Why can women not access of Work-Life Balance policy: Focusing on a Male-Centered Organization and Gender Discrimination

Hwayeon Kim[1] & Sung Min Park, Ph.D. [2]

In recent years, despite the increasing number of highly qualified women participating in the workforce, there remain many obstacles to women's full participation. According to an article published by the *Economist* in 2017, among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, South Korea's "glass-ceiling index" was the lowest for five consecutive years, and it has been shown that women are being discriminated against in all areas, including with regard to employment, wages, and promotions. This is because women in South Korean society have traditionally maintained the home and provided care. Though times have changed, an orientation toward men and an unequal gender perspective still dominate organizational culture. In organizations that comprise a majority of male workers, men form a collective organizational culture by emphasizing differences from women (Collinson & Hearn, 1994). In South Korea in particular, Confucian ideology, which long formed the cultural basis of society, clearly distinguishes between gender roles. Culturally, men are absolved of the responsibility for housework; however, working women are tasked with both work and family responsibilities and often face work-family conflicts. Hence, numerous highly capable women cut their careers short and return to being housewives. In addition, within organizations, female employees have been perceived as unable to concentrate solely on work because of family duties. This unequal perception has yielded substantial

[1] Ph.D. student, Graduate School of Governance, Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul, Korea
[2] Associate Professor, Graduate School of Governance, Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul, Korea

discrimination against women in terms of employment, promotions, and wages.

The South Korean government has recognized this problem and has recently implemented a policy that actively supports work-life balance (WLB): for example, the policy supports flexible work arrangements, the provision of childcare facilities and childcare support, etc. The policy is intended to enable female employees to freely expand their capabilities within organizations. However, many organizations still seem to be failing to take advantage of these initiatives. Many public and private organizations have developed various WLB policies, but utilization rates have been low due to concerns that taking advantage of such initiatives could create negative visibility or could have negative future career repercussions.

Against this background, the purpose of this study is to examine the effects of a male-centered organizational culture on the accessibility of WLB policies and the mediating effect of the recognition of gender discrimination. This study pursues the following research questions: Do female managers in a male-centered organizational culture feel greater gender discrimination? If so, can the recognition that gender discrimination is reinforced by a male-centered organizational culture lead to an awareness of the difficulty of utilizing organizational WLB policies? Is it organizational culture alone that makes it difficult to utilize WLB policies? This study sought to answer these questions. The remainder of this study is composed as follows: the second section discusses South Korea's male-centered organizational culture and reviews previous studies and related theories pertaining to gender discrimination and WLB policies. The third section discusses the data used in the research and the measurement items. The fourth section examines the effects of organizational priority on accessibility of WLB policies and the mediating effects of the recognition of gender discrimination. Finally, the fifth section presents theoretical and practical suggestions for reforming organizational culture in South Korea, enhancing the motivation of workers, facilitating gender equality in the organization, and realizing the adoption and accessibility of WLB policies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational culture is a concept that comprises things such as norms, values, behavioral patterns, and traditions; an organizational culture is collectively shared or generally accepted by organizational members (Schein, 1985; Heskett & Kotter, 1992). Organizational culture crucially defines the behavior and mindset of such members (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Ivancevich et al., 1990).

In Korean society, collectivism and hierarchy have long held sway due to the influence of Confucian values; they have influenced not only society but also the forming of organizational culture (Oh et al., 2017). Confucian values have given rise to South Korea's unique male-centered organizational culture. This culture may be conceptualized the product of traditional Confucianism—in particular, its emphasis on patriarchy, collectivism, hierarchy, and male privilege. South Korean organizational culture entails not only unconditional sacrifice and devotion to the organization and the prioritization of work life over personal life but also compulsory participation in meetings outside of the workplace. It is also a hierarchical, irrational, and relational organizational culture in which the amount of time put into work is closely related to evaluation. This organizational culture has been pointed out as being a cause of various social problems in Korean society.

This culture is very disadvantageous to women, who are tasked with striking a balance between work and family. Men, who are less burdened by housework and childcare, can remain in the workplace late compared to women; in so doing, they contribute to the creation of an organizational culture in which work is prioritized above all else. Organizational members who can stay late at the workplace to immediately accept and carry out orders from superiors are considered ideal (Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010). By contrast, women who are desperately trying to balance work and family cannot afford to work long hours and are

eventually excluded and discriminated against (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Rutherford, 2001). In such an organizational context, women who are dealing with work-family conflicts are often advised that they cannot pass the glass ceiling without putting their whole lives into work. These women are even advised that using flexible working hours or time off will put them at a disadvantage in terms of getting promoted to managerial positions (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). In addition, organizations have been reported to rule out employees who have familial obligations from promotions because they consider employees who have such obligations to be less committed to work than employees who do not (Blair-Loy, 2001). Therefore, women, who have relatively more obligations at home, are more likely to be discriminated against than men.

A recent study conducted by the Korea Labor Institute (2017) is consistent with these results. According to the study, the proportion of female managers is lower at firms with long working hours, including at firms with overtime, which has been the basis for sex-related complaints. In addition, women who have a hard time attending gatherings outside of the workplace such as staff dinners are viewed as having "individualism" and lacking loyalty to the organization; their circumstances are not taken into account (Korea Women's Studies Institute, 2014).

The irony is that most organizations have some policies that support work/family-life balance. Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) argue that although organizations often have these policies to fulfill legal responsibilities, an atmosphere is created whereby employees cannot easily utilize these benefits. That is, the existence of policies and the ability to utilize them are totally unrelated. In particular, if an organization sees the utilization of WLB policies as a cost, employees will have an even harder time utilizing WLB policies (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). Unless a rational, gender-equal organizational culture is established, even the most talented

people will not be able to make good use of WLB policies.

In South Korean society, many women suffer from work-family conflicts and difficulties in their work lives because of male-centered organizational cultures. In this study, it was assumed that such a culture would strengthen gender discrimination and exert a negative impact on the use of WLB policies.

According to the equity theory, the level of motivation varies according to the extent to individuals are treated fairly in comparison with others (Adams, 1963). The equity theory was developed based on the theory of cognitive dissonance, in which inconsistency or incongruity between individual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors results in discomfort and changes in existing attitudes and behaviors in search of a resolution (Festinger, 1957).

In recent years, research on equity has become more vigorous, focusing not only on the distributional procedures used to determine results within the organization but also on the relationship between justice and organizational effectiveness (Folger & Konovsky, 1989; Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Greenberg, 1990; Aryee et al., 2002; Moorman, 1991).

In this study, it was concluded that evaluation within an organization, assessed in terms of adherence to long working hours or participation in non-business meetings within the context of a male-centered organizational culture, could result in female workers perceiving gender discrimination and unfairness. Furthermore, when an individual receives a poor evaluation compared to others in relation to effort or is discriminated against in promotion or wages, a cognitive dissonance arises, and the individual is less likely to take advantage of WLB policies in order to avoid additional discrimination. Based on previous research and relevant theories, this study therefore established the following hypotheses:

H1 – A male-centered organizational culture has a positive impact (+) on the recognition of gender discrimination.

H2 – The recognition of gender discrimination has a negative impact (-) on the accessibility of WLB policies.

H3 – A male-centered organizational culture has a negative impact (-) on the accessibility of WLB policies.

H4 – The recognition of gender discrimination has a mediating effect between culture and the accessibility of WLB policies.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Model

Based on the literature review, a research model was constructed; this research model is shown in Figure 1. This study set the male-centered organizational culture, characteristic of South Korea, as the independent variable, and the accessibility of WLB policies as the dependent variable. In addition, the recognition of gender discrimination was set as the mediating variable between the independent variable and dependent variable. Finally, the age, education, and marital status were set as control variables, as they could affect the results.
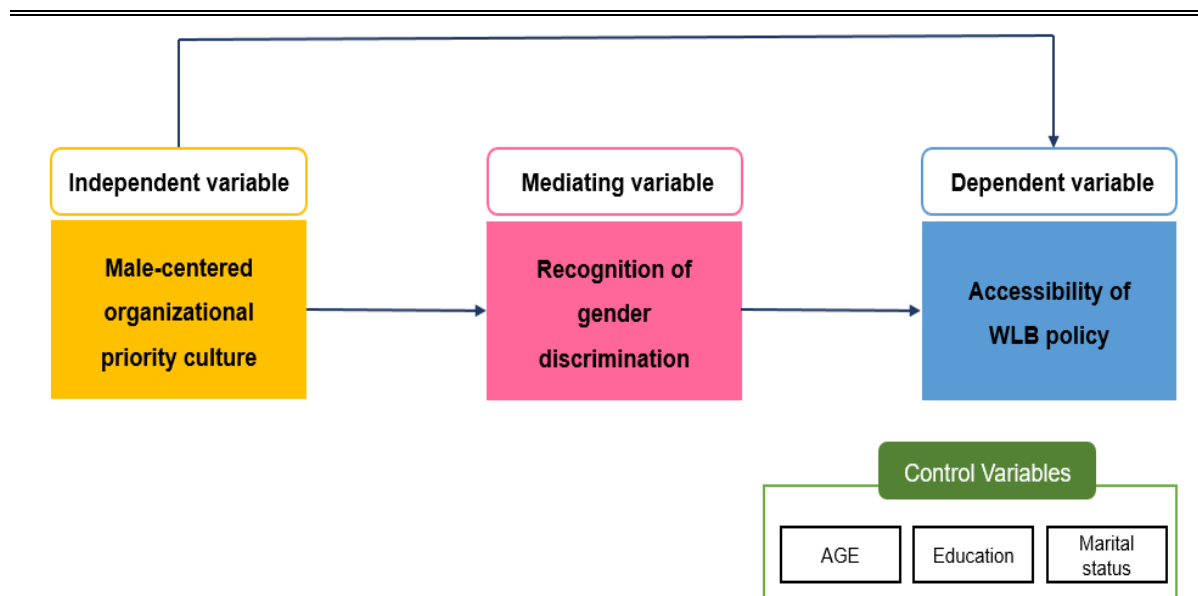
Figure 1. **Research model**

Data Collection and Sample

In this study, 468 female workers were analyzed based on the fifth data from the Korean Women Manager Panel of the Korean Women's Development Institute. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Measurement of the Main Variables

This study constructed variables for analysis based on the measurement items shown in Table 2. First, the independent variable of male-centered organizational culture was measured through five items that inquired whether the organization privileges work life over personal life; a Likert 5-point scale was used. In the case of recognition of gender discrimination as a mediating variable, individuals were asked whether they had experienced discrimination in (A) department assignment or job assignment, (B) salary or wages, (C) opportunities for and contents of education/training, (D) promotion and preferment, and/or (E) performance evaluation; the analysis was conducted by recoding five items on a single scale. Finally, accessibility of WLB policies as a dependent variable was measured by asking individuals

whether they could easily take advantage of (A) maternity leave, (B) parental leave, or (C) early leave during the infant-care period; these three items were recoded on a single scale and used for analysis.

ANALYSES AND FINDINGS

Validity and Reliability Analysis

Prior to analyzing the relationships among the variables, we conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and reliability analysis in order to confirm the validity and reliability of the measurement tool used in this study. The characteristics of the variables used in this study were only necessary for the analysis of male-centered organizational culture. The EFA results for five questions indicated that all items had factor-loading values within the range of 0.5–0.8, confirming the validity of the measurement. The reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's α value of 0.714. In conclusion, there is no problem in the validity and reliability of the questionnaire

Correlation Analysis

To confirm the correlations among the variables, Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted. The analysis found statistically significant correlations between the variables. The results of the correlation analysis can be found in Table 3.

### Structural Equation Modeling Results

In this study, analysis by structural equation modeling (SEM) was carried out by using AMOS 21.0 for hypothesis testing. As shown in Figure 3, in terms of the fit of the research

model, the GFI, AGFI, CFI, NFI, TLI, RMR, and RMSEA were .976, .951, .963, .926, .936, .031, and .043, respectively, indicating that the model fit met the standard.

The SEM results for causality verification confirmed that male-centered organizational culture had a positive (+) effect on the recognition of gender discrimination. In addition, recognition of gender discrimination had a negative (-) effect on C. Finally, A had a significant and direct negative (-) effect on accessibility of WLB policies. In the case of the control variables, individuals who were older and more educated had a tendency to think that WLB policies could be easily utilized. It was confirmed that married women are likely to think they are not able to use the policies easily; hence, H1, H2, and H3 were adopted. Detailed SEM results are shown in Table 4.

Mediation Analysis: Sobel Test

This study further tested the statistical significance of mediating effects. Table 5 shows the Sobel test results. The results confirmed that recognition of gender discrimination had a mediating role between male-centered organizational culture and accessibility of WLB policies; hence, H4 was adopted.
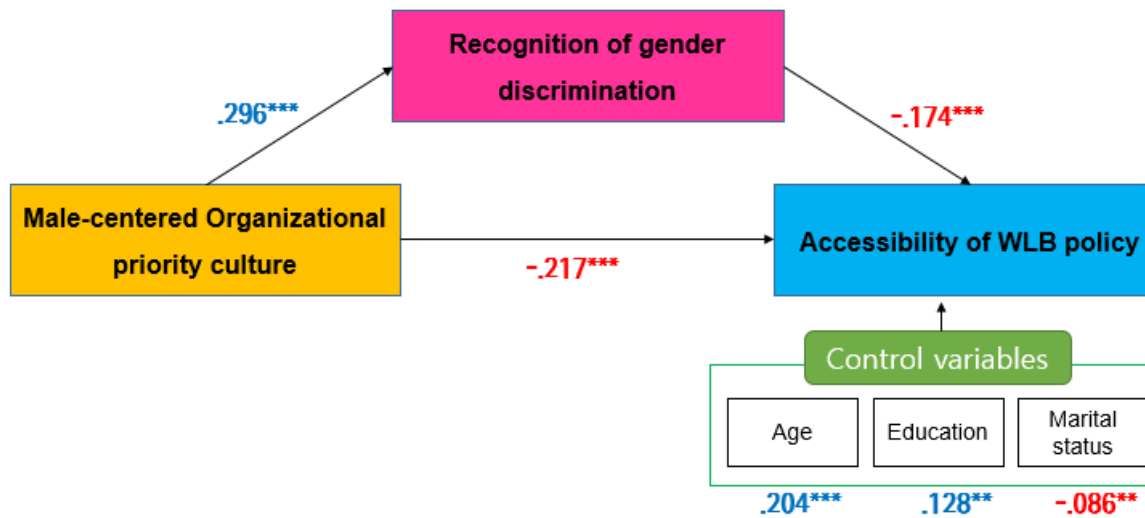
The structural path estimates are presented as standardized regression weights.

*** P < 0.001

Overall Fit Index of Model

Index	GFI	AGFI	CFI	NFI	TLI	RMR	RMSEA
Suggested Cut-off Values	≧.9	≧.9	≧.9	≧.9	≧.9	≦.05	≦.08
Model	.976	.951	.963	.926	.936	.031	.043

Figure 2. **Full structural equation model**

CONCLUSION

This study empirically investigated the effect of male-centered organizational culture on the recognition of gender discrimination and accessibility of WLB policies among female managers, who are in desperate need of work-family balance. To that end, the literature and relevant theories were reviewed and EFA, reliability analysis, correlation analysis, and SEM were conducted. The results of this study are summarized as follows.

First, male-centered organizational culture was found to intensify the recognition of gender discrimination. As the measurement items for organizational culture indicated, many respondents felt that it was more important to work long hours, including night shifts, and attend dinners (various meetings outside of work) than to work hard to achieve recognition. In organizations with strong male-centered organizational culture, female workers are naturally considered to be unsuitable and are thus excluded from majority-male groups and discriminated against in promotion and remuneration. Furthermore, in Korean society, female employees who cannot adapt to an organizational culture due to obligations at home are unable to obtain good evaluations because they are regarded as individualistic and having low loyalty to the organization.

In order to prevent the loss of highly qualified female employees and facilitate gender equality, various efforts at the governmental level must be undertaken to solve traditional gender problems in organizations. In particular, South Korea is regarded as the country with the longest working hours, equal with Japan (*The Korea Herald*, November 2, 2015). Long working hours not only undermine the quality of life of individuals but also reduce work efficiency. Considering this, various efforts are needed to reduce unnecessary night shifts in order to ensure work-life balance in Korean society. Recently, public institutions and some companies have advanced institutional strategies to ensure work-life balance for organizational

members, but utilization among organizational members has not improved. In South Korea, the Labor Standards Act guarantees maternity leave and paid leave and encourages private organizations to ensure work-life balance for organizational members. While many private organizations have passed various policies in this regard, half-willingly and half not, the utilization of such policies is totally another story. Therefore, it is urgent to improve organizational culture and an awareness that the system is there to be utilized. In addition, it is necessary to form a consensus that birth and childcare are things that a couple, rather than only the woman, is tasked with, and that it is worthwhile for both organizations and society to provide support for this.

Second, the more perceived gender discrimination in the organization, the more difficult it is to access WLB policies. This is because, for women who experience discrimination in organizations, it is difficult to easily take advantage of policies intended to support childbirth and childcare, which emphasize femininity. Once again, there is a prejudice that women applying for such benefits do not concentrate on "work."

In South Korea, the Gender Equality Act has been implemented and efforts have been made to abolish gender discrimination practices. However, South Korea is still regarded as the country among OECD countries in which gender discrimination is most severe, and it has been pointed out that there are many obstacles to female participation in the workforce. When women are discriminated against within an organization, it becomes difficult for them to make use of policies that guarantee work-life balance; when work-family conflicts arise, this inevitably causes difficulties in the organization, and these women eventually leave the company. This urgent problem requires the South Korean government to present realistic alternatives to the gender discrimination that women experience in organizations and society. In addition, strong legal and institutional arrangements will be needed to ensure that women

experience no gender discrimination in personnel operations from recruitment, selection, education, and promotion to compensation.

Third, the mediating role of gender discrimination between male-centered organizational culture and accessibility of WLB policies was statistically confirmed. This is due to the fact that under the male-centered organizational culture, female workers perceive the gender discrimination that they experience as unfair, but are more discriminated against when they utilize such organizations' WLB policies. In other words, opting not to use such policies can easily be understood as a defense mechanism to avoid further discrimination. Furthermore, the more prevalent the discrimination in the organization, the more female workers feel that the organization does not care about female workers; they do not want to make use of WLB policies, as doing so would open them up to receiving more criticism or would lay the grounds for their leaving the organization. Indeed, using maternity leave or parental leave in Korean society is considered to be a shortcut to career breaks.

Although the government has established various policies to ensure work-life balance in the private sector, it seems that there are actually many limitations to institutional arrangements alone. Therefore, it is essential that organizational culture be overcome to establish a culture of gender equality and a personnel management system based on it.

Finally, male-centered organizational culture itself has caused female workers to feel as if they cannot access WLB policies. Changing the perceptions of organizational members and the cultures of organizations cannot be achieved in the short term. Furthermore, the provision of laws and institutions can be a relatively short-term solution. In the public sector, the utilization rate of WLB policies, including family-friendly policies, is higher than in the private sector, and female employees working at public institutions experience fewer work-family conflicts than do female employees in the   private sector (Kim et al. 2105). This is

because it is mandatory to make use of such policies and because not only is continual use recommended, but use reflects on the evaluation of the organization's performance. It is equally necessary to facilitate the use of such policies in the private sector and to create incentives for utilizing the system. Moreover, it is also necessary to reform performance evaluation practices so that performance evaluation is based on work outcomes rather than irrational factors such as adherence to long working hours and attendance at non-business meetings outside of the workplace.

In addition to this short-term strategy, a long-term cultural innovation strategy will be necessary to reform negative cultural aspects and establish a rational, woman-friendly culture.

REFERENCES

Adams, J. S. (1963). Towards an understanding of inequity. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *67*(5), 422–436.

Aryee, S., Budhwar, P. S., & Chen, Z. X. (2002). Trust as a mediator of the relationship between organizational justice and work outcomes: Test of a social exchange model. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *23*(3), 267–285.

Blair-Loy, M. (2001). Cultural constructions of family schemas: The case of women finance executives. *Gender & Society*, *15*(5), 687–709.

Blair-Loy, M., &Wharton, A. S. (2002). Employees' use of work-family policies and the workplace social context. *Social Forces*, *80*(3), 813–845.

Brough, P., Holt, J., Bauld, R., Biggs, A., &Ryan, C. (2008). The ability of work—life balance policies to influence key social/organisational issues. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, *46*(3), 261–274.

Collinson, D., & Hearn, J. (1994). Naming men as men: Implications for work, organization and management. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *1*(1), 2–22.

Festinger, L. (1957). A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. (Vol. 2). Stanford university press.

Folger, R., & Konovsky, M. A. (1989). Effects of procedural and distributive justice on reactions to pay raise decisions. *Academy of Management Journal*, *32*(1), 115–130.

Greenberg, J. (1990). Organizational justice: Yesterday, today, and tomorrow. *Journal of Management*, *16*(2), 399–432.

Heskett, J. L., & Kotter, J. P. (1992). Corporate culture and performance. *Business Review. Vol. 2*, 83–93.

Ivancevich, J. M., Matteson, M. T., & Konopaske, R. (1990). Organizational behavior and management. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Irwin.

Kelly, E. L., Ammons, S. K., Chermack, K., & Moen, P. (2010). Gendered challenge, gendered

response: Confronting the ideal worker norm in a white-collar organization. *Gender & Society*, *24*(3), 281–303.

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological review*, *98*(2), 224.

Moorman, R. H. (1991). Relationship between organizational justice and organizational citizenship behaviors: Do fairness perceptions influence employee citizenship? *Journal of applied psychology*, *76*(6), 845.

Oh, H. G., Min, K. R., Kim, H. Y., & Park, S. M. (2017). Configurations of Confucian Entrepreneurship in the Asian Public Sector: A Preliminary Study of South Korean Public Organizations.

Rutherford, S. (2001). Any difference? An analysis of gender and divisional management styles in a large airline. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *8*(3), 326–345.

Schein, E. H. (1985). Organizational culture and leadership: A dynamic view. San Francisco.

Thibaut, J. W., & Walker, L. (1975). *Procedural justice: A psychological analysis*. L. Erlbaum Associates.

Table 1 *Characteristics of Respondents*

Variables		Frequency (%)	Variables		Frequency (%)
Marital status	Single	106(2.6%)	Position	Staff	2(0.4%)
	Married	362(77.4%)		Assistant Manager	171(36.5%)
Age	20's	3(0.6%)		Manager	165(35.3%)
	30's	217(46.4%)		Deputy General Manager	101(21.6%)
	40's	224(47.9%)		General Manager	25(5.3%)
	50's	22(4.7%)		Executive	4(0.9%)
	60's	2(0.4%)			
Education	High School	30(6.4%)	Tenure	1-9 years	56(12.0%)
	College	48(10.3%)		10-19 years	246(52.6%)
	Bachelor Degree	305(65.2%)		20-29 years	148(31.6%)
	Master Degree	78(16.7%)		30-39 years	17(3.6%)
	doctorate	7(1.5%)		40-49 years	1(0.2%)
Total 468(N)					

Table 2 *Measurement Items and Questionnaire Items*

Measurement Items		Questionnaire Items
Independent variable	Male-centered organizational culture	•When I get off work on time, I feel awkward. •In our company, it is difficult to take legally guaranteed vacation time on weekdays due to personal circumstances or housework. •In our company, working long hours into the night is the way to get a good evaluation. •In our company, it is hard to survive unless you make work your priority. •In our company, when I miss after-work meetings such as staff dinners or non-business meetings, I feel uncomfortable.
Mediating variable	Recognition of gender discrimination	*Q. Have you ever experienced discrimination as a woman in the following situations?* (A) Department assignment or job assignment, (B) Salary or wages, (C) Opportunities for and contents of education/training, (D) Promotion and preferment, (E) Performance evaluation
Dependent variable	Accessibility of WLB policies	*Q. Can you easily utilize worker-supporting systems provided by your workplace?* (A) Maternity leave, (B) Parental leave, (C) Early leave during the infant-care period

Table 3 *Correlation Analysis*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. AGE	1					
2. Education	-.094[*]	1				
3. Marital status	.161[**]	-.078	1			
4. Male-centered organizational culture	-.088	.135[**]	.042	1		
5. Recognition of gender discrimination	-.018	.055	.064	.237[**]	1	
6. Accessibility of WLB policy	.262[**]	.027	-.066	-.238[**]	-.233[**]	1

*: p<.05, **: p<.01

Table 4 *SEM Results*

	Hypothesis	Estimate	S.E	C.R.	P	Result
H1	Culture → Discrimination	.540	.102	5.273	***	○
H2	Discrimination → WLB policies	-.108	028	3.870	***	○
H3	Culture → WLB policies	-.247	.064	-3.885	***	○

***p < 0.001

Table 5 *Sobel Test Results*

	Hypothesis/ Path	Test Statistic	P-value (P< α =0.05)	Mediate Effect
H4	Culture →Discrimination → WLB policies	-3.11748363	0.00091201	○