trying to put down women in any way but, apart from a few areas where women are known to be better (such as in design), they are generally not as capable or productive as their male colleagues” (mu2-S1).

“I try not to discriminate against women, but it is a fact that women are not usually as capable as men” (mu22-H1).

It was not common to find male interviewees who would freely express such frank opinions, even if they believed in the inherent inferiority of women<sup>3</sup>, yet it could sometimes be detected in the way they spoke. The two male respondents quoted above were among those interviewees who held the most obvious gender-discriminative attitudes. However, it may be assumed that some other interviewees were also as gender-biased, yet without such explicit expression.

Many managers and male employees from different chaebol believed that, even if their female colleagues were as able as themselves (as implied by their recruitment), women often did not have the same qualities as men or as good an attitude towards work. Women were often considered deficient in qualities considered indispensable for a good employee and for developing a successful career in a Korean company. These qualities, as variously enumerated by male interviewees, include: will-power, drive, persistence, a challenging spirit, initiative, adaptability, endurance, resilience, loyalty, self-sacrifice, dedication, professionalism, and ability to bear responsibility (as suggested by, among others, mu1m-S1, mu2-S1, mu3-S1, mu4-S1, mu5-S1, mu22-H1, mu26-H1, mu34m-S2, mu38m-L, mu45-H2). For example, male interviewees (e.g. mu1m, mu16, mu34m) criticised women for being lacking in “adaptability and dedication” by quoting an occasion when female members of staff were asked to work in a remote city but showed much less enthusiasm than their male colleagues. In

relation to “endurance and responsibility”, others (e.g. mu2, mu17, mu38m) felt that if women were given a challenging task they would attempt it for a while but eventually give up. The men added that more challenging work, such as negotiating and attending meetings and conferences outside the company, was usually allocated to more-experienced employees of at least four or five years seniority, yet many female employees (with some notable exceptions among those striving to develop their careers) would have given up and left before then because they found the work either uninteresting or too demanding. These criticisms were also confirmed by some women (e.g. fu18\*-S1, fu40-L)<sup>4</sup>.

As far as endurance is concerned, some women (e.g. fu10\*) argued that an ideal employee for Korean companies needed the physical condition of a man to cope with the demanding work. One female graduate employee, who was pregnant at the time of the interview, stated:

“Men are physically stronger than women, are more willing to use their physical strength and can take more hardship than we women can. For instance, when the work requires us to stay and work until late women find it very tiring, while men seem to be able to work all night in the office without sleeping. Sometimes, when things are extremely busy, they can work overnight for a few days in succession, which most women including myself find extremely difficult. I think this has more to do with physique and the environment than responsibility or attitude” (fu10\* – S1).

Although some inherent physical differences between men and women are accepted, there are some stereotyped gender attributes that can act as a handicap for women. Women<sup>5</sup> are often considered reluctant to join men where physical strength and stamina are required, for example in situations involving extended working hours and overnight stays mainly because they lack endurance and commitment (as was suggested by, among others, mu25m, mu34m, mu42). These men claimed that it was more a matter of mind than physical condition or personal circumstances. A male interviewee, who regarded women potentially quite as capable as men, pointed out that many women appeared to give up too easily, thinking “well, after all I am a woman” instead of making more effort as men might (mu4). This tendency was repeated in the context of some mental qualities, such as loyalty, sacrifice and responsibility (mu2, mu3, mu5) – this is discussed further later this chapter. Women were regarded as being deficient in

‘loyalty’ and in a readiness to sacrifice their private life to prove themselves as hard working, capable employees. “Until they correct these shortcomings women will not be regarded, and treated, as equals with their male colleagues”, one member of a personnel department of chaebol S1 (mu2) said.

The importance of loyalty, that women are considered sometimes to possess to a lesser degree, has been acknowledged by others. In a recent study, Hahn JH. (1997) pointed out that while Korean employers and personnel managers generally accepted the view that there was no difference in performance between male and female workers, they (a significant 22.4 percent) saw female employees as less capable than their male counterparts. According to Hahn, the rationale behind this view stemmed more from the belief that women were less devoted to the company (39 percent of respondents) than that they were less competitive (29 percent), and that the emphasis, fundamentally, was on loyalty for the company (ibid.) (See Chapter 5 for a discussion of work culture and loyalty).

The other explanation, partly related to that given above, for the belief that women make less satisfactory employees is their alleged unenthusiastic attitude towards ‘teamwork’ and ‘sharing’. Even if they completed allocated tasks well, their work would often be less appreciated due to their unwillingness to co-operate with colleagues or make sacrifices for the team. They were considered to have a more individual approach coupled with a self-centred attitude, and seemed mainly concerned with their own tasks and correspondingly indifferent to others and the team. For example,

“When there are hard challenges many women are reluctant to participate. When we had to relocate the office, most women took the attitude that men should do the removal work because they are men, and they need not participate since they are women. Men, on the other hand, were prepared to do it without thinking, even though it was something they did not enjoy” (mu3–S1).

Some (e.g. mu7-S1) also claimed that women disliked sacrificing time and energy helping their colleagues – an attitude that is considered undesirable in Korean workplaces<sup>6</sup>. For example, women tended to finish their work and leave early rather than helping others, while their male colleagues would remain and work late. This pattern was even more apparent with female high-school leavers, who often would finish promptly on time in order to attend an evening college or for some other reason.

A male interviewee felt that this practice did not contribute positively to the office atmosphere and female members of staff were not appreciated because of it (mu2). Noting that most of his female colleagues (who had joined the firm when he did five years previously) had already left, he asserted that to be successful women should sacrifice themselves more and spend more time with the company and colleagues. Some other men also saw women as less responsible because they tended to give up more easily, and resign when faced with difficulties - especially after marriage. To these men this confirmed their general perception that the attitude of women can be summarised as (according to mu45-H2), "it really doesn't matter if I get a poor appraisal for not doing this work well. I will get married one day"<sup>7</sup>.

Many men pointed out that women's different, more individualistic and detached, approach to interactions with colleagues and socialising at work was not likely to be helpful for their careers. Women generally appeared more reasoned, steady, perhaps a little distant in their relationships with colleagues, whereas men were usually closer and more casual with each other. While these male relationships could change with time, affecting work efficiency, women tended to miss out on bonding with colleagues or being "part of the group" (as suggested by mu3, mu5). Women's reluctance to flatter, and difficulty in disguising their feelings, does not assist their career prospects because it hinders cementing relationships with their superiors - particularly important in Korean companies. These characteristics affect not only relationships with colleagues and superiors but also with business clients. Women were often regarded as less suitable than men for certain jobs such as sales, where skilful polished communication is essential with customers and business associates (who, usually men, would often take women less seriously and preferred dealing with other men, with whom they could establish a rapport). This facet, in some ways, equates to the traditional Confucian attitude whereby men could legitimately view women as inferior. This attitude was demonstrated, according to one female graduate respondent from chaebol D1 (fu32), by instances when the company avoided sending a woman to meet clients - especially in 'masculine' business sectors, such as heavy industry, where the clients might consider it an insult or a demanding sign.

A male interviewee (mu4-S1) argued that women, partly because of their different attitude toward work and interpersonal relationships with colleagues, were being given less important tasks. He further added that this was not a trivial matter, since the company and its managers were becoming unwilling to allocate any significant tasks to women for that reason (as was described in Chapter 6).

In fact, this was a view widely shared by superiors and male members of staff from different companies and chaebol. A personnel manager from chaebol L (mu38m) expressed his opinion on the subject as follows:

"Men and women alike start from the same level and with the same conditions when they are first employed. However, male employees have proved to be more competitive, energetic and responsible, and show more initiative in order to survive. On the other hand female members of staff, while they can focus well on certain things, tend to be less competitive, active and committed and also somewhat more narrow-minded with fewer interests. Anyway, achievement at work for them is not the sole measure of a successful life: they can have other outlets for their energies, like marriage. That is why we cannot fully rely on female employees" (mu38m-L).

These concerns of employers have often been accepted as valid by women themselves. For example one graduate interviewee from chaebol S1 (fu12\*) said that, since joining the company two and a half years before, she and her colleagues had been trained for one and a half years. Many female colleagues had left during, or just after, this formal training period for a variety of reasons, including marriage, moving abroad with their husbands and sometimes to pursue further studies to enhance their career prospects (as reported by, among other, fu13-S1, fu37-S2, fh49-H2). That the turnover of female staff was considered high became accepted as a 'fact' by employers, regardless of the real and varied reasons for the resignations (as argued by mu1m-S1, mu30m-D1, fu32-D1, mu41-P).

When women lack a challenging spirit and positive attitude towards work and are more likely to leave, the company has little choice, as one manager asserted:

"We can't dismiss them without a legitimate reason and can't get rid of them until they leave voluntarily. Therefore it is only logical to allocate simpler and safer tasks to them. It is too risky to give them any important work since they often fail to complete it properly, leading to inefficiency" (mu1m-S1).

Taking his point, it is quite common to find employers relying less on women, and investing less in their training, which was considered 'risky' or 'wasteful'. "That is why", added a male member of staff from the same company (mu2-S1), "there are no female high-ranking executives in the company, apart from a few sectional managers in a 'feminine' department such as designing"<sup>8</sup>.

Sometimes men's low estimation of female staff extends further. This same male staff member, from a human-resources department, expressed his opinions of female graduate employees as follows:

"In comparison with their male counterparts, female graduates are not as capable in work accomplishment and have less energy and motivation. There are only a few areas where women perform well and where they are as appreciated for their ability as men. While there is little difference in their salaries, the work performance and output of the women is inferior. Frankly, since simpler clerical and administrative tasks and assisting roles can be performed by female high-school leavers, from an over-all perspective female graduates are not really needed in the company" (mu2-S1).

There is evidence that some women agree with men in this respect. A small number of female interviewees admitted that they could not blame employers for bias or discrimination against women. This was particularly because women frequently left during, or just after, the extended induction training given by the company. One female member of staff (fu10\*-S1) said that this had happened repeatedly, and consequently it would be understandable and safer for the company to recruit and invest in men, rather than accepting a higher risk with women (as was also recognised by fu18\*-S1, mu30m-D1, fu32-D1). She also added that, unless women change their attitude towards work and their employer, the propensity towards gender discrimination, especially in people's minds, would continue. This statement seems to reflect fairly the views of many women.

These attitudes and practices may relate to the continuing influence of Confucian culture in the contemporary workplace. In criticising women's general attitude towards work, some men (e.g. mu2, mu17, mu38m, mu45) believed that those less-appealing characteristics that prevented them from being considered as valuable employees were largely due to the influence of Confucian culture and the traditional role of women in it. According to their argument, when women grow up in a family where, as is usual, the



father worked and the mother stayed at home, ‘feminine traits’ acquired within this family environment would eventually emerge. Even with the will to be different and ambition to become successful, such women would tend to opt for an easier life and if possible avoid hard or challenging tasks. To improve the status of women at work and widen their career opportunities, therefore, these men concluded that women should strive, not only to perform better in allocated work, but also concentrate on other less-obviously task-related matters, such as inter-personal relationships and co-operation within teams. Most importantly, however, they should stop regarding themselves as temporary workers, and change their general attitude towards their career and their employer to one that is more professional, responsible, pro-active and committed (according to mu1m-S1, mu2-S1, mu5-S1, mu22-H1). This view was also shared by a number of women themselves (among others, fh23-H1, fh36-S2, fu37-S2, fu43\*-P). However, some interviewees (e.g. mu1m, fh36), both male and female, were optimistic and anticipated that women in the next generation would be quite different since the culture of Korean society is changing, and that so will the ways of thinking and the attitude of women towards work.

Women also argued that those ‘feminine’ characteristics and attitudes, derived from their cultural tradition, that were less admired by male colleagues did not apply only to women. Some female interviewees declared that women generally experienced gender discrimination at work partly due to men’s traditional, conservative ideas about women’s inferior status, and expectations of different modes of behaviour according to their prescribed gender roles. Apart from direct work-related discrimination, female employees also felt and experienced prejudice generally in their working environment. Such discrimination included male prejudice in their general attitude towards women; this accustomed, if often implicit, sex-discriminatory treatment of women demonstrated the prevalent male chauvinism of a male-centred office culture, and appeared to apply in all subject chaebol (e.g. fu12\*-S1, fu18\*-S1, fu43\*-P, fu44\*-P, fu48-H2, fh49-H2, fu51-D2). Giving examples of unpleasant treatment by male colleagues or superiors, female interviewees registered their disapproval of: “men giving the impression of looking down on women or having low expectations of them”, “casual or impolite modes of address” (e.g. fh23-H1, fu32-D1, fu40-L, fu47-H2), “gender-differentiated

treatment in allocating tasks”, “asking women to perform trivial errands, including tea serving” and “jokes with sexual innuendo” – all serving to discourage women from taking their careers seriously. Some male respondents (e.g. mu45-H2) supported this point of view by admitting that there is, to some extent, a gendered attitude and way of thinking among men at work which has to be changed. One young, male respondent from chaebol S1 (mu3) also argued that many, particularly seniors from an older generation, believe that “this work is not for her because she is a woman”, “she can’t do it because she is a woman”, or (simply) “....., because she is a woman”.

A strong connection between the existing culture in society and women’s status and roles at work was frequently confirmed by both men and women during interviews with employees. While contemporary organisational culture is still deeply rooted in Confucian tradition, it also seems that gender relations in the workplace may derive their characteristics from the ancestral values and relationships of men and women. The ideology of modern Korean women has been much influenced by traditional Confucian culture and the position in it accorded to women, as previously shown in Chapter 4. Many interviewees themselves, both high-school leavers and graduates of both sexes, recognised that the status and conditions of modern working women resonate, if to a lesser extent, with those of ancestral Korean women (e.g. mu7-S1, mh8-S1, fh9-S1, fh23-H1, mu34m-S2, mu35-S2, fu37-S2, mu41-P, fu51-D2). After all, the workplace is where men and women interact, using values and customs that have formed and developed in their culture over centuries. According to one male employee, a high-school leaver from chaebol S1:

“There must be some influence of traditional gender-discriminative culture at work since the accustomed attitude that men are superior and women are inferior is reflected in everyday working life. It implicitly shows in people’s way of thinking and their way of speaking” (fh9-S1).

To what extent, then, are gendered practices condoned by traditional Korean culture and customs, and manifest in the office as sexual discrimination? How has Confucian ideology, even if changing and weakening, influenced the roles assumed by women in the workplace?

The following section explores how office life for contemporary Korean women has been influenced by the culture and their allotted roles under traditional Confucianism (which was examined in Chapter 4). In doing so, general characteristics of work culture and administrative style in chaebol - such as 'authoritarianism', 'the importance of inter-personal relationships', 'loyalty and the tendency towards life-time employment' (see the latter part of Chapter 5) - are also considered since the combination of these cultural characteristics and 'gender' can be particularly relevant to a discussion of gender discrimination in the Korean workplace.

### 7.3 Gender Segregation and Expected Gender Roles for Women at Work

This section examines how expected gender roles act to the disadvantage of women when the general characteristics of work culture are combined with a 'gender' element, and manifest in everyday working life. The major features of Confucian tradition bearing on women's status and gender relations (which were considered in some details in Chapter 4) are specifically: 1) inferiority to men (*Nam-jon-yeo-bie*) and segregation from men (*Nam-nyeo-gu-byeol*), 2) primary role as wise mother and obedient wife (*Hyun-mo-yang-cheo*) and confined at home (*an-sa-ram*), 3) male-centred (work) culture with bonding and networking in the public domain.

1) **"Men are superior, women debased"** (*Nam-jon-yeo-bie*) and "differentiation and segregation between men and women" (*Nam-nyeo-gu-byeol*):

The traditional view that women should be regarded as inferior often has a detrimental effect on women's career development in modern society. When the not-always-apparent but deep-rooted notion of '*Nam-jon-yeo-bie*' is combined with 'authoritarianism' in Korean social organisations, it produces a particularly damaging effect on women. Many female interviewees observed that men at work often casually used expressions that implied that they look down on women, and consequently they felt that they were regarded as someone inferior and unlucky. Common expressions used by men, such as "this is a woman's job!", not only described women's 'supposed' tasks but also would appear to limit their roles and freedom at work.

An example of subtle sexual discrimination is the practice, using the English form, of addressing female employees as “Miss (surname)”<sup>9</sup>. In the different chaebol studied most employees and senior staff were aware that addressing female staff as “Miss ....” was undesirable and not welcomed by women, since in Korea the English terms ‘Mister’ and ‘Miss’ are used only to indicate lower status (Janelli, 1993:160)<sup>10</sup>. Yet some men still continued to do this, especially to high-school leavers (as pointed out by fh23-H1, fu32-D1, fu40-L, fu47-H2). This seemed to women to be a constant and effective reminder by men that they considered women to be inferior, even though on the surface it did not seem to be particularly important.

In Korea, where seniority and gender are the two major elements in determining status and role, the combination of ‘authoritarianism’ (i.e. *Jang-yu-yu-seo*, “between the elder and the young there is an order”) and women’s traditionally inferior position, coupled with their corresponding ‘feminine traits’ all combine to hinder the treatment of women as fully equal employees. In Korean offices, where junior staff are not usually expected to talk back to their superiors, a woman is discouraged from offering her own opinions in conversation with a senior male. If she did so she would be criticised, not only for showing insufficient respect to her superior, but also for being “too aggressive and daring” as a woman (as explained by fu13-S1).

Some women were unhappy when male colleagues or superiors attempted to distinguish between male and female staff by separating one group from the other. A female graduate employee of chaebol P (fu44\*) recalled a number of occasions when a departmental manager would invite only male staff to dinner one evening, and women on another – as if they were regarded merely as women rather than employees. She considered this as particularly unfair and making little sense since female graduates, hired under the same conditions as male graduate staff, were then included in the group comprising mainly female high-school leavers. This, according to the interviewee, set a double standard and encouraged the treatment of women as a different group, thus serving to perpetuate the sexual segregation and division of labour and implying that ‘feminine’ tasks are for women and ‘masculine’ tasks are for men.

The presence of female high-school leavers in chaebol and the roles they play is particularly illuminating in this context. Even though there were, in fact, some male

high-school leavers in the chaebol studied, they were very few and their recruitment had not been actively pursued for some years. On the other hand, female high-school leavers have been recruited continuously for specific tasks by most chaebol, though recently in declining numbers<sup>11</sup> (as pointed out by fh17-S1, mu30m-D1, fh36-S2, mu38m-L, fu43\*-P), and they still comprise the major part of the female labour force in offices. The jobs that most of these female employees take are usually fairly simple and their salaries increase with the length of their employment (*Urisahoe yonku hakhoe* 1998:185). As female high-school leavers are hired through separate channels, they are easily differentiated from male graduates and placed lower in the hierarchy as assistants to male members of staff. According to interviewees (both high-school leavers and graduates, and men and women) from different companies, these female high-school recruits form a kind of sub-group reporting to male colleagues, most of whom would be male university graduates recruited for 'standard' office work (e.g. fh9-S1, fh11-S1, fu18\*-S1, mu27-H1, fh28-H1, fh29-H1, mu30m-D1, mu31-D1, mu41-P, fh49-H2). This clear distinction between male and female staff throughout their employment seems to have served Korean companies well. These female high-school leavers typically tend to remain with the company for six to nine years, until they marry and leave (mu1m-S1, fh36-S2), and their starting salary is usually about 75 percent of that for graduates (mu1m). Employers welcome a regular turnover of such staff as it is more cost-effective for them to use junior female labour on low rates of pay (*Urisahoe yonku hakhoe* 1998:185). A female non-graduate staff member expressed dissatisfaction with her company's treatment of women in this regard, as follows:

"The company considers women as likely to remain only for a short time, and suitable only for undertaking 'assisting' tasks for men. Therefore, they don't train women as well as men, and avoid teaching them or giving them a deeper, critical knowledge of the work. Even though training female staff to visualise and comprehend an entire project or task would enable them to work more efficiently, the company prefers to let them work on partial or fragmented tasks with no understanding of the full picture" (fh28-H1).

Both high-school leavers and other interviewees considered that gender discrimination was usually more serious in the case of high-school leavers (as recognised, among others, by fh24-H1, mu25m-H1, fh28-H1, fh29-H1, fh33-D1, fu37-

S2, fu46-H2, fh49-H2). According to one female junior employee from chaebol H1 (fh24), for most female high-school leavers the combination of sexual discrimination and prejudice against less-educated employees made their status, treatment and working conditions much worse than for female graduates. One female graduate employee from chaebol H2 (fu46), who experienced little discrimination herself, acknowledged that female high-school leavers in her office were usually considered not as equal work colleagues but rather as parts of the organisation (as of a machine), being there to help it run smoothly. She understood that many female high-school leavers were unhappy with this double discrimination – for being women and also less educated. These gendered employment practices for female high-school leavers have arisen, and are maintained, through the mechanism of requiring different educational qualifications when recruiting men and women. This segregation can be further accentuated by the policy in some chaebol, though now becoming less common, of requiring junior female staff (high-school leavers, and sometimes even graduates) to wear uniforms (e.g. fh24-H1, fu32-D1, fh36-S2, fu37-S2) - which, of course, did not apply to men in the office; the subjects felt that they were treated more as part of a 'female staff group' than as individual employees (fh36-S2).

Even though working conditions for female graduates are in many ways far better than for female high-school leavers, the former often encountered sexual discrimination, sometimes unwittingly, because they were regarded as belonging to the main body of female staff. As a consequence, newly-employed female graduates often found themselves caught between two different groups, male graduates and 'general female staff' (overwhelmingly female high-school leavers) without really belonging to either – as was recognised not only by themselves but also by others (e.g. fh29-H1, fu32-D1, fu37-S2, mu41-P, fu47-H2). This would result in female graduates being treated differently from their male graduate colleagues and consequently feeling dispirited and frustrated (as suggested by mu22, fh36, fu37, mu41, fu47)<sup>12</sup>.

Gender hierarchy in authoritarian social relationships not only leads to gender-segregated job allocation but also views women as inferior and less capable at work. The traditionally-prescribed feminine traits of an ideal woman call for obedience, chastity and the requirement to perform a secondary, 'helping' role (fu37, fu43\*, fu47,

fu50). According to a number of female interviewees, the office culture seemed to encourage a real differentiation between the expected characteristics and roles of men and women, emphasising a clear distinction between them. There appeared to be an expectation that women undertake ‘womanly’ tasks (e.g. serving tea, running errands for bosses and assisting male colleagues) and as a consequence fewer worthwhile tasks were allocated to them, even when they were eager to learn (e.g. fu19\*-S1, fu21-S1, fh24-H1, mu26-H1, fu43\*-P, fu51-D2). Although this was more commonly experienced by female high-school leavers, nonetheless few female graduates were allocated to core departments (e.g. foreign trading or sales) and most, in spite of their equivalent capabilities, were engaged in supporting tasks. This practice, in the opinion of some interviewees (e.g. mu26-H1, fh28-H1), was mainly because men, especially those who were senior in the company, believed in a rigid gender hierarchy and usually considered female members of staff as more suitable for an assisting role.

Men appeared to expect the traditionally-endowed feminine attributes of beauty and charm (‘flowers of the office’) from their female colleagues (as specifically pointed out by fh28-H1, fh29-H1, fh36-S2, fu44\*-P, fh49-H2). Confirming the tendency of overt focus on the physical attributes of female candidates and employees, as already suggested in Chapter 3, female interviewees acknowledged that in recruitment their physical appearance (e.g. minimum height of 160cms for female high-school leavers) is as important as academic performance, especially for high-school leavers (as argued by fh28-H1, fh29-H1, fh36-S2, fu44\*-P). Even after being hired, men in offices would often comment on female employees’ dress and appearance, which would tend to make them feel uncomfortable (fu37-S2). The following quotations from female non-graduate interviewees demonstrate the importance of appearance for female job candidates in Korean companies:

“While we were still at high-school, some of my classmates had plastic surgery and followed a strict diet in order to lose weight before job interviews. If you are plain looking, or not slim, even the school is hesitant to recommend you for an interview since they know from experience that you would not be well received by the prospective employers. You must also wear a skirt for interviews; it is not just about the ability of job candidates to perform the work” (fh49-H2).

“No matter how good you are academically, if you are plain (or not good looking) you are often rejected at interviews” (fh36-S2).

“I don’t understand why appearance and height are important in interviews for staff. It is like a beauty parade – when men in the office look at pretty female colleagues they find it more pleasant” (fh29-H1).

It appeared that this kind of discrimination was more strongly felt by high-school leavers, than female graduates, perhaps because their role and assumed tasks in the office were less ‘professional’, but involved simpler tasks assisting their (male) graduate colleagues and contributing to a smoothly-run, pleasant working environment that is convenient for other ‘core’ employees – a role, therefore, as ‘flowers of the office’.

In her work on female office workers in Japan, Saso (1990:228-9) makes a sharp comment on the nature of this office work for women which could well apply to Korea. According to her, while men exercise a near monopoly on middle management and supervisory positions, female office work, which includes a lot of time spent serving tea and at the copy machine, seems to be quite superficial and almost wholly non-productive – however, it may be conceded that their presence in the office does serve a decorative function and perhaps engenders the much-prized harmony in the workplace.

One of the issues raised most frequently by female interviewees, both high-school leavers and graduates, in discussing gender differentiation at work was ‘tea serving’<sup>13</sup> (fh11-S1, fu12\*-S1, fu19\*-S1, fh24-H1, fh29-H1, fu32-D1, fh36-S2, fu37-S2, fu51-D2). The dissatisfaction of women (particularly, but not exclusively, the high-school leavers), with their ‘presumed’ role of serving tea to superiors or visiting clients is widespread in Korean offices. In the past, the duties of recruited high-school leavers customarily included a number of trivial, less job-related tasks such as arriving early at the office to tidy up before work begins, wiping colleague’s desks and telephones, emptying ashtrays and, of course, serving tea. However, when female graduates were recruited alongside men for similar jobs at the same level, it was assumed that they would be free from these chores. Nevertheless, for these duties the borderline between graduates and female high-school leavers can sometimes be blurred, and is certainly stressful, for graduates since both are ‘women’ working in the same office. An example



of this was clearly illustrated by a female graduate employee working in chaebol S1 as follows:

“When clients or visitors have to be served tea while the usual junior female staff (usually high-school leavers) are not in the office the boss, instead of asking a junior male of the same department, would call a female graduate member of staff from another department to provide the service. This illustrates well the presumption that there are certain jobs that men shouldn’t do and others, influenced by traditional values, that are reserved for women” (fu12\*-S1).

When asked what he thought of the instinctive association of tea serving with female staff, a male supervisor (*daeri*) from the same company replied that,

“When some clients are visiting it is a bit awkward to let them wait while I go and make tea for them. So I prefer to ask someone else to make and serve tea, and it always happens to be a women, which I feel most comfortable with since women are accustomed to doing small favours in the office, such as running errands to the bank or post office – even though this is more usual for female high-school leavers than graduates” (mu5-S1).

These female ‘tea serving’ practices, and the relegation of women to a ‘serving and helping’ role would, sometimes, be extended further beyond the domain of work. One example, as a female interviewee (fu43\*-P) recalled in the case of a high-school leaver colleague, was to be in attendance at the funeral of a male colleague’s relative. While it is normal for both men and women to attend a colleague’s wedding, only men go to the funeral of a colleague’s close relative, leaving women behind at work. She (fu43\*) suggested a loose connection between this practice and the fact that only men could, traditionally, attend rituals for ancestors - and a funeral is more a ritual than a celebration. On this occasion, a manager sent the female junior colleague (during working hours) to the funeral of the relative of a male colleague - but only so that she could help in the kitchen and serve food and drink to the guests!

2) **“Wise mother and obedient wife”** (*Hyun-mo-yang-cheo*) as woman’s primary role; a woman is an indoor person, confined at home (*An-sa-ram*):

The customary rules and practices in the Korean workplace are based upon the traditional assumption that “men’s sphere is at work and women’s domain is at home”.

In Korea, women are primarily responsible for household duties and childcare regardless of whether or not they have paid employment. Therefore, while men are expected to be committed and loyal workers, women's roles at work can be viewed only as partial or marginal. "In the minds of many men women should do 'women's work, preferably at home", said one female graduate employee (fu44\*) of her male colleagues in chaebol P. Some female interviewees also noticed that there is a tendency among men to discourage women from pursuing their careers seriously (fh23-H1, fh29-H1, mu41-P, mu42-P, mu45-H2, fu46-H2). For example, one such female employee aged 20 years (fh29-H1) said that a male staff member in his late 20s was considered still young, whereas a single female employee of the same age was the subject of speculation as to why she still worked instead of getting married. "There are persistent comments by some male bosses and colleagues discouraging female employees from working or pursuing a career, and suggesting that they should marry and make home as a housewife while leaving affairs outside the home to men", said another (fh23-H1, and also mu22-H1). This message was even clearer for high-school leavers: the same female high-school leaver (fu23-H1) remembered the time when she joined the company and was discreetly informed by her senior female colleagues that, when women get married, they have to leave the company. Even though her female colleagues were not happy with this unwritten rule in their company, they felt that they had little power to change the system in view of the prevailing business climate.

The persistence of traditional cultural values emphasising the importance of women's roles as family mother and wife often leads to the assumption that women are less suited to developing a serious career than men. Therefore, when a woman marries, the attitude and expectations of her employer and colleagues towards her change; should she become pregnant this change in attitude becomes more pronounced. While motherhood is not officially regarded as incompatible with a career in a chaebol there is, nevertheless, a strong prejudice against (or at least uncomfortable feelings about) pregnancy. One female graduate employee from chaebol S1 expressed concern about her planned pregnancy as follows:

"As I am working in the Sales department, I may have to leave the firm when I get pregnant because it will be unpractical and awkward to meet (mostly male) clients with a big belly. It would be both physically and emotionally tiring for a

pregnant woman to be in a situation that others find uncomfortable and, at the same time, be pitied for having to work while pregnant” (fu19\*-S1, married and 26 years old).

This is not only a matter of emotional concern for the pregnant employee, but it also affects the way superiors and colleagues treat her. One illustrative example of this concerned an official briefing for the chairman by a research team in chaebol P. When a key member of the project team arrived at the briefing, a senior manager stopped her and sent her back to her office, thus excluding her from the presentation, because she was heavily pregnant and he considered it would be “embarrassing” at a formal presentation with the chairman (fu43\*).

It is broadly accepted in academic circles worldwide that women’s household duties and their reproductive role have been key elements hindering their successful career development and gender equality at work. In Korea, where the organisational culture particularly values ‘loyalty’ towards employer and the closely-related concept of ‘lifetime-employment’, women’s opportunities at work are further diminished. Lifetime employment has long been prevalent in chaebol and, even when administered with flexibility, essentially requires in return the full loyalty of an employee to superiors and the company; commitment to work and company is considered vital for a successful career. As mentioned earlier, it is generally the case that female employees are considered to be somewhat deficient in loyalty and full commitment to their employer. This issue will be considered in more detail in the later part of the chapter.

In chaebol, where loyalty and work commitment are chiefly recognised by working long hours and being completely at the company’s disposal, many male employees (particularly those from an earlier generation) consider work their priority in life and commit themselves completely to the firm, sparing little time for their private lives. This was clearly expressed by one male graduate respondent from chaebol S1 (generally regarded as having one of the best and most stable HR systems among all chaebol) as follows:

“Working for the company like this means that my life is too absorbed by the organisation. There isn’t much life left after work. It seems that work has become the priority, and more important than my private life. There is also no clear boundary between work and private life. The work also can get very

stressful with difficult inter-personal relationships, including those with bosses. Particularly when the boss is senior and powerful, the junior employee may find the situation very stressful and yet need to be careful to maintain a good relationship with him to avoid lagging behind rival colleagues” (mu17-S1).

“Korean work culture is based on the assumption that an employee has full support from his wife, who remains at home and takes care of domestic responsibilities and household duties” (Chang and Kim 1998:131; also confirmed by interviewees mu22-H1, fu39-L) in order that he can devote himself entirely to work.

For women, on the other hand, staying late to show strong work commitment is more problematic since they have responsibilities at home – and also for those who have a different attitude towards company ‘loyalty’. This can cause adjustment problems between employer and employees, and for some can serve to justify sexual discrimination. In considering the general attitude of women towards commitment to work, a male employee (mu2-S1) commented that in Korean companies, where there was no clear distinction between work and leisure, it is often necessary to sacrifice private life, especially in departments involving external meetings and client entertaining (such as sales), but women were reluctant to do it. Female employees to a certain extent agreed with this view, yet at the same time protested that their reluctance was more to do with their situation than their personal lack of loyalty. One female high-school interviewee from chaebol H1 (fh23) explained that it was sometimes necessary to work overnight, but when a woman is married she cannot combine both marriage and overnight working, and therefore it soon becomes a problem. Women appear to be disadvantaged by the fact that loyalty towards the employer and commitment to work is regarded as particularly crucial in the Korean work environment, and that these attributes are often measured and high-lighted by extremely demanding schedules (such as long working hours, sometimes continuing over successive nights) that women usually find difficult to follow (as reported by, among others, fh36-S2, fu37-S2, fu44\*-P). Instead of working hard during normal working hours and then leaving on time, employees (particularly men) seem habitually to stay late, even if it is not strictly necessary. This is chiefly to wait for their boss to leave, since few dare to go home

before their superiors: if top executives are still in the office managers cannot depart, which consequently prevents the general staff from leaving (*ibid.*).

3) **Male-centred culture**, combined with the importance of personal association; such as locality kinship (*ji-yun*), school kinship (*hahk-yun*), familism, factionalism, and emotional bonds (*Jung*)

As discussed in the previous chapter, men are usually considered more skilful at socialising than their female colleagues, and frequently reach agreement and accomplish tasks through networking and inter-personal contact with other men. Their ability to maintain pleasant relationships with colleagues and, more importantly, with their superiors (sometimes employing flattery) contributes to their career success. In an organisational culture where personal associations, such as *ji-yun* (locality-related) and *hahk-yun* (school-related), are important for networking both inside and outside the office, the tendency of women to opt out from this form of socialising hinders their careers. Their bonding relationships with bosses and colleagues are usually not as strong as those between men, and this can result in fewer opportunities for career development and promotion. One male interviewee of chaebol S1 said,

“I do agree with women in that the company and superiors are not as supportive for women as for men. But this is partly because of their different socialising pattern with colleagues and superiors, both at work and after work” (mu3-S1).

The vital importance of socialising and networking was also felt strongly by women themselves (e.g. fu12\*-S1, fu18\*-S1, fu21-S1, fh24-H1, fu32-D1, fh33-D1, fu39-L, fu40-L, fu46-H2). One interviewee (fu21-S1), who was a graduate from one of the most prestigious (mixed) universities in Korea and one of the very few female employees hired against strong competition by her chaebol two years before, explained that she had initially encountered little sexual discrimination. However, she now finds that getting noticed is more difficult because women lack access to ‘men only’ socialising events (such as smoking breaks or after-work drinks) and this has led to a measure of isolation from this circle when important information is exchanged and critical decisions are reached.

Male staff (e.g. mu3-S1, mu31-D1) also confirmed that going out for drinks after work and attending evening events is, in fact, very important in Korean working life; it is there that people really get to know each other, become closer through conversation, and also exchange valuable information. For this reason, participating in drinking and dinners with colleagues and superiors can be very important. Female staff members, nevertheless, do not always find it easy to participate in these gatherings, even though they are well aware of their importance. The concepts of “gender differentiation” and “expected traits of ideal women” that have been previously mentioned, often acted as deterrents to discourage women from participating in such gatherings as equals. Sexual segregation was evident even in their patterns of socialising: men would tend to smoke (many, if not most, Korean male office employees are smokers) together only with other men during a break; in the evening they often would go out for late-night drinking, from which women would normally, with little choice, be excluded (e.g. fu18\*-S1). A male colleague endorses this view:

“It is normal, and happens all the time, to ask a male colleague to go out for lunch or dinner or a drink - but not a female colleague. This would apply to superiors as well. When they go for a drink or meal after work, they usually ask male staff but not female ones. When they smoke, they tend to gather and talk while smoking where women are excluded, since women who smoke are not well regarded. As a result the (mostly male) superiors get to know male staff better, which must influence their decision making when faced with a choice between men and women” (mu3-S1).

For women this could be a dilemma. Not only can frequent drinking and socialising outside the office (a good illustration of male-centred culture) easily exclude women, but if they participate it would conflict with the traditional image of an ideal woman. In Korean society where women who smoke are still regarded as ‘not proper’, it would be almost unimaginable for a female member of staff to join her male colleagues and bosses for a smoking break. Similarly, drinking and staying out late (until midnight, or sometimes to the early hours of the morning), which many Korean working men often do with male colleagues, would not always be looked on with favour, and many women would find it uncomfortable, even undesirable. Nevertheless, when female employees fail to follow the pattern of behaviour adopted by their male colleagues, they are seen to be ‘not part of the group’. In this regard, it was interesting to find some men who

criticised women for not being very good at mingling with male colleagues and bosses after work and going out to dinner and bars until late (e.g. mu2-S1, mu3-S1, mu31-D1).

One male interviewee from chaebol D1 said:

“They are different from us. When staff members (sometimes with superiors) go out together, women tend to leave after dinner instead of staying until the second or third bar has been visited. It is more fun to have female colleagues around, but as women (married and single) are not supposed to stay out late they tend to leave early. In that case, the men might then go to bars where female hostesses entertain them with drinks and conversation. That is when I feel that female colleagues are different from us. I can’t feel the same kind of comradeship with them that I feel with male colleagues” (mu31-D1).

Because men are not only the majority group at work, but also because the workplace typically has a male-centred culture, women either have to conform to male mores or be regarded as less-than-ideal employees and colleagues. Men usually expect women to make an effort to adjust themselves, become fully compatible with the organisation and fit in seamlessly with the male-centred culture. Some men even admitted that the main reason why women could not be treated as equals was that they do not usually blend harmoniously with the existing work culture (mu2, mu3). They suggested forcefully that, since men were in the majority and women were not, women should follow men’s customs and mannerism at work. They added that in reality women, in spite of being in the minority, tend to behave and perform their tasks in their own way, ignoring the existing rules – and this was not desirable<sup>14</sup>. Some men, however, were a little more understanding, by pointing out:

“Because they are women it is difficult to treat them, as we do other male colleagues, with strong emotional attachment and closeness. We men often go out for lunch with the same male colleagues. Sometimes two or three times a week with the same man. Yet it would be difficult to do this with a female colleague without causing gossip. So women’s opportunities for socialising and networking with men at work are rather limited - even though, with generally changing attitudes, maintaining friendship and comradeship with female colleagues is more possible these days” (mu5-S1).

One of the critical differences between male and female members of staff, which influences their success in the company, is their relationship with their superiors (as admitted by both men and women, such as mu5-S1, fu12\*-S1, fu14-S1, fu18\*-S1, fh28-

H1, mu31-D1, fu44\*-P). For this reason women can find themselves disadvantaged at critical stages in their career, for example when superiors consider training opportunities, job allocations and promotions. The emotional bond (*jung*) and trust between a superior and his male subordinate, developed through numerous informal and social interactions, often play a crucial part in choices between rival candidates, and this is seen to be natural in Korean workplaces where human relationships and emotional bonds are very important (as was described in Chapter 5). Some women (e.g. fu18\*-S1, fu44\*-P) stated that unequal opportunities for job training and management development often stemmed from the personal attitude of the superior in charge of selection - who was in most cases a man. However, they accepted that from the superior's viewpoint it would be easier and more comfortable dealing with other men - who appeared more reliable and prepared to obey orders without question (perhaps partly following army experience<sup>15</sup>) than women.

It is therefore clear that staff of both sexes recognise the continuing, strong influence of traditional Korean culture in the ordering of modern office life and the interpersonal relationships operating within it. The consequential elements of discrimination – not only between the sexes but also between staff of different educational attainment – are widespread, pervasive, subtle, can be insidious and, most importantly, affect career development and job opportunities. There appears to be a strong tendency that more important, challenging jobs are given to men whereas less important and 'assisting' or 'feminine' tasks to women. All these findings confirm the view that a female office worker is still seen as a woman rather than an employee, and that she is often expected to play the woman's role as prescribed by cultural tradition. Furthermore, there seemed to be little fundamental questioning of women's traditional roles<sup>16</sup>.

Meanwhile, it is also important to understand that the nature of work culture and the extent of gendered practices varies widely – according to the character of the industry, chaebol, company, and even department (where the manager's personal attitude is crucial). There seems to be some correlation between the relative importance of traditional cultural influences in the organisation and the degree of gender discrimination. A female graduate interviewee (fu46-H2) suggested that differences in culture between workplaces often reflected how traditional or modernised the company



was: if the company was still strongly influenced by Confucian tradition, staff were required to follow the instructions of superiors regardless of how undesirable or impractical they might be. She added that some more-modernised companies (like S1 group) were inclined to allow opportunities for discussion among employees and were prepared to consider ideas even from junior staff, implying that their work culture is more open, rational and democratic, and more likely to change for the better.

A similar tendency in relation to gender relations can be found: the extent of gendered practices in a workplace can vary according to its work culture. For example, in chaebol S1 (considered as one of the leaders in modern organisational culture in Korea) men's three-year army service was not favourably regarded as work experience (as it is in most other chaebol) and a new male recruit would start his career at the same level as women who were three years junior in university (fu21-S1). This meant that the employment conditions were the same for everyone who entered the company in the same year. This practice contrasted with that in other chaebol where army service was considered to be equivalent to work experience, varying from one to three years; consequently when women joined these companies their salary and seniority lagged those of their male colleagues recruited at the same time (fu32-D1). A worse case applied in a smaller chaebol (with a more-traditional administrative culture), where not only were new female recruits three years behind their male colleagues, but their main working tasks were also not very different from those of high-school leavers. A female graduate from a smaller chaebol D2 (fu51) strongly expressed her dissatisfaction that, even though a graduate, she had to undertake simple administrative work and, worse, assist her male colleagues - tasks usually performed by female high-school leavers.

The extent of gendered practices also varied according to the business sector of the company where the women were working, even within the same chaebol (fh33-D1): those working in heavy industry and construction were less-favourably treated, while women employed in 'feminine' industries (such as fashion or retailing) experienced less discrimination. For example, the atmosphere in 'heavy' industry (e.g. steel and construction) is tough, rough and demanding, involving field and site work and contact with other companies in that industry (fh33). Very few women are employed in these industries, and if so they find it difficult to adapt since gender discrimination is

prevalent (fu21-S1). On the other hand, women appear to be more appreciated, and have better opportunities for promotion, in functional areas where the nature of work is traditionally regarded as 'feminine' and requires particular attention to detail (e.g. information, design, planning, and administration). However, these areas are usually not good for long-term career advancement in the company.

However, it is interesting that my research findings so far show that gender discrimination even in chaebol S1 is common, and differs little whether the affiliate's industry is 'female-friendly' or not. This suggests that work culture affecting women is still embedded in 'traditional' gender ideology and not free from sexual discrimination – which in essence is not so different from that in other chaebol studied.

Even in the late 1990s, chaebol were still dominated by frequent gender differentiation and a male-centred work culture with persistent deep-rooted male prejudice against equal status and opportunity for women. Changes in attitude towards gender relations do not seem to come easily, which is hardly surprising since the culture developed and has been ingrained in society over many centuries. More than three decades of rapid economic development and modernisation have not appeared sufficiently to dismantle those traditional ideologies that maintain a strict distinction between gender roles, both at work and in society. Chaebol (and other Korean organisations) still reflect this gendered inequality insofar as their institutions are mostly staffed and controlled by men and their policies reflect male dominance over women and their lives. When asked why it is so difficult to achieve gender equality, one female respondent (fh9-S1) expressed a perceptive view that without women at the top to influence decisions and implement policies, the operational mode of the organisation is naturally male-centred and that, even if men try to embrace women's perspectives, improvement and changes are slow because their views are not the same as women's. This tendency does not seem to be unique to Korea: as Marshall (1984) suggests many, if not most, organisational cultures are dominated by male values. Harlow and Hearn (1995:184) further argued that, from a gendered point of view, it is men who generally make the rules because they usually control the organisations, both formally and informally. Behind the mechanisms of sexual segregation and gender discrimination at work seem to lie certain common perceptions of gender roles and divisions which are

shared by most societies worldwide.

## 7.4 Conclusion

In spite of the fact that women in chaebol offices suffer sexual discrimination, as shown in the previous chapter, a significant number of men still believed that employment policies and practices are free from gender-bias and assumed that everyone is treated equally, or at least fairly according to individual ability and performance. The key issue here seems to be that gender discrimination was present, yet it was either unnoticed or considered by men to be fair since “women are different from men”, and their attitudes and ways of working differ from those of men. For those men who were not aware of any gender discrimination, any that did exist represented “fair treatment in the light of sexual differences” – a belief derived, in my view, from their assumption of women’s inferiority in line with traditional Confucian ideology, and their own lack of sensitivity towards gender issues.

This belief was not only prevalent among men; some women also did not think they were discriminated against, and seemed to accept things as they were. Any disadvantages and negative reactions caused by gender differences might, therefore, be disregarded as being either an individual or local matter rather than a systemic problem of the organisation. Worse, these practices were frequently regarded as ‘natural’ or ‘common’ and part of the ‘*kwan-haeng*’ (customs)<sup>17</sup> of the organisation - without questioning their validity since “it has always been that way”. However, even for those women who were unaware of any gendered practices, it soon became clear that they were not fully satisfied with their working environment and treatment because of subtle gender discrimination that they experienced without even realising. It is surprisingly common to hear statements such as “there is little gender discrimination..... as long as you are not married or pregnant, or until it comes to promotion”.

The examination of work culture and women’s roles in it, in the second part of this chapter, has confirmed how far traditional norms and ideologies impact on women at work, and to what extent they serve to perpetuate gender inequality in contemporary offices. The pervasive influence of traditional culture in modern Korean offices does

adversely affect the career progress of women, while male superiors and colleagues frequently discriminate against them on the basis of their perceived gender differences in attitudes, behaviour, skills, and suitability for particular tasks. Further, social mores and their own priorities serve to constrain women from participating fully in the working life and informal culture of the office.

Women's inferior status and gender discrimination at work is not unique to Korean society. Most countries, whether developed or developing, share the same problem, however varied in its extent and however different the social mechanisms used to create and maintain the gender imbalance in the particular society (as seen in Chapter 2). In the case of Korea, the major gender-discriminating influence in the workplace has been the strong cultural tradition of a Confucian philosophy with its dominant ideologies of sexual inequality and male-chauvinist patriarchy. As pointed out in Chapters 1 and 4, Korea has long been popularly viewed as the nation that adheres most faithfully and strictly to its Confucian heritage with its rigid ideology and principles – a result of the particular history of the Yi dynasty when a policy of state indoctrination of neo-Confucian principles was instigated for the purpose of consolidating the patriarchal monarchy, as well as preserving social cohesion and national independence and identity.<sup>18</sup> While the culture of modern Korea and its social organisations remains strongly influenced by Confucianism, it is not surprising to learn that the status of women and gender relations in Korean offices are also profoundly affected by the same historical legacy.

This chapter has drawn attention to the gendered, male-centred work culture in chaebol, and has explored how it has operated as a mechanism that permits, sometimes unwittingly, covert gender discrimination in the workplace. The examination seeks to promote a better understanding of the contemporary working environment, and a more balanced, impartial appreciation of women's situation in it. It is hoped that this will assist employers and employees to improve gender equality at work. The reduction of male-centred discrimination, the encouragement of a more professional approach by women towards their careers, and the improvement of the general administrative culture affecting women's condition should be beneficial to all. As Walby (1997:12) argues, "the lack of effective utilisation of women's potential in the market economy reduces

the efficiency of the economy and society as a whole". In summary, one of the most pressing challenges facing Korean employment must be to improve gender awareness and recognise that furthering gender equality will bring positive outcomes to all concerned. Progress would also contribute to the 'human development' of society.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Koh BI. (1996:192), since Confucianism is not an organised religion and hence has no registration procedures it is always difficult, in fact almost impossible, to define any person as Confucian or non-Confucian. Therefore, it may also be difficult measuring to what extent Korean culture, or work culture in Korean offices for that matter, is purely Confucian in origin.

<sup>2</sup> Interviewee code: the first letter (**f** or **m**) denotes sex; the second indicates educational attainment on joining: **h** (high-school leaver) or **u** (university graduate); the **number** identifies the interviewee (from 1 to 51); a final **m** denotes manager. See Appendix 1.1 for the codes and profile of chaebol interviewees.

\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for women at work than for men).

In instances where it is judged to be relevant, the identity of the employer chaebol is indicated after a hyphen with an upper-case postscript followed (where appropriate) by a lower-case letter for the particular affiliate. For example, 'fu10\*-S1a' indicates that the interviewee number 10 was female, university educated, married, and worked in affiliate 'a' of chaebol S1. However, reference to a particular affiliate is rare as in only a few cases is it deemed to be relevant.

<sup>3</sup> Particularly considering the circumstance that I (the interviewer, introduced to them by their superiors) was a woman undertaking research on gender-related issues, they were unlikely to confront me with clearly gender-discriminative comments. Furthermore, in recent years the atmosphere in Korean chaebol has become more gender-sensitive as a result of government policies and pressure (mu1m, mh6, fh23, mu27, fh28, fh29, mu38m, mu45, fu46) and therefore publicly asserting the traditional concept of "men are superior, women debased" can be regarded as old-fashioned, particularly among younger generation employees.

<sup>4</sup> Noting that only 12 women remained from 26 female graduates hired when she joined 5 years before, one female respondent (fu18\*) gave three main reasons why the others had left the company. While the first is common to both sexes, the other two were particularly relevant to women:

- i) some women (and men) felt that their work and their employer was not what they had expected, and therefore wished to seek employment elsewhere
- ii) women from a wealthy family background when faced with difficulties at work often give up and leave, rather than confront the hardship directly and attempt to solve the problems
- iii) women working in departments or offices where there were few other female colleagues to provide emotional support and comradeship felt isolated from men and intimidated by the male-centred workplace.

<sup>5</sup> It is not only too demanding but also unrealistic to manage both, especially for those women who are married and have full responsibility for the housework (and childcare).

<sup>6</sup> This tendency was also confirmed in Sohn and Jo's study (1993). Personnel managers of Korean companies were not very happy with women's tendency to be too self-centred and individualistic to share or help with a colleague's work, and to leave the office on time rather than staying late as men did.

<sup>7</sup> This kind of male perception of women was not always mistaken, according to a few female respondents. One female graduate (fu32) reported that when she first heard about graduate women seeking a privileged employer to improve their chances of finding a good husband, she found it hard to believe. However, after working in a chaebol she came to realise that it was partly true: two-thirds of her female colleagues who had joined at the same time left when they married and, knowing them personally, she felt that they were just the kind of women who would cease working after marriage. With hindsight, it seemed clear to her that the main reason they had joined a chaebol was to impress prospective husbands and their families in the match-making process prevalent in Korea that they were well-educated and capable and therefore suitable as a future wife. Adding that these women usually married well (for example, to a medical doctor or barrister), she admitted sometimes feeling a bit envious of them while at the same time regarding their way of thinking and behaviour as rather pathetic. Nevertheless, she made it clear that this by no means applied to all women working in her company. Lee SH's (2001) work on women's education and marriage in Korea also shows that, although women follow different trajectories as some leave their jobs at marriage and others remain committed to their careers, in general women's attendance at elite universities provides more advantages in the marriage market than in the labour market (see also Hampson 2000:171).

<sup>8</sup> Similar tendencies have been also identified in some earlier works by Korean academics on this subject (e.g. Chung and Chang 1985; Sohn and Jo 1993). For example, when Chung and Chang (1985) did their study in 1985 on employment in large Korean corporations, they learned that a number of personnel executives believed that women lack the qualities suitable for managerial positions - that they lack work commitment, are unable to handle the intricacies of human relations, are concerned mostly with short-term considerations, and have limited vision. Another study completed later in the early 1990s by Sohn and Jo (1993) also showed a similar result in that personnel managers in companies where few women had been promoted to managerial level thought that women were good at tasks of an assisting nature but were not good enough for jobs which require responsibility.

<sup>9</sup> Even though 'Miss' is generally used for women who are not married regardless of class or status, when its use was introduced to Korea a nuance was added by the influence of traditional culture. 'Miss' is mainly used for women who have received a modern education and has a somewhat middle-class connotation (e.g. not used for a domestic servant or housekeeper). It is also used for working women, and women with whom the addresser is acquainted but who are of equal or lower status and younger. One typical example is the case when a boss at work summons his female (junior) staff or a typist (Choi JS. 1994:88).

<sup>10</sup> In Korean companies, according to Janelli (1993:160), where the terms of address managers used to reaffirm differences in rank were considered so important that men and women who had no managerial titles were addressed to reproduce symbolically their respective rankings. Male *sawon* (staff) were usually addressed by everyone according to their full names plus the addition of *ssi* (Pak Kimun-ssi), but for women the prevalent form was the English title Miss plus their surnames (e.g. Miss Cho). Janelli added that in all situations the English terms Mister and Miss were used only to indicate lower status. However, he also noticed some evidence of structural transformation in language rules during his stay for fieldwork. Following female employees' (*sawon*) complaints at being addressed using a lower form than that used for the male *sawon*, the managers at the company started to use entire names followed by *ssi*, with Miss plus a surname to address female workers (Janelli 1993:160).

<sup>11</sup> Interviewees gave their own views as to why the recruitment of female high-school leavers has decreased in recent years as follows:

“At present, the rate of employing (female) high-school leavers has gone down. In the past, there were a number of different tasks allocated only to female high-school leavers - mainly because they are less challenging and can be boring and monotonous. However, graduates are now encouraged to do many of these tasks in addition to their normal work, and therefore the company tends to need fewer high-school leavers” (fh17).

“The practice of hiring female high-school leavers has almost stopped in the last four or five years. This was mainly due to computerisation of the workplace; as a result, men are able to do their own documentation without being assisted by junior female staff. However, when necessary the company sometimes hires temporary female labour through agencies” (mu30m).

“The company occasionally hires female high-school leavers, but since the employment of female graduates the number has been decreasing. Now over 90 percent of newly-hired junior female staff are on short-term contracts through agencies” (fu43\*).

<sup>12</sup> One good example of this is well illustrated in a quotation from a female graduate employee, referring to the matter of wearing a uniform.

“Until early this year, all female staff had to wear a uniform, but not men. Female graduates were not happy with this practice and complained to top management. However, the response was: ‘Why does it matter? What is the big deal? Anyway, there are already enough conflicts between female high-school leavers and female graduates. If you [female graduates] don’t wear the uniform it would make things more complicated since the others [female high-school leavers] wouldn’t be happy. Why don’t you wear it even for the sake of harmony in the workplace?’ But from our point of view, it wasn’t right since we could easily be confused with female high-school staff, especially by those who don’t know us personally, or clients – a female graduate wearing a uniform doesn’t give clients and visitors the impression that we are professional enough to deal with them. Further, even if they learn that we are graduates, they would consider that because we are wearing a uniform our roles and position in the company must be trivial” (fu37).

<sup>13</sup> This tendency has also been well recognised in the literature on Japanese female office workers. The following description by Iwao (1993:202) of the situation in Japan bears a close resemblance to that in Korea. According to Iwao,

“Working women in Japan put up with much discriminatory treatment, such as being expected to serve tea to male colleagues and not being given jobs or positions of responsibility in the office..... Many women employees are openly called *ochakumi* (tea fetchers), and it is their job to serve tea to other workers and to guests in the office, keep the office tidy, and otherwise fetch and serve for other employees. More recently, in many companies each employee as a rule helps himself or herself to tea or coffee, except executives or management staff having secretaries. It is also not uncommon for younger men in an office, laboratory, or other workplace to be the ones expected to serve the tea. When visitors come into an office, it is still customary to serve them tea or other refreshment, and women are tacitly expected to perform this job. In some offices women employees take turns serving tea....”

<sup>14</sup> While men frequently exclude women from their circle, the attitude and reaction of women to this can vary: some attempt to join ‘the group’ by making an effort to become more ‘like men’ and follow male-oriented customs (for example, by staying late in the office or hanging out with male colleagues after work) while others (e.g. fu39) find it rather unnecessary, believing that as long as they do their work properly they have completed their ‘duties’. It was my personal impression, however, that women who were doing comparatively well in their careers tended to be good at mixing with their male colleagues and bosses and maintaining amicable relationships with them. See Chapter 8 for further discussion of women’s different attitudes.

<sup>15</sup> Practically all male-employees in chaebol have served in the military forces where they were exposed to the importance of discipline and obeying orders. The following quotation may also be indicative of militaristic influences in the administrative culture of chaebol:

“At the enterprise level, Korea’s business class evolved a particularly repressive management culture – an extremely hierarchical and centralised system of decision-making and discipline that bordered on the militaristic. Koreans, in fact, refer to the chaebol as military companies, and indeed “workers in many Korean construction companies are expected to obey orders and work with the same discipline as soldiers in the army construction and engineering commands” (Song Byung-Nak 1989, *The Korean Economy*, unpublished manuscript, Seoul, p274). The influence of military culture and discipline is often direct since retired officers have extensive involvement in the management of private enterprises (ibid.)” (quoted in Bello and Rosenfeld 1990:28-9; see also Byeon HS. 1997 for its influence on Korean women).

<sup>16</sup> Even if overt sexism was not so obvious among male colleagues and managers in my study, it was equally rare for senior staff to have any intention of changing their organisations’ career rules for the sake of gender parity. Experiences at work have made most women fully aware of the limits to their equal opportunities. See Chapter 8 for further discussion.

<sup>17</sup> According to Chang PW. (1994), these factors were often expressed as ‘*kwan haeng*’ (customs) by decision makers at all levels in the workplace. They cannot clearly be separate; rather, they are intricately interwoven and have a circular relationship with one another.

<sup>18</sup> See particularly Chapter 4, endnote 10.



## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **WOMEN'S WORK EXPERIENCES AND THE OUTCOME**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

Employment policies and practices in chaebol have so far been examined to discover whether they were gendered and, if so, to what extent, with what kind of discrimination and how they were sustained. In doing so the work culture, deeply rooted in Confucian tradition, was also analysed to reveal how it had created and maintained the existing gender discriminatory practices at work. As demonstrated in the two previous chapters, Korean women at work were often subject to diverse sexual discrimination, both overt and covert, that was undoubtedly influenced by the gender-biased cultural tradition that considered women as inferior and therefore holding secondary status in society to men.

The main aim of this chapter is, then, to evaluate the working conditions and experiences of Korean female white-collar employees in chaebol. The first part examines the actual experiences and perceptions of female office employees, their ways of adjusting to the gendered working conditions, and their consequential attitudes and expectations for the future. It is important to research women's personal experiences as they may differ from those prescribed by the official policies of their employer, and those of their male colleagues. Subjective aspects of gender discrimination cannot be recognised without a good understanding of women's experiences and their feelings about them. This perspective of female employees was probed largely by in-depth interviews with them. The second part of the chapter, on the other hand, focuses on weighing up and evaluating the position of women in Korean white-collar employment, and their role in the national development process. At this point, in the light of the findings of the research, we can begin to evaluate the 'integration', 'exploitation' and 'marginalisation' theses suggested by Tiano and considered in Chapter 2. The relevance of each thesis is assessed to ascertain which most closely reflects and gives the best theoretical insight into the outcomes experienced by white-collar working women in contemporary Korea.

## 8.2 Women's Experiences at Work: Reality and Adaptation

Even though chaebol have long been considered by job candidates and office workers as better employers than most Korean companies for their lower levels of work-culture discrimination in the office (as seen in Chapter 5), only a very few selected female graduates are given the opportunity to join chaebol after successfully completing the highly-competitive recruitment process. These bright and highly-motivated female graduates, usually with excellent academic records at university, take deserved pride in winning selection from a large pool of similarly qualified graduates. Many of these women begin their working life in chaebol with highly-charged optimism and self-confidence, and a determination to forge a successful career<sup>1</sup> (mu1m<sup>2</sup>, mu30m, fu32, mu41, fu48). However, having started many women eventually begin to experience a certain disillusionment with their position and conditions at work. As already reported in Chapter 6, some would feel major disappointment with the overt, work-related discrimination, such as gendered practices in the allocation of tasks, in spite of formal company policies displaying no obvious gender discrimination. For others it was concern with implicit and indirect discrimination in, for example, the mannerisms, customary rules and insinuating attitudes of their colleagues and superiors. Some one-third of all female chaebol interviewees (i.e. fh11-S1, fu18\*-S1, fu20\*-S1, fh24-H1, fh29-H1, fu32-D1, fu37-S2, fu40-L, fu43\*-P) claimed that they had experienced little sexual discrimination at work; however, it became apparent that their perceptions were not based on a full understanding and awareness of the issues. They initially professed to have hardly experienced any gender discrimination, yet later unwittingly admitted that they and their female colleagues were dissatisfied with certain gendered practices at work and were striving to correct them. Their work environment was clearly subject to a measure of gender discrimination; for example, it was not customary for junior female staff (usually high-school leavers) to attend general staff meetings, and a number of female graduates believed that they were treated equally as men – provided they were not married or had children.

As can be seen from the various reported experiences of gender discrimination, the majority of women seemed eventually to become disappointed and frustrated with their situation at work. An accumulation of gender-discriminatory behaviour may injure their pride, and reservations expressed about their professional competence can easily lower women's spirits and reduce their motivation (as suggested by fh9-S1, fh23-H1, fu44\*-P). "Women can often lose interest in their job, because whether we work hard or not does not seem to make much difference to our prospects, promotion, pay, and opportunities for overseas travel", reported one female high-school leaver (fh23-H1). Another female junior employee of chaebol H1 (fh29) protested that, while men undertook responsible core work, women were usually given assisting roles – which deprived them of the chance to prove their ability to do 'proper work', and as a result lose the opportunity to be genuinely appreciated and considered for promotion. Consequently, she feared, "women have become less essential for the company's operations and its survival."

Although the majority of women interviewed believed that they were better off than women in other non-chaebol companies, very few were optimistic about their future prospects and their chances of reaching senior positions in the company. "As women spend more time in employment and getting to understand the working environment, we've begun to realise that there is little future for us in the company", asserted one frustrated female graduate employee from chaebol D2 (fu51). This kind of uncertainty was not unknown to male staff; however, in these cases, apart from a few who might find the work difficult or their personal relationship with their boss unsatisfactory, it was more to do with general job insecurity arising from the recent economic recession. It is clear that, in this regard, the pressures that women had to face were much heavier and quite different in nature from those confronting men.

Even though encountering gender discrimination and prejudice at work was widely shared among women, the ways that individual women reacted to these obstacles differed according to their different aspirations. Their varied reactions might be gathered loosely under three headings: a) 'submission' (continue as long as possible, but usually leave after marriage or pregnancy), b) 'resignation' (or planning to leave for an alternative career), and c) 'resolute perseverance'.

**a) Submission (passive, temporary adjustment to the situation)**

Some of the women, even though they had experienced or felt sexual discrimination at the beginning of their working life, eventually became accustomed to the conditions and accepted them as normal. They gradually stopped thinking about the issues and no longer worried about questioning them. An example of this is illustrated in the following quotation by a female high-school leaver from chaebol S1.

“At the beginning I felt it was wrong, but as time passed I got used to the existing system and the culture as it was. Nowadays, I usually don’t feel or think about it anymore” (fh9-S1; 31 years old single, employed as a secretary 13 years without promotion).

Such attitudes were generally more common among high-school leavers, who had originally been hired as junior staff for particular tasks and under a separate reward system. The perception that employment in chaebol was temporary, usually until marriage, was more frequently expressed and accepted (though sometimes reluctantly) by female high-school leavers than female graduates. One such high-school leaver described her feelings as an employee in chaebol H1 without sufficiently stimulating work, as follows:

“When I first joined I found the work interesting and challenging and worked hard since it was new to me, and I felt good about myself learning new things. It usually takes about two to three years to learn more or less what we need to know to carry out the tasks. But after that we tend to fall into a routine because it is repetitive work, with changes mainly in the quantity. When a female high-school leaver joins a chaebol, it would not be long before she realises how limited are the challenges she faces, and how poor are her promotional prospects. Nevertheless, because we still get paid provided we do our job reasonably well, we tend to become complacent with little motivation to work hard and develop our career in the company. Despite sometimes having self-doubts, like ‘what am I doing here?’, most of us usually accept the situation as it is, without questioning it” (fh23-H1; 27 years old, single, employed 8½ years).

Many junior female staff, and some female graduates, give in and accept the existing working environment. They passively continue their everyday working life until something happens, such as marriage, to change their mind or situation and which persuades them to leave the company.

Even though most women thought that they should be able to continue working after marriage, in reality they find it difficult, as was confessed by married female employees (e.g. fu12\*-S1, fu18\*-S1, fu19\*-S1) and feared by single women (e.g. fh11-S1, fu13-S1, fh23-H1, fh24-H1, fh28-H1, fu46-H2). Although there were no written policies, when women married it was traditionally assumed that they would resign, more or less voluntarily, in line with unwritten, customary rules. There was at least implied pressure along the lines of “marriage means leaving”, particularly for high-school leavers (as pointed out by fh23-H1). While women’s resignation upon marriage was in accordance with custom, and often the result of indirect pressure implying that “married women are not welcome to stay”, this did not always apply. Sometimes women themselves realised that marriage and reproduction were not easily compatible with a career in chaebol, and many would decide to stop working on marriage, or more often when becoming pregnant. This was because women feared that they would not be able to survive the necessary hard work and heavy pressure associated with such a career. A female high-school leaver working in chaebol S1 explained:

“It is no problem at the moment, even if I have to work late or am required to stay overnight in the office, since I am not yet married. However, once I am married or, particularly, have children, I would find it very difficult to do the same” (fh11-S1; 27 years old, single, employed over 9 years).

For those women who remained after marriage, their additional responsibility for household matters appeared to be a distraction and make them less committed to, and less interested in, their work – as observed by both men (e.g. mu2, mu3, mh6, mu38m) and single women (e.g. fh23, fh24, fu40). Such changes in some married female staff would be used to justify a hostile attitude by men towards all women who might wish to continue working after marriage or pregnancy. A significant number of men considered married women less suitable as work colleagues because of their family responsibilities. Typical examples of this attitude are:

“Married women in general are not ideal chaebol employees on account of their household responsibilities and their commitment to home life” (mu2-S1; married with child, wife working as nutritionist).

“When women are single they tend to make an effort to work as hard as men do, but once they get married their attitude changes for the worse, and even more so

after having a baby” (mu3-S1; married, wife currently staying at home due to pregnancy).

In this environment, many women would find it difficult to continue working, as one female high-school leaver from chaebol H1 explained:

“The reason why I don’t want to stay too long with the company is that people [mostly men] in the company don’t welcome women continuing their career after marriage. Sometimes they express their negative attitude by commenting on the matter in a form of a joke. I am not so desperate to remain here to put up with that. I would rather find something else to do which would make me feel happier and more fulfilled” (fh28-H1; 24 years old, employed over five years).

This situation seems to be less favourable for high-school leavers than for graduates. According to another junior female interviewee (fh24-H1), because there was no precedent for female high-school leavers remaining after marriage in her particular company H1a (merchant shipping)<sup>3</sup>, she believed that she too had to leave when married – even though she wanted to stay longer while considering her next career move. In some other companies within the same chaebol, even though a few married female members of staff could continue working, none remained after childbirth. She explained:

“Some have tried to remain at work after getting pregnant, but when they approach the time for childbirth the department uses indirect pressure to encourage them to resign ‘voluntarily’ by subtly giving her the message that ‘we would prefer that you leave’. But I don’t know about the situation for certain because there have been no female colleagues who are married or pregnant around me” (fh28-H1).

One female graduate respondent (fu18\*) in a different chaebol (S1) also mentioned that one of her colleagues received the worst performance grade of anyone in the department that year when she returned after her two months maternity leave. This led the woman to decide to leave the company. A male interviewee from the same chaebol (mu2-S1) confirmed that, in general, it was really only in special ‘feminine’ departments, such as fashion design, that women could continue working after having had a baby.

This kind of working environment and attitude of male colleagues sets up an emotional barrier that serves to deter many women with a family from remaining in the company. As one female graduate working in chaebol S1 stated:

“It is not only the absence of childcare facilities that is the problem, but also the prejudice against pregnant women and mothers that can discourage women from continuing to work” (fu13-S1; married without children yet).

Among the women who passively adjust to temporary employment, expecting to have to leave ‘when the time comes’, the situation was more hopeless for high-school leavers, for whom the system was too strong for them to fight for major improvements. They had initially been hired for simpler tasks at a lower salary, and it could be argued that their less-challenging work and poor prospects for promotion were already ‘part of the contract’. The discrimination they experience could be partly due to their lesser education (though there are now few male high-school leavers hired by chaebol) and their position somewhat ambivalent for them to demand equal rights without discrimination. This is an issue that may need further investigation. As far as female graduates are concerned, there were few who clearly fell into this category of ‘submission’. However, interviewees occasionally mentioned female graduate colleagues who could be considered ‘complicit’ or lacking in gender-awareness and who had left the company without hesitation when getting married. However, impressions by third persons may not necessarily reflect the whole truth.

#### **b) Resignation (or planning to leave)**

Some women were not prepared to wait until they married or became pregnant before leaving the company. Faced with sexual discrimination, they realised that working in a chaebol perhaps was not the right career for them and decided, while still working, to seek alternative employment which might suit them better (exemplified by fh11-S1, fu18\*-S1, fh23-H1, fu46-H2). One single female graduate (fu46) from chaebol H2 said that she wanted to continue working at the present company but was not convinced that it would offer a reasonable expectation of ‘lifetime employment’, or at least a long-term career. If she had been so convinced, she might have worked harder and demonstrated more ‘loyalty’ for the firm. Instead, she started looking for something else to do in the future. A similar situation was experienced by another woman in a different chaebol (H1), who said,

“I have worked here for almost 10 years, but there seem to be few prospects for me in this company. I find my work boring and not challenging enough. As a

result, I would like to find something else to do and am actively looking. Initially I tried attending a part-time evening college for one year, but I didn't learn much as it wasn't what I had expected and the tuition fee was very expensive. Furthermore, as the classes started at six o'clock in the evening I had to leave work at five thirty, which my bosses disapproved of. So I don't want to go back to studying. Recently, though, I have been investing time and money in order to train as a beauty consultant, and hope that I will be able to find employment in that field" (fh23-H1; 27 years old single high-school leaver, employed 8 years in the company, still as general staff (*sawon*)).

Sometimes chaebol are not viewed as the ideal long-term employer that is often assumed. According to one female graduate staff member of chaebol D1:

"If I work hard, as men do, it may be possible for me to reach a senior executive level, but I don't envy those men in that position. On the contrary I feel sorry for them: they are getting old but still have to work very hard every day from early morning until late (8.00 a.m. to 8.00 p.m. and later) to earn the salary they get. I fear that the intelligence and ability that they once had has rather been wasted. To me, their life is not one that I would consider satisfying or desirable, even though many of my male colleagues regard it as a goal to which they aspire and therefore work hard for" (fu32-D1; 26 years old single from prestigious university, worked 2 ½ years).

Many of the women who were thinking of leaving in the near future to develop another career wanted to find work that they could continue even after getting married or having children. Chiefly for this reason some planned to leave paid employment and start their own business, for example by opening a small shop near their home where they could control their working hours while earning a reasonable income (e.g. fh24-H1, fh28-H1). One such employee (fh24) took an evening flower arrangement course, hoping that she could run her own flower shop when she leaves the company. Interestingly, many of the new careers these women were considering seemed to fall into a category that either conformed to a traditionally-female stereotype - such as beauty consultant (fh23-H1) or flower arrangement (fh24), or was a customarily-secure career for women like teaching (fu46-H2, fu48-H2, fu51-D2). While female high-school leavers had little choice, beyond opportunities not requiring higher educational qualifications (yet usually reinforcing female stereotypes), female graduates did at least have a wider choice that included teaching, which in general is highly regarded with good security and popular among women in Korea.



With childcare seen as a possible problem while working in any Korean company, some women were considering working from home, for example as a freelancer in a computer-related business (e.g. fu13-S1; 25 years old single graduate). In this instance, however, the interviewee was uncertain about the practicalities as it is a comparatively new concept and there are few precedents. There were also a number of women who were not expecting to find another job immediately, either due to lack of available opportunities or because they intended to take a break after marriage before returning to work later in a different field. When their children reach school age and no longer need full-time care, they hoped that they could return to university to qualify as a teacher, financed by money saved during their chaebol working years (fu18\*-S1, fu48-H2). One interviewee (fu18\*; 28 years old, degree in English Education) had already trained to be a teacher while at university, and therefore merely needed to pass an examination (before she reached 35 years of age) to be appointed as a teacher in a public school.

Many women believed that, due to their generally disadvantageous position at work in comparison with men, a good educational qualification was particularly important. Since educational and vocational qualifications are evidence of intellectual ability and knowledge, a considerable number of women regarded further study important for finding good alternative employment (e.g. fh9, fu14, fh28, fh29, fu32, fh33, fh36, fu37, fu43\*, fu47, fu51). One female junior employee (fh33-D1; 24 years old), who felt that her present working conditions would not improve significantly in the future, said she was planning soon to leave the firm to pursue further studies (possibly a language course abroad). She hoped that better qualifications (such as speaking English fluently) would enable her to find a more satisfactory job with better prospects. This disposition was common among the women interviewees, both high-school leavers and graduates. A university graduate (fu32) from chaebol D1 decided to leave her job after one year to take an MBA programme in the United States, hoping that she could later secure a job in Korea with a foreign company, where she believed women would be more likely to be treated according to their abilities<sup>4</sup>. This yearning for further educational qualifications was particularly strong among female high-school leavers. They often expressed regret at not having attended a university; this was explained partly by the disparagement of graduate colleagues and partly by their poorer job prospects. One

junior employee (fh29), who was preparing for a university entrance exam while still working in chaebol H1, described her motivation as follows:

“When I left high school I decided not to go to university, thinking that I could study alone at home if necessary and that I would win promotion through natural ability and work experience. However, the reality was quite different: the work was hard for me and promotion was extremely slow. I then realised that I should study more to become better qualified. That is why I am now preparing for a university entrance exam. If I am accepted I intend to study part-time, in the evenings after work, and perhaps later find some more professional work” (fh29-H1; 20 years old single, worked almost 2 years).

It was encouraging that a significant number of women were returning to full time education in order to improve their qualifications, and as a consequence their employment opportunities, and that they were making determined efforts to advance their careers. Nevertheless, there were undeniably other pertinent factors, such as the unfavourable social environment and gendered culture, which hindered these aspirations. While some female high-school leavers were seeking a university degree to improve their working status<sup>5</sup>, a number of female graduates were also finding their conditions and job prospects unsatisfactory and planning to leave for even further education. Improved qualifications undoubtedly help an individual to a certain extent, since the working conditions of female graduates are usually better and with less gender discrimination, than those for high-school leavers. Similarly, female graduates with a newly-obtained MBA might have a better chance of finding a job in a foreign company. Further education and higher qualifications may also, in themselves, improve the self-confidence and optimism of female employees. However, the real issue was not about the lack of qualifications for women: it was that prevailing gender bias and gender-discriminative practices embedded within work organisations really do matter.

One of the important research findings is that the lack of a degree for female high-school leavers played a crucial part in formalising their inferior status as a sub-group under general (graduate) employees. Their treatment is more visibly discriminative, and includes poorer promotional chances and the customary practice of leaving upon marriage. For example, among all the female chaebol interviewees (28 in total), I did not encounter even one high-school leaver who was married and remained working. They would often find that, even though their salary may have increased and their grade

(*gup*) advanced according to their length of service, the nature of their work had hardly changed: it was not unusual for a female high-school leaver with a comparatively-high, time-related grade still undertaking the same tasks as a junior employee who had joined the company 10 years later. Such employees continue to play a decorative, assisting role; their poor promotion prospects and unchallenging work, even after long experience, frequently causes them to lose spirit and motivation.

On the other hand, female graduates who were hired through *kongchae* (open recruitment) were treated more like general staff, although some sexual discrimination was still evident. However, their superior educational attainment still seemed to have little impact on their job prospects. While remaining at work after marriage was rare for high-school leavers, this rule did not seem to apply so strictly to female graduates: seven out of 19 female graduates interviewed were married, although they (mostly aged in their 20s) were still at a comparatively early stage of their career. Nevertheless, many female graduates also came to realize that chaebol would not offer them a satisfactory long-term career and decided to seek other options.

### c) Resolute perseverance

Although a minority, some female interviewees (fu10\*-S1, fu19\*-S1, fu37-S2, fu40-L, fu43\*) were optimistic in outlook and viewed their chaebol career in generally positive terms. One example is illustrated by a quotation from a self-assured female employee who believed that she was doing well in her company:

“At present, I don’t feel that women are sexually discriminated against in the company. We have improved the working conditions and gender equality at work. People’s way of thinking is changing too. We have changed the working atmosphere little by little by making an effort and, sometimes, fighting against existing gender-discriminatory customs” (fu10\*-S1; 27 year old, married and pregnant, 3 ½ years with company).

While many women (and men) feared possible future redundancy because of the company’s financial hardship, this woman indicated that she personally never worried about it, chiefly because her role in the department included many tasks that only she really understood. According to her (fu10\*), it would be too inconvenient and frustrating for others in the department if she were made redundant in the near future.

As a result, she was unconcerned about the possibility of being laid off. When she was asked whether she could picture herself as a manager one day in the present company she replied that, even though so far there had been no female manager in her company (there were just a few instances in the entire chaebol), she wished to create a precedent by becoming the first, adding that it must be possible if she worked hard enough.

It was almost impossible to know whether her confidence was well-grounded and her will-power strong enough to make it happen; only time will tell. However my personal impression was that her unusual confidence did not seem to be well rooted, and that her feeling of being 'secure' might change at any time with someone else assuming her responsibilities. Further, according to interviews with female colleagues, both high-school leavers and graduates, (fh9, fh11, fu12\*, fu13, fu14) in the same company (S1a), the situation for women was not considered to be as positive or favourable as it appeared. Their perceptions could be summarised by phrases such as: "there are no women at the top because we are a minority with little power" (fh9), "at first it was a shock to see how women are treated", "women are laid off first" (fu12\*), "there are no role models for a female manager" (fu13), "female high-school leavers or pregnant women are the first to be laid off" (fu14). The unusual confidence and optimism of the self-assured employee (fu10\*) may have come partly from her educational attainment: while her colleagues were university graduates, she exceptionally had a Master degree (in fabric engineering – although from a less-prestigious university) in a field related to the company's industry. If her confidence were to prove justified, a higher-educational qualification (such as a Master's degree) and expertise in the field would seem to be beneficial for the career development of some women. However, this could only be surmised since hers was the only case where a female interviewee's educational qualification was higher than that of her graduate colleagues.

Another female graduate interviewee (fu19\*), from company S1b, who was also feeling confident about her job security, was involved in contracting corporate insurance policies. She said that when she achieved the same sales performance as some men, her accomplishment tended to be appreciated more because it was seen to be matching their record. Her success was regarded as unusual for a woman, and this was

later confirmed by her direct superior (mu15m-S1). The female interviewee confessed that her (mostly male) clients appeared to be polite and sympathetic in meetings with her, were never rude and allowed her plenty of time to talk – all of which helped her to be successful in winning sales which, as a result, exceeded on average those of her male colleagues (fu19\*-S1)<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, she appeared to have little ambition and was not particularly gender-aware; she was interested only in doing her best for the present, and intended to leave to have a family in the future. Ironically, another female graduate employee (fu18\*-S1), who was somewhat more forceful, worked in the same company and was regarded as equally capable; she explained that the insurance sales contractor had been successful at her job because, like men, she was assertive and good at taking initiative - qualities which were often lacking among female staff (fu18\*). It was interesting to contrast these two currently successful women: the former (fu19\*, the insurance contractor) was typically 'feminine' with good looks, charm, a well-rounded personality and gentle approach, while the latter (fu18\*) was clearly more gender-aware, tough, hard-working and attempted to behave like her male colleagues. Unfortunately, however, she (fu18\*) was pregnant at the time of the interview and concerned about her future, not being sure whether she could remain working after having the baby due to the demands of childcare and the adverse effect this would have on her ability to do her job. As reported in the previous section, she did not see much future with the present employer and was seeking an alternative career.

Overall, there seemed to be little pattern or consistency in the type of women who were doing well in their chaebol career. According to my personal observation, however, these women appeared to be generally bright, confident, hard working, responsible and efficient. They also seemed capable of maintaining a good relationship with colleagues and bosses, and also proud of themselves in what they were doing professionally. However, not all of them were strongly gender-aware. Overall, such cases were few and exceptional and their success seemed to be due more to the individual than the working environment or organisation – even though in the working climate of one decade earlier it would have been even more difficult to find such cases.

It is worth noting that, throughout the study, it was almost impossible to find a manager who was female - although there were said to be a few in other departments

regarded as 'feminine', or in companies operating in industries where women were employed for their special skills in, for example, fashion designing. Yet, in the course of numerous interviews and visits to different companies no female managers were available for interview. The scarcity of female managers in chaebol was also confirmed by both male and female interviewees themselves (mu5-S1, fh9-S1, fu10\*-S1, fu12\*-S1, fu13-S1, fu18\*-S1, fu21-S1, mu34m-S2, fu37-S2, mu42-P, fu48-H2). The following quotations from interviews well illustrate the present situation where women find it difficult to be promoted to a higher, managerial level.

"Promotion for women to *daeri* (supervisory) level is often possible, but to a higher level (e.g. *kwa-jang*, manager) it is not easy: a female employee was considered for promotion to *kwa-jang* on two consecutive occasions since she had acquired sufficient seniority, but was rejected each time. This eventually led to her leaving the company. From the company's point of view it is still not considered practical or wise to promote a woman to be a manager in a company involved in heavy industry (e.g. construction), even though women are now well respected. As a result, prospects for women in this field are not bright" (fu21-S1).

"Regardless of her work ability, it will be very difficult for a woman to manage male staff. I know a few women who reached managerial level, but they had to go through a really hard time to get there. Moreover, junior male staff tend to ignore and show little respect towards them, mainly because they are women. Even if a female boss were older and very capable, men would tend to say, "a woman should stay at home..." and see her as a woman rather than as their boss. I guess that if she goes to see (male) clients, they would think the same way" (mu45-H2).

Nevertheless, some women still hoped that they could be successful and reach a managerial position. A female respondent, half wishing and half doubting, stated, "if I could manage to remain with this company until my 50s, and reach a senior position, my life would be a great success" (fu44\*-P). The following quotation, from the woman with a Master's degree, can perhaps most usefully sum up this section by offering a thoughtful model for working women's attitudes towards their career:

"Even if it is hard to survive in the present male-centred environment, we as women should do our best to persevere - not only for personal reasons but also for the status of working women in general. To convince employers in the future that women are worth hiring and investing in, it is important that as many women as possible remain in employment, rather than giving up and leaving. For that reason women need to be strong-willed and determined; some changes

in their environment would help too, such as understanding and support from their husbands as well as practical and systematic assistance with childcare” (fu10\*-S1; 27 years old, married and pregnant).

In general, the women interviewed argued that different treatment would lead to differences in performance. According to one female employee (fu51-D2), if less-challenging jobs with little responsibility were given to women they would probably perform more poorly than men, as they would lack the same motivation or satisfaction. Women would probably lose interest and a determination to work hard, because they would realise that their future is not as bright as that for men. Sometimes, though not often, women might try to improve their situation, both by individual and collective effort - and occasionally they would succeed.

At an individual level, the example of one female graduate employee’s (fu43\*-P) personal struggle with her boss to improve her allocation of work is illustrative:

“As the section manager (immediate supervisor) wasn’t giving me any important tasks, I told him directly that I would work hard if he was considerate and open enough to give me proper work; otherwise I would have no choice but to leave. After that, he started giving me more challenging jobs. I worked very hard: if he stayed late and other staff had left, I would stay on to help him with his work (although with simple things, like typing). He then began to have more confidence in me and started allocating me work with more responsibility than my senior colleagues. My work developed a lot during that time and I thank him for that. If I hadn’t asked him it wouldn’t have happened. But it also depends on the person; my very first boss didn’t change his attitude much, even after he had said he ‘understood and would try to address my concerns’” (fu43\*-P; 33 years old, married with one child, worked 9 years).

Another female employee (fu51-D2) interestingly pointed out that, among her female colleagues who felt unfairly treated or discriminated against, there are two quite different approaches that can be taken to deal with the issue: one is to do everything that the men (bosses or male colleagues) require and then later ask them for ‘favours’; the other is simply to say ‘no’ when it is unacceptable and does not feel right. The former approach is more accommodating and ‘feminine’ with less aggression towards men while relying on their discretion, whereas the latter is more straightforward and confrontational towards men and the working environment. She was not sure which approach worked better, although she felt that both could be effective at different times.

She also added that the more aggressive approach might backfire, and described an example of this. Her male boss would often ask her to serve tea even though she was a graduate. So one time she responded that she would do it only for visiting clients or guests, but not at other times or for the male colleagues. Even though she had said what she felt was right at the time, it soon brought her disfavour: the boss became unfriendly towards her and was reluctant to train her or to explain how to complete work, even when she requested it. She felt she was being punished for being confrontational and not sufficiently subservient towards him (fu51-D2).

In most cases, however, it seemed to be worthwhile for women to make a conscious effort to raise these issues directly. Some women (e.g. fu50-H2, fu51-D2) argued strongly that, since they are a minority in the workplace, their voices are weak and can easily be ignored so they must persist in trying to change the existing gender bias and demand their deserved rights – change will not come automatically. A quotation from one female high-school leaver (fh11-S1) is particularly pertinent:

“In the past, while everyone else attended general staff meetings female high-school leavers were supposed to stay behind to answer the phone etc. In those situations it was by custom almost impossible for any junior female staff (typically, a high-school leaver) to join the meeting. Eventually however, dissatisfaction with this practice was expressed openly and discussed among the female staff, who reached an agreement: we decided that a few of us would take turns to stay behind to answer the phone and mind the office, while others could participate in the general meetings. Yet when I first entered the room at the next meeting, my boss loudly asked me to leave to attend to my usual duties. After that episode I expressed my irritation with him by not speaking to him for some time. He eventually got the message and changed his attitude. When the next meeting was about to begin he asked for me, saying ‘where is .... [her name]? The meeting is about to start.’” (fh11-S1; 27 years old single, employed for over 9 years).

She further added that this was just one of many examples experienced by individual female members of staff. She proudly concluded that since women joined the company they had fought to improve their status and situation at work and that, as a result, sexual discrimination had been gradually decreasing, and conditions were far better now than they had been in the past (fh11-S1)<sup>7</sup>.

Collective protests and action by women were usually not well organised, especially in an environment where white-collar employees, unlike production workers, normally



had no trade union, or if they did it would be a branch of a general industrial union with little interest in white-collar workers (according to fu39-L, fu46-H2). Consequently, there have been few examples of group protest by female white-collar employees against mistreatment or discrimination. However, among the companies studied there was one where a women-only group<sup>8</sup> had been formed to represent and promote the interests of female employees with their employer: “it is a kind of system for gathering and screening individuals’ thoughts and complaints, and trying to solve problems in a more structured, efficient way as a group” (explained the representative of the group, fh28-H1). As a result, some real improvements had been achieved: until a few years before, female employees (usually high-school leavers) were forced to leave on marriage, but this customary rule has now been relaxed and women can continue working until pregnant - although they may feel pressure to leave after child birth (fh29-H1).

Nevertheless, in spite of dissatisfaction with their treatment, it was not always easy fighting to change the situation since women were reluctant to ‘make a fuss’, fearing that it would disrupt office harmony and that they would be branded as difficult (as argued by fu20\*-S1). This concern was confirmed by male respondents (mu2-S1, mu3-S1, mu5-S1, mh6-S1, fu20\*-S1, mu35-S2, mu41-P) who expressed their disapproval of women who actively raised issues of equal rights and equality of opportunity at work, considering them to be breaking the harmony of the workplace. Even though the need to improve gender equality and working conditions is widely recognised among women they, and also men, usually accepted that the changes would, and should, be ‘gradual’. A female high-school leaver (fh11) working in chaebol S1 explained,

“If the company suddenly starts hiring women as 50 percent of all new recruits, it is not going to work in practice. Since we are still at an early stage of female employment in Korean companies, chaebol would not be able to cope with a sudden large increase in the number of female employees, nor would it necessarily help them to survive at work. Given the existing social and business culture, such a dramatic increase in female employment wouldn’t be easily accepted. Therefore it is more desirable to introduce improvements step by step. Generally, I believe that the changes are heading in the right direction at the moment” (fh11-S1; 27 year old single, over 9 years of work experience).

Overall, a number of women (e.g. fh29-H1, fh36-S2, fu37-S2, fu51-D2) felt that

instances of serious gender discrimination (e.g. exclusion from general staff meetings), chiefly those arising from Confucian tradition, have reduced and that as time passes changes in the culture and atmosphere at work have brought improved conditions and treatment for women - female staff are now less often ordered to type for men, or make tea. Even chaebol D2 (relatively small, with an 'old fashioned' administrative culture) seemed to be showing signs of changing its traditional, conservative ideology and practice: until four years ago men were promoted twice as fast as women; however, two years previously women staged a group protest and won a change in policy. Now, like men, they can in principle be promoted after 3 years, although (as respondent fu51 reported) in practice there are limits, and policies alone are not sufficient to ensure equal treatment for women.

So far we have explored various experiences of women at work, and how their reactions and outcomes differ. Many women, particularly female graduate job candidates (e.g. fs52<sup>9</sup>, fs53, fs54), consider that having a profession is essential and regard a successful career as making their life more complete. For this reason, many prospective graduates prepare themselves for the job market by taking courses (such as foreign language and computer skills) unrelated to their field of study during their spare time, in order to enhance their appeal to prospective employers (*ibid.*). However, almost all Korean chaebol studied seem to be unable yet to provide an environment where women can perform at their best, on the same terms as men. In particular, some chaebol employers seemed not to know exactly what to do with their new, educated female employees, as they were still accustomed to having female employees who were there merely to assist men (as reported by fu20\*-S1). While companies fail fully to utilise good quality female labour, due mainly to their male-dominant work culture and gendered employment practices, possibly aggravated by women's 'less-commercial' attitude towards work, they experience a high turnover of female staff who give up their jobs in disappointment and frustration. This adversely affects employers, engendering further bias against women and leading to modifications in their policies detrimental to the career development of female staff. It is clear that women, working in the gender-biased climate of the modern workplace, bear additional burdens because of their sex and gendered roles. Some of these burdens are essentially practical and relate to the

need to balance their responsibilities and time commitment (particularly if they are mothers) towards both their families and their work (see Chapter 9 for a detailed discussion on women's reproductive roles and childcare). Others are more intangible, resulting from the pervasive male-centred office culture, and occasionally covert, indirect pressure to sacrifice their career prospects in favour of men merely because they are women.

This examination of the experiences of Korean women employed in chaebol has focused on answers to a number of critical questions: can their work, and their general participation in paid employment, be seen as a means to gain further liberation from the traditional gender-discriminative culture?; have they been integrated into the development process of the nation?; or is their involvement in paid work as white-collar employees another form of exploitation as victims of a capitalist economy and society? The answers to these questions provided by the research suggest that, in some measure, the conditions faced by Korean women have indeed been improved by participating in white-collar work for employers such as chaebol and that, to a certain extent, some women themselves see their work as a liberating experience which has allowed them to improve their circumstances and status generally in society.

For an evaluation of the effect on Korean women of white-collar employment, the following section presents an overview of what has so far been discussed in earlier chapters in order to evaluate the theoretical model introduced in Chapter 2, where it was suggested that Tiano's three theses (of 'marginalisation', 'exploitation', and 'integration') could provide a useful framework to appreciate the impact on women of their labour participation in developing economies.

### **8.3 Female White-collar Employees in Chaebol: The Outcome**

#### **An Overview of Female White-collar Employment in Chaebol**

With the questions that were set out above in mind, let us first consider the implications for university-educated women of the changes in white-collar employment by chaebol in the late 1980s and 1990s. In Chapter 3, it was shown that the then-booming Korean economy was largely responsible for the (however temporary) active recruitment of

female graduates, using a less gender-biased approach, in the first half of the 1990s. In their earlier work, Chung and Chang (1985:30) listed the reasons why big Korean companies (such as chaebol) began to value and start employing more educated female graduates as office workers in the mid 1980s. Chung and Chang argued that these reasons were to explore and develop female labour, increase work efficiency, respond actively to social changes, save labour costs in the long-term, improve their company's public image, and help families acquire a double income. This view, explaining the sudden change in the hiring practices of chaebol, was also partly supported later by other writers.

Many commentators, however, suggested that the primary reason was the shortage of qualified labour for white-collar jobs in the early 1990s (e.g. Chang PW. 1994; *Minwoohoe* 1997; Kim TH. 1997; Oh JJ. 1998; Chung UC. 1997)<sup>10</sup>. For example, as *Minwoohoe* (1997:2) explains, it was because chaebol realised that recruiting from a larger pool of applicants of both sexes increased their chances of selecting superior candidates. Further, by utilising characteristic 'feminine' traits they hoped to improve efficiency and, in promoting gender equality, enhance the public image of chaebol. There was another important factor bearing on this issue; this was the impact of globalisation on the Korean economy (Chang PW. 1994) that the government eagerly promoted during the 1990s, also discussed in Chapter 3. A new recognition in Korea of the rewards to be gained from employing female labour, and the anticipated benefits ensuing to the national economy, began frequently to appear in the general literature of the 1990s. Kim TH. (1999) argues that some developed countries and multi-national companies have recognised that the recruitment, development and utilisation of good female labour are the foundation of corporate competitiveness and national economic success. When the importance of full utilisation of qualified female labour was recognised, the government of Kim Young-Sam actively encouraged large companies to recruit from the previously-untapped supply of educated women as part of its national policy towards globalisation. This was also confirmed by some interviewees who stated that there was strong encouragement, even a form of directive, from the government to ensure that chaebol (the headquarters) and their subsidiary companies should employ a certain proportion of women (as reported by fu10\*-S1, fu20\*-S1, mu30m-D1, mu31-

D1, mu41-P, fu43\*-P). The government's involvement was considered an effective stimulus for the recent changes in the policies of chaebol towards female employment.

As a result, the recruitment of female graduates by chaebol grew steadily from the mid-1980s until it reached a peak in the mid-1990s. With the general economic expansion of the country and the resulting need for skilled female labour, women appeared to be integrating into the development process by joining the white-collar (as well as blue-collar) labour force in ever-larger numbers. However, my research has shown that when educated women were hired by chaebol to share higher-level office work with men, the reality often did not match their expectations. They were not fully integrated as 'core' workers like their male colleagues, but were often effectively marginalised and discriminated against. This resulted from a combination of diverse, multi-layered factors, for which both employers and employees of both sexes were responsible, together with the persistent effect of the prevailing (Confucian) culture of sex-segregation and gender-differentiation.

In chaebol offices women often became dispirited on receiving less-favourable treatment and fewer opportunities for advancement, and yet they were frequently regarded by employers and male fellow workers as lacking in commitment, drive and professionalism. On occasion this view might have been justified, since women sometimes showed less commitment and dedication knowing that they easily could leave and become housewives – thus displaying an element of complicity. More importantly, however, the research suggested that the fundamental problem seemed to originate from obstacles women faced due to the conservative, male-centred work culture: deep in the minds of many men, women appeared less suited and capable at work. This implied lower expectations for career advancement, which in turn justified less investment in their training, which inevitably resulted in fewer opportunities for promotion. Even if some women were considered as good as men, at heart men (and some women) believed that the major breadwinners of the family needed the jobs and career opportunities, and that women's careers were temporary, less serious and therefore less important. Nevertheless, there was a rising expectation until the mid-1990s that women's status and working conditions would improve gradually over time

as a result of their increased labour participation, and mutual adjustment and accommodation.

This hint of optimism was, however, to be challenged by the sudden economic crisis that hit the country in mid-1997. As already discussed in Chapter 5, the forced structural adjustment to the national economy inevitably affected labour demand, and this led to growing unemployment<sup>11</sup> and a reduced demand for labour in companies compelled to undergo structural change, particularly in their management of human resources. For both employers and employees the economy and corporate survival became a matter of major concern, and this relegated issues such as utilisation of female labour and furthering their rights to a lesser significance<sup>12</sup>. Unemployment arising from the 1997 economic crisis, and the resulting structural adjustment of the economy, has become a serious problem in Korea (Cathie 1998; Chang HJ. 1998; Oh JJ. 1998; Rowley and Bae 1998; Kim TH. 1999; Kirk 1999; Whitley 1999; Bustelo 2000; Kong 2000; Joh SW. 2001; Kim S. 2001; Haggard et al. 2003; Kim BW. 2003; Shin JS. and Chang HJ. 2003; Bae and Rowley 2004).

In the chaebol this led to reductions in bonus and social benefits, and sometimes even in salary itself (mh6-S1, fh24-H1). It was also suggested that the comparative advantages of working for chaebol, such as superior salaries and generous benefits flowing from their concern for staff, seemed to have been eroded (mu3-S1, fu13-S1, fh24-H1, mu34m-S2). These adverse changes in general working conditions arising from the 'IMF crisis' generated a feeling of insecurity in most staff members as employees began to be laid off.<sup>13</sup> The workplace had become more "up-tight" with a heavier workload for those remaining after staff reductions (fu12\*-S1, fh24-H1). Although there was no evident policy, staff reductions usually began in peripheral departments (such as public relations and staff training) that were considered less vital for the company's survival; these were either reduced in size or absorbed into other departments (as was experienced by, among others, mu4-S1, fu10\*-S1, fu14-S1, fu32-D1, mu45-H2).

The impact of the recession inevitably brought some changes for women. The underlying national economic difficulties and the ensuing financial hardship of Korean companies adversely affected female employment in chaebol and other commercial

enterprises. Women not only suffered from the more onerous working conditions (such as longer working hours, a heavier workload, reduced benefits and emotional stress) like their male colleagues, but also from some other factors particular to their sex. For example, since female employees were not regarded as the breadwinner of a household, they encountered social pressure against remaining at work while men were being made redundant. Those women who were married or with children, and especially those whose husbands worked in the same company, felt that they should leave when the company began laying off employees. Sometimes this pressure became too strong for them to resist<sup>14</sup>. Many women who were recruited during the comparatively extensive and less-gender-biased recruitment campaigns of the early 1990s have now left, thus reducing the number of female graduates employed in chaebol.

In times of economic downturn employers often lay off women first (Joekees 1987; Stichter 1990).<sup>15</sup> Stichter (1990) argued that as these reductions in female labour are due to gender discrimination on the part of employers they would seem to reveal an ideology which assumes that male incomes are more important than female incomes, and which reflects women's subordinate position in the household. This clearly applied in the case of Korea. Not only did the companies and their male employees consider that men's jobs were more important, but some women themselves (e.g. fu13, fu19\*) also seemed to feel that they should surrender their opportunities in favour of men, the primary breadwinners.<sup>16</sup> In the current climate of economic hardship and financial privation for chaebol, one married female employee (fu19\*) confessed that, if she and other female colleagues were asked to leave, she would not be particularly upset with the company's conduct since many male colleagues had to leave as well. She added that her situation was not as bad as for her male colleagues, some of whom headed households and were financially solely responsible for the family - whereas she, as an unmarried daughter, could still rely on her parents as a last resort.

In general, women felt in these circumstances that they did not deserve full equality of treatment, and were reluctant to claim their rights. One female graduate employee (fu50-H2), interviewed about gender issues in the summer of 1997, even then expressed her fear that the economic difficulties facing many Korean companies would not make it a good time to talk about gender equality at work. Another female interviewee (fu46-

H2) stated that the issue of gender equality concerned her less than the possibility of being laid off due to the company's financial hardship. Even though some may have felt that they displayed a degree of complicity, it cannot have been easy for these women to resist discrimination and demand their rights when faced with the possibility of losing their jobs. It must have been a daunting experience for them to choose between collaboration and resistance, a dilemma calling for sensitivity and subtlety in assessing where they stood and how far they could negotiate.

Since the economic crisis chaebol have employed fewer staff although they have continued to recruit a small number (usually men) through internship or for particular positions<sup>17</sup> (see also Pacific Bridge, Inc. 2001; Bae and Rowley 2004). One female member of staff explained the current situation as follows:

“At present most chaebol tend to hire new staff only when needed, rather than recruiting regularly on a grand scale as before. The company now gives discretion to each department to recruit for particular positions whenever necessary. Naturally, the company or department usually prefers not to select women, who might leave the company on marriage or pregnancy” (fu10\*-S1).

Since 1997 fewer women have been recruited by chaebol - apart from those for specialised ‘feminine’ departments (such as clothing design, sales reception, and secretarial support) (as pointed out by fu10\*-S1, fh28-H1, mu38m-L, fu40-L, fu43\*-P).

Unemployment, and the reduced demand for labour resulting from the economic downturn, naturally adversely affected the employment of women and their integration into the labour market. “In a period of a high unemployment, the utilisation of well-qualified female labour can easily be overlooked as it is, in fact, at present”, warned Kim TH. (1999:58) in the same year. The prospects for white-collar employment in chaebol for women, especially educated ones, did not look bright at the end of the 1990s. When asked whether women would be less likely to be selected under the new recruitment method (whereby recruits were hired only for particular vacant positions - see note 9 for more details), a senior manager (mu1m) from chaebol S1 replied “not necessarily because, when requesting recommendations from university faculties, companies should not specify the sex of needed applicants”. He then added, “if a female candidate presents better in interview, we would hire her. However, to be frank with you, the process is not strictly equal or fair. Nevertheless, women would be hired if they



are definitely better". In spite of his efforts not to make any comment that might sound gender discriminative, it became clear that he believed that women would be less likely to be chosen by the company in the immediate future.

In conclusion, the dramatic events of 1997, involving a collapse in the international value of the 'won' and emergency rescue funding by the IMF, inevitably led to economic hardship throughout the economy (see Chapter 5). Korean companies, including chaebol, have been forced to 'down-size', curtail or even eliminate many of their operations, reduce staff and suspend previously planned recruitment. The prompt action by government and companies has, in the event, proved effective. The economy has stabilised, the emergency IMF loans repaid, and national confidence is being restored. However, the after-effects of the crisis still remain and it will be some years before the economy is restored fully to its earlier buoyancy. This economic upheaval has naturally had a major impact on the labour market, which since the crisis remains under siege. This has made it difficult for new applicants to find suitable jobs, and has led current workers to fear possible redundancy. For reasons already referred to, this has had a particularly damaging effect on women and their employment prospects.

The somewhat 'short-lived' expansion in the recruitment and utilisation of educated females by chaebol in the late 1980s and the early 1990s seems to suggest an important point. It is clear that female white-collar employment by chaebol was greatly stimulated by the buoyant national economy, and female recruitment was activated by economic need, government exhortation and the demands of industry. However, it has now been curtailed by the economic downturn, clearly revealing the true extent of women's integration in the labour market and national development. At this point, a critical evaluation of Tiano's three theses would help to explain the phenomenon of white-collar employment for women in the Korean chaebol in the 1990s.

### **Are Women 'Exploited', 'Integrated' or 'Marginalised'?**

Let us first consider the relevance and applicability of the 'exploitation thesis' to Korean women in white-collar employment. Some gender exploitative aspects can surely be found in their working conditions, where women were treated unequally and considered as 'inferior' to their male colleagues. Moreover, in promoting the active

recruitment of women by chaebol during the economic boom, the government's priority seemed less to do with promoting gender equality than encouraging the use of female labour to benefit companies and consequently the capitalist economy. Maintaining a strict gender division of labour was further evidence - exemplified by the role of junior female employees (female high-school leavers) as a separate category for tasks of an assisting nature at a lower salary and with an anticipated short-term work tenure.

On the other hand, however, most women interviewed – both graduates and high-school leavers – had little doubt of the benefits from working in chaebol, in spite of experiencing biased attitudes and gender discrimination. Compared with the oppressive and demeaning circumstances experienced by their female ancestors, referred to in Chapter 4, the process of development and modernisation has undoubtedly brought much of benefit to contemporary Korean women. Job opportunities in chaebol (and other white-collar employment) are preferable to work previously available to women: chaebol are regarded as desirable employers by educated women because their working environment is less gender-biased than in many other commercial companies, and indeed most other career options available in Korea. Therefore, if the 'exploitation thesis' described by Tiano (1986) is taken as depicting women's involvement in paid employment is 'more harmful than beneficial' to them, its applicability to Korean white-collar women would seem to be questionable since this interpretation bears relatively little relevance to the circumstances of women working in contemporary offices.

Would the 'integration' thesis then provide a more useful and appropriate perspective for viewing the experiences of white-collar working women? This perspective is based on the belief that industrialisation leads to female liberation and sexual equality by incorporating women in economic and political development. It assumes that industrialisation, and its attendant cultural and structural changes, inevitably involves women more centrally in public life. Korea's rapid industrial and economic development over the last few decades, and the consequential increased demand for female labour, has attracted educated women to the labour force and introduced them to a relatively new career, graduate office employment in chaebol. These developments have been further assisted by other modernising influences, such as

improvements in national policies towards equal employment opportunities for women, the promotion of the use of female labour, general improvements in education for women, and other socio-cultural changes including those affecting family structure. Further, the modernisation process that came with industrial development has brought a less traditional, more gender-aware sensitivity to women and gender issues, as described in Chapter 4. Development has undoubtedly been a positive force for women in Korea, where the traditional gender-discriminating culture confined women to their domestic circle and regarded them as inferior to men. Development has also served to increase women's labour participation, and gender-awareness in employment and in society generally<sup>18</sup>.

Yet, can contemporary Korean women be considered adequately to exemplify the 'integration' thesis? Is it correct to say that they have been *fully* integrated in the process of national development? The answer must be, as has been demonstrated in sections of previous chapters, that Korean economic development has *not* fully integrated women, in spite of yielding a number of beneficial features that have been referred to. Even though the process of development and modernisation has contributed to an improvement in their status at work and in society in general, the involvement of women in contemporary employment has failed to bring fundamental change to their traditionally gendered roles and inferior status at work. Furthermore, despite the fact that women appeared to be integrating to some degree while the economy expanded, the evidence at the onset of recession suggests that the apparently progressive changes in female white-collar employment over the last decade have been but a transient market response to the demands of industrial development and the practical needs of employers - rather than a genuine, unsolicited contribution to gender equality.

If Korean women, as a result of their labour participation in their country's development, cannot fairly be described as exploited or fully integrated, would the 'marginalisation' thesis perhaps provide a more helpful insight? Tiano maintains that capitalist industrialisation excludes women from productive roles and confines them to the household or to the informal sector. To explain the situation of modern Korean women, this 'marginalisation' thesis is not sufficiently embracing if taken literally. From this perspective capitalist development is seen as making women peripheral to

socially-valued roles and resources, whereas the experiences of Korean women in the last few decades can hardly be so unfavourably categorised. However, on a different level this thesis may be useful in explaining a number of features of gender discrimination at work in Korea.

When women entered office employment, for example, they were marginalised by gendered employment practices and a male-centred work culture. They were allocated less important responsibilities with restricted promotion potential, given fewer opportunities for training and promotion, and pressured to leave after marriage or pregnancy. Moreover, female high-school leavers were clearly segregated and differentiated from male employees through different, specified educational requirements: these requirements differed between male and female recruits, and seemed to be a mechanism that was used to justify the allocation of semi-skilled and lower-waged work to women, resulting in a gender division of labour. Even female graduates, with the same education and qualifications as men, were segregated by their sex as a minority group in a male-centred work culture by informal practices, such as men-only socialising patterns and exclusive networking and bonding between men and male superiors. In spite of efforts by many women to work hard and fit in, most seemed to feel that their endeavours were poorly rewarded and that their role in the company was marginal. In these instances it was the existing work culture, still strongly influenced by Confucian tradition, which was the mechanism that served to maintain and justify the gendered attitudes and practices, and that contributed to the marginalisation of women at work. When the economic crisis led to a reduced demand for labour, women were further marginalised by their poorer recruitment prospects and increased likelihood of redundancy - thus, effectively being consigned to a peripheral, rather than core, workforce (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of core/peripheral workers).

In conclusion, although it cannot be denied that elements from each of Tiano's three theoretical perspectives can be relevant to illuminating the experiences of contemporary Korean women in white-collar employment, the findings of my research suggest that the insights provided by the 'marginalisation' perspective would seem to provide the closest understanding and appreciation of their status and conditions in modern Korea. However, applying this thesis to the case of Korean white-collar women without any

reservation seems problematic, since it alone cannot accommodate and explain the whole picture. Therefore, it might be appropriate to redefine the ‘marginalisation’ thesis in terms of female employees being ‘marginalised’ within modernising, and even in some cases globalising, corporations analogous to Korean chaebol (see the concluding chapter for further discussion on this issue). Meanwhile, let us consider why it was not possible for Korean women to be fully integrated without suffering discrimination and being marginalised in the labour market.

### **Marginalisation of Women at Work**

Korean women’s ancillary position in the labour market seemed to flow inexorably from the traditional, patriarchal relationships still extant in society at large. With the country’s political and economic development of the 1970s-1980s in mind, Koo SY. (1984) argued that it was the patriarchal system that produced those social characteristics of women (e.g. docility, submissiveness, low reward expectation) that make them particularly useful to the pattern of industrialisation pursued by developing countries such as Korea. Women’s contribution to the Korean economy seems to have been secured by taking advantage of elements of “patriarchal ideology combining with capitalist institutions” (Walby 1986:243). According to Lim (1983:77), patriarchal institutions and social relations are responsible for the inferior or secondary status of women in the capitalist waged-labour market. She argues that the primacy of the sexual division of labour within the family – man as breadwinner and woman as housekeeper and child raiser – has several consequences for the woman who seeks waged employment (in the case of Korean women, see also Hampson 2000; Roces and Edwards 2000). These consequences are that women, socialised to accept this gender role in life, have little motivation to acquire marketable skills; they are often prevented by discrimination from learning such skills, and (even if they do acquire them) may be prevented by discrimination from securing the type of employment or the level of remuneration that the skills would command for a man. My research supports this argument and shows that in spite of all the changes in recent decades women employed in Korean companies, especially high-school leavers, still remain effectively in

stereotypical roles as ‘wives and mothers’, or ‘flowers of the office’ when at work - as secondary, peripheral workers.

Ideologies derived both from international capitalism and traditional domestic values were invoked to present women as inferior and submissive to men, both economically and socially, in order to serve capitalist interests. Park KA. (1994) also, importantly, noted that the backwardness of Korean women stems not only from a traditional patriarchal culture but also from the institutionalisation of these traditional elements, coupled with the absence of mechanisms for encouraging sexual equality. She further argues that this inequality is reinforced by the structural characteristics of capitalism, whereby the marginal status of women leads to them receiving lower wages allied with the obligation to demonstrate greater deference to authority and conscientiousness at work. Again, the findings of my research support this argument, especially in the case of junior staff (high-school leavers): they are in a rather ambivalent position in that their inferior status at work can be justified by their lower educational qualification, yet also can be viewed as due to systematic gender differentiation and discrimination. Supporting evidence is provided by the fact that this sub-group of junior staff, there to undertake simpler tasks and to assist their ‘core’ colleagues, is mostly filled with female high-school leavers.

When women have participated in paid employment they have always, regardless of economic conditions, been viewed at best as a ‘secondary’ family earner. The widely-held notion that women were secondary earners, whose income from paid work was less vital to the family’s survival, contributed towards reinforcing the process of marginalisation and relegating them to a role as ‘reserve army’ of white-collar labour in the Korean economy. This argument has been made by some academics (e.g. Braverman 1974; Beechey 1977; Bruegel 1979; Walby 1986:74-80; Hatt 1997), and is well expressed by Hatt (1997:106) as follows:

“Two contrasting theories attempt to explain how recessions affect men and women. Women either represent a reserve army of labour or else they are regarded as cheap substitutes for male labour. If women constitute a reserve army of labour then female unemployment will rise faster than male unemployment in a recession, whereas if women are used as substitutes for male labour recessions will hit male employment particularly hard. During both the wars in the early twentieth century men have gone away to fight whilst women

have replaced men in the factories. Men joined the armed forces whilst women constituted a reserve army of labour. ... In peacetime too, women can be used as a reserve army to be drawn into employment when aggregate demand is high, but they will be the first to lose their jobs with the onset of recession. In this view women are the marginal workers who are hired and fired as the economy moves through boom and slump. Their position in the labour market mirrors their social position”.

Not all those relatively few women (graduates in particular, but also high-school leavers) who had been hired were able to remain working when economic conditions in Korea became unfavourable, and those that did faced a more uncertain future. Compounding this was the fact that many women felt that somehow they did not have the right to remain at work when ‘breadwinning’ male colleagues were being laid off.

A creed, accepting the conventional sexual division of labour and regarding women as secondary earners whose prime responsibilities lie at home, permeates the offices of chaebol. “A man is the head of the family and responsible for its survival, while a woman is a help to the family finances”, was how one university graduate interviewee (fu13-S1) described the views held generally by her office colleagues and superiors. Another interviewee (male graduate) confirmed a similar attitude among men:

“In a patriarchal society like Korea, men are responsible for providing income for their families while women look after household duties; this ideology affects the role at work of both of them - even though I personally don’t mind sharing this responsibility with my wife”<sup>19</sup> (mu7-S1; 28 years old, married).

In Korea, the accepted family norm undoubtedly is still a man who is the breadwinner and a woman who stays at home responsible for the household work, in spite of the growing number of couples in recent years who both work. According to the research findings, this ideology seems to affect men and women differently in their attitudes towards work and the assumed gender roles they conform to. While working for a chaebol requires a high degree of commitment, men usually make special efforts to survive and avoid being seen failing as a ‘man’ in a society where he is primarily responsible for his family’s welfare. Many women, on the other hand, even with similar qualifications and capability as men, are arguably less determined. Although this can partly be attributed to gender discrimination pervading chaebol offices, it is also true that women often lack a ‘life-or-death’ attitude towards their career. Although this is an

interesting and complex issue that could be discussed at length, it is not central to the main topic to which we should return.

This secondary or marginal position of women at work is not unique to Korea. In studying women in Third World export-manufacturing industries, Elson and Pearson (1981) identified the main characteristics of this 'secondary status'. These are that women's rates of pay tend to be lower than those of men doing similar or comparable jobs; and that women tend to form a 'reserve army of labour', easily dismissed when firms want to cut back their labour force, and conveniently re-hired when they want to expand again. They add that this could be explained in terms of 'women's role in the family' or 'women's reproductive role' (ibid.). Walby (1997:66) also argues that women's employment has often been considered secondary or marginal in social and economic theory, which includes conceptions of women as a reserve of labour, as secondary workers, and more recently as 'numerically flexible' workers. My research also clearly confirmed this in the case of Korean women in white-collar jobs, since they have been regarded as being drawn into employment when there was a boom in the economy and returned to the family when there was a recession (see Milkman 1976; Beechey 1977 & 1978; Bruegel 1979; Hatt 1997; Walby 1997; Brinton et al. 2001).

In this process Confucian ideology was also used by employers to maintain and justify discrimination against, and the marginalising of, women in the workforce. Even though the notion of women's role as a secondary earner is widely accepted in many societies, the origin and justification of this concept in Korea largely came from the strict gender divisions and spatial boundaries of Confucian tradition: women's place is at home, men should labour outdoors and serve as sole bread-winner. In the light of this, it is not surprising to learn that female employees were considered less committed, and less serious about their work, than men<sup>20</sup>.

This not only affects the attitude of employers and male colleagues towards women, but also that of the women themselves, who suffer a lack of confidence in their own professionalism and commitment. When faced with gender discrimination, many women succumb and accept the situation as it is, and make little conscious effort to change their treatment. Even if they choose opposition and resistance, it is usually poorly organised and insufficiently persistent to bring major improvement (see the



concluding chapter for further discussion of this issue). Although diluted by advances in female education, modernisation and other progressive influences, traditional Confucian culture still acts as a major barrier against the full participation of women and their desire for equal rights at work.

The Korean patriarchal system is legitimised by its Confucian tradition; its long history gives it an assumed validity. Traditional patriarchal elements, such as gender differentiation and inferior roles for women, that were reinforced and justified by Confucianism, have permeated industry and the labour market wherever women were involved, and serve to maintain gender differentiation and the sexual division of labour. Therefore, women's increased participation in the workforce and the opening of new opportunities for them did not necessarily of itself improve gender equality, as might naively have been expected by some. It also became clear that neither employers, male colleagues nor female employees were yet fully prepared to practice gender equality at work, and that this would not be possible without fundamental changes to historically-gendered attitudes and behaviour.

## 8.4 Conclusion

The first half of the chapter, using insights drawn from in-depth interviews, explored the actual experiences and perceptions of women (and some men) working in chaebol offices. Particular attention was paid to the different ways that women responded to gender-discriminatory treatment, and how it affected their attitudes and expectations for the future. It has been shown that the great majority of women working in chaebol offices have encountered gender-biased experiences (though the extent of these experiences, and the nature of their perceptions, vary widely) and most women interviewed expressed their disappointment at being exposed to these discriminatory practices. Their reactions to the experiences also varied widely, being influenced by, and particular to, the specific circumstances of the work and the personality and aspirations of each individual employee. Nevertheless, it was possible to group the different reactions of the individual women to their treatment at work into three broad

categories, which may be depicted as: 'meek submission', 'resignation' and 'resolute perseverance'.

The second part of the chapter focused on major changes in the employment of female white-collar staff in the recent years that are particularly relevant to this study. A booming economy and the resulting shortage of skilled labour led Korean companies, actively encouraged by the government, to hire qualified women in increasing numbers. However, the working environment and culture remained largely male-dominated and gender-biased, and this served to hinder the genuine integration of women into the development process. When the 1997 'IMF crisis' led to harsher economic circumstances, and companies were forced to introduce less-generous working conditions, curtailment of recruitment, and actual reductions in staff, it became clear that women suffered disproportionately. This suggested that the demand for female labour in the economic boom period (during the late 1980s and the early 1990s) was due more to the economic situation than any genuine progress towards gender equality. In turn, this implied that Korean women were, to a significant degree, considered and treated as a 'reserve army of labour' - a flexible and peripheral workforce.

Throughout, Korean cultural tradition seems to have played a pervasive role, both as a barrier to progress towards gender equality and also as justification for discrimination. Even though it is not always easy to draw a clear distinction between the influence of purely Confucian culture and that of patriarchal capitalist ideology (as is similarly pervasive in other parts of world), it is clear that both are implicated in the strength and persistence of gender discrimination in Korea.

In an overall evaluation of Korean working women and their experiences in economic development, the insights provided by the 'marginalisation' perspective would seem to provide the closest understanding and appreciation of their status and conditions in modern Korea. However, the outcome of my research also suggests that a redefinition of Tiano's 'marginalisation' thesis may be necessary to provide a satisfactory and constructive explanation for women in white-collar employment in developing countries, such as Korea. This discussion will be continued in the following chapter.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Optimism and expectations were particularly high in the first half of the 1990s, when both the government and chaebol were actively promoting the recruitment of female graduates as part of the movement towards globalisation (as reported by fu20\*, fu21, fu46).

<sup>2</sup> Interviewee code: the first letter (**f** or **m**) denotes sex; the second indicates educational attainment on joining: **h** (high-school leaver) or **u** (university graduate); the **number** identifies the interviewee (from 1 to 51); a final **m** denotes manager. See Appendix 1.1 for the codes and profile of chaebol interviewees.

\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for women at work than for men).

In instances where it is judged to be relevant, the identity of the employer chaebol is indicated after a hyphen with an upper-case postscript followed (where appropriate) by a lower-case letter for the particular affiliate. For example, 'fu10\*-S1a' indicates that the interviewee number 10 was female, university educated, married, and worked in affiliate 'a' of chaebol S1. However, reference to a particular affiliate is rare as in only a few cases is it deemed to be relevant.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2.1 for chaebol codes and business sectors.

<sup>4</sup> As seen in Chapter 5, Western companies in Korea are usually considered to be better employers than domestic firms because of their less-gender-discriminatory practices. This expectation was confirmed by those interviewees working in foreign-owned companies. It is also interesting to discover that students, particularly women, are showing more interest in Western education. For example, between 1994-2000, the number of Korean women taking the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), required for entrance into western MBA programs, increased by 227% (Pacific Bridge, Inc. 2001:1)

<sup>5</sup> According to one female informant (fh36-S2), of some 180 female high-school leavers in her company over 30 attend an evening college after work.

<sup>6</sup> During the two interviews with her, she appeared to be bright and have an easy-going, pleasant personality with an optimistic attitude. Yet, at the same time I could see that she looked extremely attractive and feminine; it came as no surprise when she told me of her success in obtaining contracts with male clients. Unlike some other female employees, also well appreciated by their employers for their determination and hard work, she gave little thought to her future career and was contemplating leaving after a few years to have children.

<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the effort and struggle by women to improve their condition does not always win rewards. In a similar situation in another chaebol, the outcome differed. In chaebol D2, which is smaller and more traditional than many chaebol, the work atmosphere and superiors' attitudes were known to be conservative and gender-biased, and female staff (even graduates) were not able to attend formal staff meetings. One female employee (fu51), one of very few female graduates in the company, attempted initially to attend the general meeting to learn about the work that men did. To avoid missing anything important, she asked other female staff (high-school leavers) to cover for her (e.g. by answering phones etc.). However she soon had to abandon the idea owing to constant disparagement by male colleagues and superiors, and found it impossible to fight alone against the accepted customs and practices of the office. In this case, the problem arose partly because the culture of the chaebol, which allowed women little power at the workplace, was not ready to adapt to gender equality.

<sup>8</sup> It was not clear when this female staff group (SPSH) started. However, it has 12 female committee members and a membership of over 230 and holds 4-5 regular meetings a year. When female staff have complaints the group communicates directly with top management (the general affairs department) to

secure assistance. The group also has other activities - such as charity work which promotes the company's image in public. According to the interviewee (the representative of the group, fh28-H1), this was mutually beneficial for both employees and the company - clearly so for the employees, and for the company it facilitated informal negotiation of desired changes. One typical example occurred when the company asked the general affairs department to negotiate with this women's group to persuade staff members voluntarily to give up their 100% bonus when the company faced financial difficulty. To achieve the same thing with male employees they had to use the junior board channel (fh28).

<sup>9</sup> Interviewee code: the first letter (**f** or **m**) denotes sex, the second occupation (**s** - student, **f** - foreign company employee, **g** - government employee, **w** - housewife, and **b** - own business; the **number** identifies interviewee (from 52 to 64). See Appendix 1.2 for the codes and profile for non-chaebol interviewees.

\* denotes that the female interviewee is married (marriage seems to be more significant for women at work than for men).

<sup>10</sup> The view that conditions in the labour market affect female employment and that "high female employment rates may come about simply as a result of shortage of males, due to wars, crises, or out-migration" (Stichter 1990:20) has been widely recognised. In the light of this, it was not surprising that in Korea the early 1990s saw an increase in the employment of female skilled white-collar labour when there was a shortage of skilled labour.

<sup>11</sup> See Kim TH. (2000: 132-142) for recent unemployment information in Korea.

<sup>12</sup> It became clear from some of the interviews conducted during this visit that, not only were gender relations at work regarded as a secondary issue, but that it seemed perhaps unwise even to raise the subject. For example, during one interview a male personnel manager (mu38m-L) in a chaebol suggested that I should modify the topic of my research to something 'more productive and beneficial' for the company's survival in difficult times - rather than persevere with a subject of minor importance, like gender equality.

<sup>13</sup> A similar tendency has been confirmed elsewhere. According to Choi MS. (1998), the workplace is becoming more competitive and individualistic since the workers are now concerned about who will next be fired.

<sup>14</sup> An unexpected incident, that I came across during one of the preliminary interviews conducted in August 1997, illustrated well the atmosphere of that time. In the middle of an interview with a female employee (held in a cafe in the same building as her company), I witnessed a middle-aged businessman, seemingly guilt-ridden, talking to a much younger woman who looked distressed and on the verge of bursting into tears. My interviewee (fu46-H2) identified them as a departmental manager in her company and a female member of his staff, who was almost certainly being asked to resign 'voluntarily'. According to the interviewee, there had been speculation that some staff would be laid off due to adverse trading conditions, and that the female employee in question was one of the mostly likely targets - because she was a woman who was not only married but with a child.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Haiti, Venezuela, and Jamaica during the late 1970s where, when their manufacturing sectors had difficulty facing international pressures, women suffered disproportionate job losses; this was also the case in Sri Lanka and Taiwan (Joekees 1987:96).

<sup>16</sup> This problem did not seem to relate to female high-school leavers as much as to female graduates since the nature of work for the former is very different from that of male graduates; their remaining in employment did not directly 'threaten' a position that could be held by a male staff. However, female high-school leavers were also adversely affected by the economic hardship since many companies wanted to lay off staff to reduce labour costs; they encouraged their graduate staff to undertake some of the tasks

that were previously done by female high-school leavers (such as typing and copying their documents etc.).

<sup>17</sup> This trend was also confirmed by a manager from the HR Department of a chaebol subsidiary (mu1m-S1). According to him, the responsibility for recruiting new staff (and only when necessary) was now progressively being delegated by the chaebol headquarters to each individual subsidiary. For example, before the economic crisis his company alone used to employ 30-50 new staff every year: many had been originally directly recruited by the chaebol and then allocated to them; the remainder they had hired themselves. The method of recruiting was changing too, he explained: previously it had been by 'net-fishing', whereby a large number of candidates were recruited and then allocated later to particular companies and departments. Currently, however, recruiting tended to be more by 'fish-hooking' whereby each individual was selected for a particular position wherever needed. In his company, currently about half of new staff were allocated from the chaebol headquarters and half came through 'fish hook' recruitment. In the future, he predicted, new staff would more likely be hired for their professional skills or their qualification for a particular position. Apparently his chaebol S had announced that there would be no official recruitment programme for the forthcoming autumn (1999). However, 'less officially', his subsidiary company was going to receive 10 new staff whom the chaebol had committed to employing three years previously when they joined the army service as officers (ROTC), and perhaps a further 20 staff who would be selected from top universities by the 'fish-hook' method (mu1m).

<sup>18</sup> In this respect, Han JS. (1996) has a valid point in arguing that, as the degree and importance of women's participation in the labour market and elsewhere in society has extended in recent years, these developments in turn seem to have had a positive impact on traditional Confucian notions of women's roles in Korean society.

<sup>19</sup> The statement of this male respondent (mu7-S1) hints at some changes and new ideas in the attitude and ways of thinking of the new generation. It was encouraging to see that some younger men (e.g. mu27-H1, mu41-P, mu42-P, mu45-H2) were in favour of their wives working and sharing responsibility for bringing income to the family. This seems to be partly due to their appreciation of the benefit of a double income, and partly to their changing attitude towards women's involvement in employment and society. However, it does not necessarily mean that in practice they were ready to share household chores with their working wives, even if they feel that they should. According to female interviewees (e.g. fu18\*-S1, fu37-S2), most of the household duties were still carried out by themselves, although some of their husbands helped occasionally.

<sup>20</sup> "In a way it was understandable because, while a man has no choice but to survive at work to support his family, it is assumed and socially acceptable for women to leave employment when they wish, because they can usually be supported by a man in the family," said a male interviewee (mu45-H2). Other men (e.g. mu1m-S1, mu3-S1) also agreed with this view when explaining that men usually had a different attitude towards work: they were more committed, loyal and used to taking initiatives, whereas women seemed to avoid responsibility and lack persistence. This reflected a basic difference in their attitude: that work was 'a matter of life or death' for men, whereas for women (particularly if married) it was less so. Even if women continued working after marriage, one male interviewee implied, most of them still seemed to regard themselves as secondary earners and therefore able to leave at any time they wished (mu3-S1).

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

#### **9.1 Summary**

The aim of this study has been to offer a gender perspective on Korean women working as white-collar employees in the offices of chaebol, while bearing in mind the broad objective of assessing the impact on them of their labour participation in the economic development of the country. By examining the employment policies and practices of chaebol towards their female employees, particularly in the late 1990s, it has attempted to gauge existing gender relations and, at the same time, explore the extent to which traditional Confucian culture has influenced the modern work culture of chaebol and gender relations within them.

By way of summary, the introductory Chapter 1 identified some pertinent, gender-related issues in the Korean workplace. It began by questioning the real impact, rather than the easily-assumed benefits, of economic development on women, and particularly their status and conditions in employment. The core questions related to whether or not Korean women have been positively integrated into national development; and, if this is not the case, whether it is the national culture with its strong Confucian tradition that has hindered full integration. Chapter 2 presented a broad, international overview of the labour participation of women, with particular focus on export-processing industries in developing countries and white-collar employment in the developed world. This showed that, in spite of women's increasingly significant role in capitalist development, their status and conditions in the various labour markets seem to share a common element of gender discrimination, which continues to be controversial. This survey concluded by suggesting that the application of Tiano's three theses (exploitation, marginalisation, integration) could provide a suitable framework for exploring and evaluating the participation of Korean women in white-collar employment in the

context of national development. Chapter 3 aimed to provide a background to the study of female white-collar employment in chaebol by giving a synopsis of Korean economic development during the second half of the 20th century, coupled with the corresponding changes in female employment during the same period. The succeeding Chapter 4 focused on traditional Korean culture that has served strongly to influence the status of women and gender relations in its society. It was argued that the traditional Confucian ideology still has a strong impact on people's lives and ways of thinking in Korea today: women are widely regarded as inferior to men, and their primary role is still considered to be that of wife and mother, preferably confined at home. This deep-rooted gender-role distinction in Korean society can be seen as providing an important ideological justification for sexual discrimination in the workplace.

While the first four chapters introduced the subject and considered the background and literature, the remaining chapters focused more narrowly on the research itself. Chapter 5 provided an introductory description of chaebol as the context for the case study, and described the characteristics of their work culture and administrative style – which have been clearly influenced by Confucian tradition. Chapter 6 was dedicated to a closer examination of the employment policies and practices within chaebol, paying particular attention to gendered facets. Even in chaebol, which are regarded as better employers than most other Korean companies, it was clear that fewer recruitment, training, educational and promotional opportunities were being offered to women, which in practice amounted to discrimination. Female employees were still a minority and occupied very few managerial positions. The focus of Chapter 7 was on actual gender relations in the office, carried out by examining real, if informal, attitudes and practices of both employers and employees. The chapter explored how the characteristics of traditional Korean culture created and perpetuated certain gendered discourses in the workplace. This was followed by a consideration of how female workers, and their roles in the office, were regarded by their male colleagues and superiors in those working environments. Finally, in Chapter 8 women's experiences at work, and their reactions to them, were examined: different women chose different outcomes, some through submission, some through perseverance, some through terminal resignation. The chapter also presented an overall evaluation of female white-

collar employment in Korea in recent years, including the period after the 'IMF crisis' when the decline in demand for labour made women an easy target for redundancy and less likely to be employed – implying that their role was as a 'reserve army of labour'. The main conclusion of this chapter, and the study, was that Tiano's 'marginalisation' thesis appeared most closely to characterise the situation of working women in Korea today.

## 9.2 Conclusions

The hypotheses<sup>1</sup> set out in Chapter 1 have been appraised throughout the study. In relation to the first of these hypotheses, my research has positively confirmed that, in spite of the vital contribution and increased labour participation of Korean women, national development has failed to integrate them fully into the process. The case study of female white-collar employees in chaebol offices presented clear evidence that gender discrimination existed at work; that, compared to their male colleagues, women were disadvantaged, given less-important work and considered to have poor prospects by their employers who consequently invested little in their career development. Most of the women appreciated the opportunity to work as white-collar employees in chaebol, and believed that their circumstances were superior to those of their ancestral sisters, and also those of many women currently working in other jobs. However, they often felt that their integration in the workplace was insufficient and unsatisfactory, experiencing varying degrees of gender discrimination and sexual segregation. Their presence and their roles at work were peripheral and marginalised, often prompting a loss of confidence and premature resignation, sometimes assisted by pressure from the employer. The likelihood of a qualified woman being recruited by chaebol, as well as her long-term survival, still remains slim.

This study leads to the conclusion that for female office employees in Korea a number of major issues need to be addressed: the widespread under-valuation of female labour; the minimal female representation both at recruitment and in senior levels of the organisation; the curtailed career opportunities due to marriage and childbearing; the gender differentiation and sexual divisions of labour, with consequential demands for



traditional 'feminine' roles; and the fact that women are considered as supplementary earners and a 'reserve army of labour', with their careers being taken less seriously.

A powerful cause of this has been shown by my study to be the strongly gender-biased, conservative work culture which serves to sustain the customary, gendered practices and male-centred attitudes, both of those in authority and (male and female) employees generally. This issue directly links to the second hypothesis, which concerns the culture of Korean society with its dominating Confucian ideology. The way in which female employees in the office were regarded was still significantly influenced by the traditional image of women and their role primarily as wife and mother. The deep-rooted Confucian tradition permeates everyday working life in modern workplaces, and affects people's ways of thinking, attitudes towards work and their assumed roles in society.

A revealing if symbolic illustration of this tendency is the usage of the expression 'flowers of the office' for female staff. Can the status and role of Korean women working in (chaebol) offices still fairly be depicted by this phrase? Although the expression may now be less common in contemporary offices, it is still used to epitomize the perceived status of female office employees - being modernised in the sense that they now work in offices, but at the same time reflecting a traditional, ideologically-gendered image. Typical female white-collar office workers have historically been high-school leavers assigned to less-skilled, routine work with little opportunity for promotion. They were employed for a relatively short period on low salaries and were suitable only for undertaking 'womanly' or 'assisting' tasks for men. They were often expected to show traditionally-endowed feminine attributes of beauty and charm, with their presence in the office serving somewhat as a decorative and 'harmonizing' function, hence 'flowers of the office'.

In contrast, women (particularly graduates) in chaebol offices today are no longer viewed merely as sitting pretty and serving men. The employment policies and practices of chaebol towards their female employees have, however slowly, showed signs of some improvement - for example, by allowing female graduate candidates to be included in their *kongchae* recruitment. More women are now achieving the educational qualifications that allow them to embark on careers with 'privileged' white-collar

employers (such as chaebol), that were previously open only to men. However, this study suggests that women are not significantly represented among white-collar staff and that they certainly are not treated as equal workers alongside their male colleagues. Their careers are still considered as subservient to men's, and are affected by discrimination and unequal allocation of opportunities and rewards. The roles they are expected to play are often gender-biased – not part of the core workforce but in a peripheral, supplementary capacity. Although the inclusion of female graduates in the general staff of chaebol has undoubtedly advanced the cause and status of white-collar office jobs for women, progress towards full equality at work still remains at an early, transitional stage. In some ways and to some extent, most women working in chaebol are still 'flowers of the office' either for their expected roles (chiefly for high-school leavers) or by their token presence (graduates) even if their status may superficially equate to that of their male colleagues.

While Korea has been experiencing rapid socio-economic change as part of the development process, women's roles in society have also been dramatically transformed by their increasingly-active involvement in the labour market. The country's economic progress, particularly over the last few decades, has undeniably enriched women's opportunities in society, allowing them better educational opportunities and the ability take advantage of extended career and life-style options. The development process has certainly improved the lot of Korean women compared with that of their oppressed female ancestors who were living in an entirely traditional culture: women who used to be victims of repressive patriarchal norms are now becoming autonomous contributors to society. Nevertheless, the strongly gendered culture and customs in society seem to persist, being unable yet to adapt and prepare for the needed changes to women's status and gender relations in the workplace.

Furthermore, until now Korea's development has been a 'rush-to' modernisation for the prime purpose of achieving economic growth. As a result important issues, such as 'humanising' social conditions and improving the quality of life for all citizens, have largely been ignored while the nation has pursued its primary goal of economic expansion. This has inevitably led to an uneven and unfair distribution of the benefits of development to different economic and social groups. Among the many issues arising

from the country's economic progress, that of gender relations is one of the most clearly recognised examples of a failure fully to benefit from development. In the process of national economic growth women have remained a less-privileged group, whose rights have been undermined in the interest of capitalist expansion.

If development is, as Brett argues (1991), a process that should involve all members of a society to the same extent according to their individual needs, then Korean development in the truly liberating sense for women has not kept pace with the economic growth of the society. Gender equality, or at least encouraging progress towards it, may easily have been assumed to be a 'natural' consequence of economic development. Evidence from this case study of female white-collar employees in chaebol, however, suggests that any such progress is minimal. It is clear that the development process of itself does not necessarily guarantee the delivery of gender equality, and recalling the arguments (referred to in Chapter 2) of academics writing about the developed world, such as Kanter (1993)<sup>2</sup> and Walby (1997)<sup>3</sup>, it must be acknowledged that gender equality has not yet been fully achieved even in more-developed, Western countries. In the light of this, it may well be assumed that it will be some time before Korean women gain full and equal rights in society and secure true gender equality at work, and that this cannot be realised without fundamental change and conscious effort by both employers and (male and female) employees as well as the government.

Let us now consider the pending issue of the applicability of Tiano's 'marginalisation' thesis to white-collar women in Korean development. As suggested in the previous chapter, applying the 'marginalisation' thesis directly to female white-collar workers in a country such as Korea can be questionable. When Tiano initially developed her three theses it was in the comparatively simpler context of working women in the developing world. Although the 'marginalisation' thesis defines the experiences of white-collar women more closely than the other two, it fails adequately to encompass the undoubted benefits from development obtained by the modern working woman, for whom development has brought real tangible improvements when compared with her ancestors. Her earnings have given her independence, and she is no longer confined at home. They perceive their relative liberalisation, independence and

‘integration’ into the public economic life of the nation as a major advance from their traditional roles. Both female high-school leavers and graduates working in chaebol are appreciative of their comparatively privileged position in the labour market. However, a degree of ‘exploitation’ is also evident with the maintenance of gender division of labour by capitalist employers and the government who, on occasion, regard women as ‘flexible’, secondary workers forming a ‘reserve army of labour’ when needed by the economy. Therefore, the other two theses should not be dismissed entirely, as each has elements relevant to illuminating the position of the modern working woman.

At the same time, this implies that the original marginalisation thesis alone cannot explain adequately the situation of Korean women working in chaebol, since it fails to encompass the dynamic interplay between (domestic and global) market forces and gender relations within the existing cultural and social environment. Women are ‘integrated’ in the economy, yet remain ‘marginalised’ at work, where men still retain their traditional dominance through formal and informal practices. Women are marginalised from informal power centres and the more-permanent, ‘core’ workforce in the white-collar labour market, rather than from the public sphere or the economy. In this sense it is illuminating to recognise the importance of the reproductive and domestic roles of women, which in (early) capitalist development made them peripheral to socially-valued productive roles by confining them to the household or the informal sector and now, as the more ‘integrated’ modern women discover, are marginalising them at work largely for the same reason.

In the development process incorporating both economic growth and social change, women’s labour participation can simultaneously be empowering yet marginalising and exploitative – clearly a complex, multi-layered interaction. We have seen that, by itself, the marginalisation thesis is too simplistic to interpret these circumstances. Therefore, in conclusion, I suggest that perhaps a modified form, which could be termed ‘complex marginalisation’, would better define and explain the situation of women working in chaebol offices. This ‘complex marginalisation’ may well be applicable to working women in other societies. Naturally, this preliminary suggestion would need further study and analysis before a modified thesis could properly be formulated and applied.

The real value of theoretical analysis and debate is that it can provide an instructional pointer for the future. In order to improve the position of Korean women in the labour market and integrate them effectively into society in general, there are some critical and pressing issues that deserve special attention. These are issues relating to i) the obstacles to a successful career and equal treatment at work provided unwittingly by women's reproductive role and household duties, and ii) the promulgation of an increased level of gender awareness and sensitivity among individuals and social organisations (e.g. employers and government) to further progress towards gender equality.

### 9.3 Career Obstacles Faced by Women

One of the most widely recognised, yet fundamental, difficulties faced by women stems from their reproductive role and their assumed responsibility for domestic duties<sup>4</sup>. For example, female interviewees working in chaebol offices recognised that, apart from custom and tradition that still adversely affects female employment in companies, there are other more pragmatic reasons why employers avoid hiring women. These include their perceived lack of professionalism, loyalty and commitment (as viewed by men, and often confirmed by women themselves), and also practical problems associated with their household duties, reproductive roles and childcare. The fact that women are almost exclusively responsible for these out-of-office duties hinders their competitiveness in the labour market, and can also adversely affect the attitudes and perceptions of their employers.

However they manage their experiences and outcomes, most women share the same basic obstacles to their career development: marriage, pregnancy and child rearing can cause female employees to leave, or to be directly or indirectly persuaded to leave, since these domestic responsibilities are often regarded as incompatible with working in a chaebol. Not only do women's household duties and reproductive roles act as limiting factors in gender discrimination by employers, but women themselves find these family responsibilities (especially childcare) a practical hindrance in pursuing their careers. Childcare and other housework are not only demanding in time, but also limit the

opportunities for working women to be promoted to positions of responsibility - which may also involve business travel and extended working hours.<sup>5</sup>

In a country where marriage and bearing children is less discretionary than it is in the West, and where there is a shorter history of women in paid work, the task of successfully combining work with household responsibilities and motherhood can often be problematic, sometimes even unrealistic. Most of the women interviewed mentioned that working conditions (such as long hours) and the required work commitment in chaebol made it difficult for them to combine employment with family responsibilities when married. Further, their employers' attitude towards maternity leave was not very cooperative or understanding: they might allow a two-month absence (the official maternity leave) but for a woman to return to work after longer, unpaid leave was virtually unheard of. The lack of a suitable childminding system in Korea was also frequently mentioned (for example by fu12\*, fu13, fu18\*, fh23). Since there are very few good childminding services available for working mothers, many female interviewees (e.g. fu10\*, fu12\*, fu13, fu14, fu37, fu43\*, fu44\*, fh49) considered that it was quite normal to arrange for their mothers or mothers-in-law to look after children when they need childcare<sup>6</sup> – although in some cases this would not be possible as neither the mother nor mother-in-law lived nearby (fu13). However, for other employees wishing to remain at work, having a baby without access to family support for childcare presented serious complications. One married graduate interviewee (fu18\*) from chaebol S1, who has so far been successful in her job, expressed her fears as follows:

“I am currently pregnant, but once I have a baby it will be difficult to come to work at seven in the morning as I do now. If the problem of childminding can be resolved, I would like to continue working; but if not I may have to leave because it will be almost impossible to manage both work and child-rearing without considerable help from my family” (fu18\*-S1).

Since chaebol do not allow unpaid leave (except for promising executives, usually men, who wish to study abroad for an MBA) and do not offer long-term maternity leave (as pointed out by fu18\*-S1, fu37-S2, fu43\*-P), some women reluctantly had to give up work when faced with this childcare dilemma.

It is universally acknowledged that marriage and their reproductive role represent

probably the most challenging barriers to women entering and participating in the labour force on an equal footing with men (Lim 1983; Jones and Causer 1995; Westwood et al. 1997). The existing prejudice against women working after marriage or childbirth has erected a barrier against Korean women, as it has against other women elsewhere. The presumed, and sometimes overt, relegation of women to household duties and their reproductive role has been one of the major, if not the most fundamental, deterrents hindering their pursuit of a successful career. Women's double burden of work and family still remains an unresolved dilemma for many Korean women. Therefore, as Bacchi argues (1990:99), simply demanding an end to gender roles does not seem to have had much effect: until we radically rethink the relationship between home and paid work for women and for men, women will remain tormented by 'either/or' choices and dual workloads. In practical terms, support by government and employers for improved and expanded childcare and child minding arrangements are urgent and would be beneficial (see Yang SJ 1997). Further, it would be helpful if childcare is considered more a public issue rather than exclusively a private one<sup>7</sup>; this could lead to significant changes in people's thinking and attitudes towards sharing responsibility for household duties between men and women that are necessary for a long-term improvement in gender relations.

#### 9.4 Promoting Gender Awareness and Sensitivity

Another vital concern is to increase the level of gender awareness; not only is it important to discuss and promulgate these gender issues on both a social and a political level but women themselves (as well as men) should also be more aware of their rights so that they resist discrimination and fight to achieve gender equality. As shown in the study, this has not always been the case for women themselves. Not all women are interested in, or even conscious of, gender issues, which would suggest an element of complicity. One single, female high-school leaver working in chaebol S1 drew attention to this situation:

"I have fought for the last 10 years to improve our conditions, but there are many women who are not even aware of these issues and do nothing about them – that is the most serious problem. In a way it is easier to accept the situation as

it is, without fighting or causing trouble - but women should fight when the current system is not fair and right” (fh11-S1).

Even if the present position of women in the Korean economy can be considered to be largely marginal, there is one aspect that is critically important and could make a real difference to their circumstances: this is their awareness of gender issues and their preparedness to defend their rights. At the time of the research such actions were not common, and when they did occur they were typically local, individual, intermittent, and rarely rewarded. It is suggested, however, that women who play a passive role by merely conforming to existing conditions contribute to their own exploitation or marginalisation by employers and colleagues, while those who question discrimination and resist, particularly collectively, have a better chance of improving their circumstances and securing a degree of integration. Therefore, both at an individual and collective level, women have to become gender-aware and make deliberate, conscious efforts to improve their status and conditions at work; struggle and resistance, rather than complicity, will make a difference. Further, success calls for more professionalism and a stronger commitment to work by women, the attainment of better qualifications through job training, as well as determined and structured efforts to fight and overcome existing sexual discrimination through collective bargaining.

Achieving gender equality at work will take time and will not be realised without determined effort and fundamental changes in attitude by women themselves, by men, by employers and by government, all of whom have important roles to play in achieving progress. The importance of the role of government in encouraging gender equality in Korean society, and particularly in economic enterprises and the labour market, has been recognised earlier in this study. As suggested by one married female PhD candidate currently working for a governmental organisation (fg61), the attitude of social organisations towards women and their right to equal treatment can fluctuate widely according to the politics of the day and government policies towards women. A male interviewee from chaebol H2 expressed his views strongly on this matter:

“Not only the government but also Korean companies have exploited female labour in recent decades: when the national economy was short of labour (such as production workers in the 1960s and 1970s) it encouraged women actively to participate in paid work, but when there is no longer a shortage they cut down



on female labour. This is not a fair treatment of women: if they truly considered women's status and conditions, they would ensure a consistency in policy which would be implemented accordingly" (mu45-H2).

On the other hand, employers must attempt to ensure gender equality at work by establishing fair policies, provide equal opportunities for training, job rotation and promotion, work to eliminate pay differentials between men and women, and promote security of employment for women. In the absence of a legislative framework that guarantees women's rights to equal opportunities and terms of employment, gender discrimination at work can become widespread. Therefore, effective enforcement of the law and regulations promoting gender equality is also crucial.<sup>8</sup>

Further, the importance of collective efforts to organise women's labour to promote gender equality should be recognised. With a strong central government, the accompanying weakness of Korean labour organisations in general (Whitely 1999; see also Rowley and Bae 2003 for trade union developments) and a tendency to regard gender concerns as secondary (if not irrelevant or even obstructive) to the more crucial issues of national identity and nation-building (Eckert, 2000), it is not surprising that the women's collective movement and organised labour unions have historically been fragmented and weak.<sup>9</sup> As already recognised in Chapter 8, collective protests and action by women were beginning to appear, but were rarely well organised, especially among white-collar workers. Companies make changes in reaction not only to market pressures but also political pressures (Carruthers and Babb, 2000); Korean white-collar women need to campaign actively, within their organisations and also nationally, to raise the profile of gender issues. Change will not come automatically and the voices of the female minority at work are weak and can easily be ignored without collective political pressure.

This study has shown (particularly in Chapter 8) that differences in culture between workplaces often were a reflection of how traditional or modernised the company was. Achieving gender equality at work will not be possible in the absence of a gender-sensitive culture in society, since the attitudes toward women and gender relations in employment to a great extent reflect those of society. Without dismantling the strong sexual-discriminative cultural tradition still prevalent in Korean society, women and

their work will not be treated justly, however capable and committed they may be. In this respect, new cultural changes flowing from further globalisation and exposure to international influences will also assist the nation progressively to dilute the legacy of its traditional, gender oppressive ideology and practices (see Pettman 2003).

In summary, in order to achieve lasting improvements in gender equality in Korea there will need to be progress on a number of related issues: general societal culture and ideology, ideas and concepts relating to women's domestic roles and their assumed sole responsibility of childcare, practical assistance with childcare and childminding, more enlightened attitudes and actions by both government and employers towards sexual discrimination, improved gender-awareness among women, and a determination by them to protect their rights and commit to a more professional approach towards work.

## 9.5 Outlook

Since completion of the field research at the end of 1999, Korea has experienced significant (short-term and long-term) institutional and cultural change. The economy, benefiting from the painful restructuring and reform after the 1997 crisis, has been recovering quickly (Kang SD. 2000; Park NH. 2002; Bae and Rowley 2004). It now faces new challenges in the global economy that offer attractive opportunities yet also bear risks and threats to the status quo (Kim DO. et al. 2000).

For the labour market, the changes and restructuring induced by the financial crisis have intensified the trend towards market flexibility and have deeply affected employment patterns (Choi KS. 1997; Kang SD. 2000; Kim WB. 2003; Bae JS. and Rowley 2004). Problems associated with redundancy, unemployment (and under-employment)<sup>10</sup> and job insecurity have become important, public social issues (Kang SD. 2000; Kim WB. 2003; Kim A. E. 2004). Chaebol, while fighting to retain their management style and ownership structure, have moved strongly to enhance labour market flexibility (Shin KY. 2000). New corporate practices (such as diminishing lifetime employment, unconstrained redundancy etc.) have directly affected employees, leading to job insecurity and a harsher, more competitive working environment (as was described in previous chapters; see also A.E. 2004).

In this new environment discrimination against women has intensified; they currently face more prejudice and gendered treatment in recruitment and promotion, and are openly targeted for early redundancy<sup>11</sup> (Choi MS. 1998; Kang SD. 2000; Kim HM. 2001; Kim A. E. 2004). Many policies devised previously to further gender equality have been suspended in the wake of the financial crisis,<sup>12</sup> and the disparity between women's legal rights and their actual experiences in the labour market has widened (Kim HM. 2001; Kim A. E. 2004).

In view of Korea's fast-changing socio-economic environment this study, based primarily on fieldwork in the later 1990s, must inevitably be a transitional review of gender issues facing women working in chaebol offices. It would be important to remain alert to changes and further investigate exactly how the conditions and developments in employment policies and practices are affecting the status and position of women in the new order.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> These were: first, that national development which has generated an increased participation in paid work by Korean women has failed to integrate them fully into the process; second, that it is the use of the culture, with its strong Confucian tradition, by social actors and institutions, which has been the major obstacle to full integration of Korean women into the development process – because it has 'legitimised' and sustained gender inequality and sexual discrimination at work and in society.

<sup>2</sup> Kanter (1993) showed that in an American firm, while management was being defined as a 'masculine' pursuit, more of the routine office chores were being 'feminised', and that sex polarisation and sex segregation of occupations was a fact of the American work world.

<sup>3</sup> Walby pointed out that recent waves of industrial restructuring in the U.K. embody newer forms of patriarchal conditions of employment - which are less exclusionary and allow women greater access to work, and which have led to a major increase in the proportion of top jobs occupied by women - but significant sex segregation in employment still remains.

<sup>4</sup> Numerous studies have identified both motherhood (White et al. 1992; Cockburn 1991) and the

potential for motherhood (Collinson et al. 1990) as impacting detrimentally on women's opportunities for employment and career advancement. Traditionally, the solutions to managing motherhood have rested with the individual – commonly resulting in women leaving employment altogether for a lesser or greater period (Jones and Causer 1995:51).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Korean companies usually do not expect women to be as mobile as their male colleagues because of their family roles. This immobility is often used as an excuse for not assigning women to important tasks, and for not promoting them (according to respondents fh23-H1<sup>5</sup>, fu32-D1, fh33-D1, fu44\*-P, fh49-H2). These conditions influence women by reducing their career expectations and discouraging ambition, and as a result many tend to leave work after a few years.

<sup>6</sup> One female graduate, who was planning to have a child, said that if she could continue working she and her husband would have to move to be nearer to her mother who had agreed to look after the baby (fu12\*-S1), showing the negative repercussion from a lack of a proper childcare system.

<sup>7</sup> See Folbre (1994) for an extended discussion on family labour and childcare, and the division of responsibility between the private and public sectors, and between men and women.

<sup>8</sup> The conditions for women and their status at work have greatly improved since the Law for Gender Equality in Employment was first introduced in 1987, with a third revision in 1999; however, it is also recognised that strict enforcement of the law and vigilance over work practices are necessary for further progress towards gender equality in employment (Kim and Park 1992; Kim E. 1999).

<sup>9</sup> In February 1987, 21 voluntary organisations with a feminist orientation formed the Korean Women's Associations United; since then in the context of socio-political democratisation new autonomous women's associations have proliferated (Moon S. 2003). While the earlier (particularly in the 1970s) women's movement focussed primarily on the plight of female factory workers, as working conditions and living standards improved it has progressively broadened its focus to encompass a far wider range of issues. The women's movement is now challenging problems of gender politics, sexuality and patriarchy that previously have been ignored (Hampson 2000; see also Moon S. 2002).

<sup>10</sup> The official unemployment rate was 3.3% in May 2004 (Ministry of Labour 2005); temporary workers comprised 52.1% in 2000, and 49.3% in December 2003, of all workers (Ministry of Labour 2004:247).

<sup>11</sup> The unemployment rate in 2003 for female graduates was 3.4%, compared with 2.7% for male graduates (Ministry of Gender Equality 2004:432).

<sup>12</sup> For example, the government put heavy pressure on large firms to set up a quota system to appoint more women to managerial positions, but retreated in the wake of the financial crisis. The government applied similar pressure on firms to hire more women, but this policy was also suspended. For many years, large firms have limited the hiring of women to about 20% of new recruits, despite the fact that as many women as men apply and that their qualifications match those of their male counterparts. Employment prospects for women, therefore, remain unfavourable; more and more working women are gaining employment in the informal and subcontracting sector (Kim A. E. 2004:232-233).

## APPENDIX ONE

## Codes and Profile of Interviewees and other Informants

## 1.1 Chaebol Interviewee Codes

*Inter- viewee Code	Sex	Educ.	Age	Marital Status	Tenure (years)	**Position/ Department	Industry (Co. code)	Chae- bol (code)
<b>mu1m</b>	M	Univ.	43	Married	17	Senior Manager / Personnel	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>mu2</b>	M	Univ.	31	Married	5	Daeri / Personnel	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>mu3</b>	M	Univ.	30	Married	5	Daeri / Planning	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>mu4</b>	M	Univ.	30	Married	5 ½	Daeri / Sales	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>mu5</b>	M	Univ.	30	Single	5	Daeri / Sales	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>mh6</b>	M	High- Sch.	30	Married	12	Ju-im / General admin.	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>mu7</b>	M	Univ.	28	Married	3 ¼	Sawon / Material	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>mh8</b>	M	High- Sch.	27	Single	9 ½	Ju-im / Information	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>fh9</b>	F	High- Sch.	31	Single	13	Sawon / Secretary	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>fu10</b>	F	Univ. MA	27	Married/ pregnant	3 ½	Daeri / Export	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>fh11</b>	F	High- Sch.	27	Single	9 ½	Ju-im / Administration	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>fu12</b>	F	Univ.	26	Married	2 ½	Sawon / Export	Textiles (S1a)	S1

Inter- viewee Code	Sex	Educ.	Age	Status	Tenure (years)	Position/ Department	Industry (Co. code)	Chae- bol
<b>fu13</b>	F	Univ.	25	Single	3 ½	Ju-im / PR	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>fu14</b>	F	Univ.	24	Single	2	Sawon / Planning	Textiles (S1a)	S1
<b>mu15m</b>	M	Univ.	38	Married	9	Manager / Insurance	Insurance (S1b)	S1
<b>mu16</b>	M	Univ.	30	Married	3 ½	Ju-im / Risk management	Insurance (S1b)	S1
<b>mu17</b>	M	Univ.	29	Single	2 ½	Sawon / Long-term planning affairs	Insurance (S1b)	S1
<b>fu18</b>	F	Univ.	28	Married/ pregnant	5 ½	Daeri / Sales planning	Insurance (S1b)	S1
<b>fu19</b>	F	Univ.	26	Married	4 ½	Ju-im / Sales (retail insurance)	Insurance (S1b)	S1
<b>fu20</b>	F	Univ.	30	Married	2 ½	Ju-im / Interior Completion	Construc- tion (S1c)	S1
<b>fu21</b>	F	Univ.	29	Single	1 ¼	Ju-im / Building Administration	Construc- tion (S1c)	S1
<b>mu22</b>	M	Univ.	30	Married	3 ¼	Sawon / Overseas Sales	Int'l Trading (H1a)	H1
<b>fh23</b>	F	High- Sch.	27	Single	8 ½	Sawon / Administration	Int'l Trading (H1a)	H1
<b>fh24</b>	F	High- Sch.	26	Single	7	Sawon / Administration	Int'l Trading (H1a)	H1
<b>mu25m</b>	M	Univ.	35	Married	11	Manager / Shipping Administration	Merchant Shipping (H1a)	H1

Inter- viewee Code	Sex	Educ.	Age	Status	Tenure (years)	Position/ Department	Industry (Co. code)	Chae- bol
<b>mu26</b>	M	Univ.	28	Single	1 ½	Sawon / Shipping Services	Merchant Shipping (H1a)	H1
<b>mu27</b>	M	Univ.	27	Single	4	Sawon / Shipping Services	Merchant Shipping (H1a)	H1
<b>fh28</b>	F	High- Sch.	24	Single	5 ½	Sawon / Sales Administration	Merchant Shipping (H1a)	H1
<b>fh29</b>	F	High- Sch.	20	Single	1 ½	Sawon / Shipping Administration	Merchant Shipping (H1a)	H1
<b>mu30m</b>	M	Univ.	40	Married	14	Manager / Production	Head Office (D1a)	D1
<b>mu31</b>	M	Univ.	30	Single	3	Daeri / Production	Head Office (D1a)	D1
<b>fu32</b>	F	Univ.	26	Single	2 ½	Sawon / Brokerage	Head Office (D1a)	D1
<b>fh33</b>	F	High- Sch.	24	Single	7	Sawon / Document preparation	Head Office (D1a)	D1
<b>mu34m</b>	M	Univ.	38	Married	11	Manager / Planning & Control	Head Office (S2a)	S2
<b>mu35</b>	M	Univ.	31	Married	5	Daeri / Planning & Control	Head Office (S2a)	S2
<b>fh36</b>	F	High- Sch.	26	Single	7	Sawon / Personnel Administration	Head Office (S2a)	S2
<b>fu37</b>	F	Univ.	25	Single	2 ½	Sawon / Planning & Control	Head Office (S2a)	S2
<b>mu38</b>	M	Univ.	40	Married	14	Senior Manager / marketing	Retail (La)	L

Inter- viewee Code	Sex	Educ.	Age	Status	Tenure (years)	Position/ Department	Industry (Co. code)	Chae- bol
<b>fu39</b>	F	Univ.	29	Single	5	Sawon / Marketing	Retail (La)	L
<b>fu40</b>	F	Univ.	29	Single	5	Sawon / Marketing	Retail (La)	L
<b>mu41</b>	M	Univ.	35	Married	10	Daeri / Personnel	Iron& Steel (Pa)	P
<b>mu42</b>	M	Univ.	33	Married	9	Daeri / Management& Planning	Iron& Steel (Pa)	P
<b>fu43</b>	F	Univ.	33	Married with child	9	Daeri / Foreign Procurement	Iron& Steel (Pa)	P
<b>fu44</b>	F	Univ.	30	Married	7	Daeri / Investor Relations	Iron& Steel (Pa)	P
<b>mu45</b>	M	Univ.	31	Married	4 (left)	Daeri / PR	Heavy Manufact. (H2a)	H2
<b>fu46</b>	F	Univ.	28	Single	3 ½ (left)	Daeri / PR – data research	Heavy Manufact. (H2a)	H2
<b>fu47</b>	F	Univ.	28	Single	1 (left)	Sawon / Overseas Licences	Heavy Manufact. (H2a)	H2
<b>fu48</b>	F	Univ.	27	Single	2 ¾	Sawon / Editing Group paper	Heavy Manufact. (H2a)	H2
<b>fh49</b>	F	High- Sch.	26	Single	8	Sawon / Clerical (in Group PR)	Heavy Manufact. (H2a)	H2
<b>fu50</b>	F	Univ.	30	Single	3 (left)	Sawon / PR	Heavy Manufact. (H2a)	H2
<b>fu51</b>	F	Univ.	28	Single	3 ½ (left)	Sawon / Staff Training	Head Office (D2a)	D2

Notes:

\* The first letter (**f** or **m**) denotes sex; the second indicates educational attainment on joining: **h** (high-school leaver) or **u** (university graduate); the **number** identifies the interviewee; a final **m** denotes manager.

\*\* Non-managerial staff are usually graded (from junior to senior): *sawon*, *ju-im*, *daeri* ('supervisor').



## 1.2 Other (non chaebol) Interviewee Codes

*Inter- viewee	Sex	Educ.	Age	Marital Status	Tenure	Position/ Department	Organisation
<b>fs52</b>	F	Univ. Student	22	Single	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Political & Int'l Relations	University in Seoul
<b>fs53</b>	F	Univ. Student	22	Single	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Foreign Language	University in Seoul
<b>fs54</b>	F	Univ. Student	22	Single	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Economics	University in Seoul
<b>ff55</b>	F	Master (USA)	27	Single	2 months	General staff Stock trading	Branch of British Co.
<b>ff56</b>	F	Univ.	28	Single	5 years	General staff	Branch of Japanese Co.
<b>ff57</b>	F	Univ.	32	Married with child	1 year	Secretary	Branch of American Co.
<b>ff58</b>	F	Univ.	34	Married with child	11 years	Senior representative	Branch of American Co.
<b>ff59</b>	F	Univ.	37	Married with child	Left after 5 years	General staff	Branch of American Co.
<b>fg60</b>	F	Univ.	36	Married with child	13 years	Civil servant	Government
<b>fg61</b>	F	PhD Current	31	Married	2 years	Civil servant	Government
<b>fg62</b>	F	High- school	47	Married with children	29 years	Manager Civil servant	Government
<b>fw63</b>	F	Master	36	Married with child	N/A	Housewife	N/A
<b>mb64</b>	M	Univ.	63	Married with children	10 years	President	Own consulting business – chaebol-related

Note:

\*The first letter denotes sex, the second occupation (s - student, f - foreign company employee, g - government employee, w - housewife, and b - own business; the number identifies interviewee.

### 1.3 Codes for Presenters at Chaebol Recruitment Seminars

*Interviewee Code	Sex	Position/ Department	Industry	Chaebol
<b>cs65</b>	M	Manager/ Planning	Information Technology	H1
<b>cs66</b>	M	Manager/ Human Resources, Recruitment	Information Technology	H1
<b>cs67</b>	M	Senior Manager/ Human Resources	Headquarters	H1
<b>cs68</b>	F	Employee	Information Technology	H1
<b>cs69</b>	M	Senior Manager/ Human Resources Management	Headquarters	D1
<b>cs70</b>	F	Employee/ Public Relations	Headquarters	D1
<b>cs71</b>	M	Manager/ Personnel Research	Electronics	L
<b>cs72</b>	F	Employee/ Personnel Research	Electronics	L
<b>cs73</b>	M	Manager/ Human Resources	Headquarters	S3
<b>cs74</b>	F	Employee/ Information & Communication	Headquarters	S3
<b>cs75</b>	F	Job counsellor	Women's University	N/A

Note:

\* **cs** denotes chaebol seminar, the **number** identifies the presenter.

GRAND TOTAL of subjects interviewed: 64

In addition, attended recruitment seminars given by 11 presenters.

## APPENDIX TWO

### Analysis of Employers and Interviewees

#### 2.1 : Interviewees by Chaebol Codes and Business Sectors

Chaebol	Industry	Male	Female
<b>S1</b>	Textiles (S1a)	8	6
	Fire & Marine Insurance (S1b)	3	2
	Construction (S1c)	0	2
<b>H1</b>	International Trading (H1a)	1	2
	Merchant Shipping (H1b)	3	2
<b>D1</b>	Head Office (D)	2	2
<b>L</b>	Retail/Direct Sales (L)	1	2
<b>S2</b>	Head Office (S2)	2	2
<b>H2</b>	Heavy Manufacturing (H2)	1	5
<b>P</b>	Iron & Steel (P)	2	2
<b>D2</b>	Head Office (D2)	0	1
Total		23 (45%)	28 (55%)

Other (non-chaebol) Interviewees	Male	Female
Employees of Foreign Companies	0	5
Government Employees	0	3
Candidates for Employment (Students)	0	3
Housewife	0	1
Consultant to Chaebol	1	0
Total	1	12

## 2.2 Chaebol Employees - Age and Marital Status

Age	Male	Of which Unmarried	Female	Of which Unmarried
40 or over	3 (13.0%)	0	0 -	0
34 – 39	4 (17.4%)	0	0 -	0
31 – 33	4 (17.4%)	0	2 (7.1%)	1
27 – 30	12 (52.2%)	6	14 (50.0%)	10
24 – 26	0 -	0	11 (39.3%)	9
21 - 23	0 -	0	0 -	0
20 or under	0 -	0	1 (3.6%)	1
Total	23 (100%)	6 (26%)	28 (100%)	21 (75%)

Note: no interviewees were divorced or separated.

## 2.3 Chaebol Employees – Educational Level (at recruitment)

Education Level	Male	Female
Post Graduates	0 -	1 (3.6%)
University Graduates (4 years)	21 (91.3%)	18 (64.3%)
College Graduates (2 years)	0 -	0 -
High-School Leavers	2 (8.7%)	9 (32.1%)
Total	23 (100%)	28 (100%)

## 2.4 Chaebol Employees - Current Seniority Grade

Position Held	Male	Female
Section Manager or Higher	6 (26.1%)	0 -
Supervisor ( <i>Daeri</i> )	9 (39.1%)	5 (17.9%)
Junior Employees ( <i>Juim &amp; Sawon</i> )	8 (34.8%)	23 (82.1%)
Total	23 (100%)	28 (100%)

## 2.5 Chaebol Employees – How they were recruited

Recruitment channel		Male		Female	
		University Graduates	High-School Leavers	University Graduates	High-School Leavers
Open	Advertisements (public notice & newspapers)	7 (33.3%)	0	16 (84.2%)	0
	General university/school/faculty contacts: alumni, faculty recommendations, company promotions and distribution of application forms etc.	10 (47.6%)	2 (100%)	3 (15.8%)	6 (66.7%)
Pre-selection through faculty, company-sponsored scholarship, or internship		3 (14.3%)	0	0	0
Recommendation by already-employed alumni		1 (4.8%)	0	0	0
Personal contacts (unconnected to university/school)		0	0	0	3 (33.3%)
Total		21 (100%)	2 (100%)	19 (100%)	9 (100%)
		23		28	

## APENDIX THREE

### **Interview Guide for Chaebol Employees** (Used for field research during the spring/summer 1999)

The questions for the interview guide were broadly grouped into four sections according to specific content:

**Section A) Personal Background:**  
factual questions relating to the identity and background of the individual respondent, e.g. family environment, education and training, career development etc.

**Section B) Current Employment:**  
questions bearing on the respondent's personal experiences in the current employment.

**Section C) Beliefs and Culture:**  
questions exploring the respondent's beliefs and behaviour in connection with cultural influences at work.

**Section D) Gender:**  
questions associated with attitudes, behaviour and office discourse bearing on issues of gender relations and equal opportunity.

#### **Section A) Personal Background**

1. Name
2. Sex
3. Age (year of birth)
4. Marital status, children
5. If married, does spouse work?
6. Educational attainment: major subject; other qualifications.
7. Previous relevant working experience.

#### **Section B) Current Employment**

8. Employer; department and position held; work description.

9. Duration of present employment.
10. How were you recruited?; what was your experience of the recruitment process?
11. Why did you choose your present employer? Has the employer met your previous expectations? Are you satisfied?
12. Which aspects of current employment satisfy you most?
13. Which aspects are you not satisfied with? How can your working conditions be improved?
14. How long do you intend to remain with your present employer? Do you have any future plans?
15. How would you regard your current work performance?
16. Are there any major obstacles to improving your work performance?  
How could it be improved?
17. Are you happy working alongside your colleagues? What is your relationship with them?

### **Section C) Beliefs and Culture**

18. Which quality do you consider most relevant for success at work?
19. Are you satisfied with the company's evaluation of the work performance of staff?
20. Are there any aspects of the work culture with which you are not happy?  
Which aspects of the work culture do you consider are hindering the efficiency of the workplace?
21. To what extent does the traditional (Confucian) culture influence your work place? Do you believe that the influence of traditional culture is an important element in the modern workplace?
22. What are the positive and negative aspects of the legacy of traditional Korean culture (e.g. being very 'Korean')?
23. After work, how do you usually spend your time? Do you socialise much with your colleagues?
24. Are there domestic responsibilities which affect your work? If so, how much time do you spend on them?
25. What is your major concern at the moment?

**Section D) Gender**

26. Have you ever felt that you are treated differently or unfairly mainly because of your sex? If so, in what way?
27. Do you believe that the company's employment policies and practices are gender neutral (i.e. fair to both sexes)? Are you happy with the attitude and actions of your employer regarding gender equality?
28. Do you believe that there are differences between men and women in their work performance? If so, what are they?
29. During your present employment, have you noticed any changes in gender relationships?
30. How do you consider that gender relationships at work can be improved?
31. What do you consider are the main obstacles to gender equality at work?  
  
How would you compare the status of Korean women with that perceived of women in other countries? If different, why do you think it to be so?
32. Do you think the employer is making efforts to improve gender equality? If so, how? Do you approve?
33. Any other comments?



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