

## Illusion of Change: Audience Readings of a Male Childcare Reality Show in Korea

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### Abstract

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*The Return of Superman* (KBS2, 2013-) is one of Korea's so-called male childcare reality shows. It portrays celebrity fathers taking care of their young children, unassisted, for 48 hours, while their wives are taking a relaxing break. The narrative revolves around the experiences of clumsy fathers who know very little about childcare. Using an audience analysis, we investigate how both men and women react to gender roles as portrayed in *The Return of Superman*, and examine how their interpretation of the show is related to the progressive potential of male childcare reality shows. We argue that it is premature to presume that the popularity of this show indicates gender equality, considering that both male and female viewers are skeptical of the show's portrayal of reality, and thus are not hopeful about the feasibility of achieving gender equality in regard to housework in their own everyday lives.

### Key words

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*The Return of Superman*, male childcare reality shows in Korea, gender roles, housework

## Introduction

*The Return of Superman* (KBS2, 2013-) is a Korean reality show that portrays celebrity fathers taking care of their young children, unassisted, for 48 hours, while their wives are taking a relaxing break. The narrative revolves around the experiences of clumsy fathers who know very little about childcare. Humor is generated when the show depicts various bloopers made by the fathers while looking after their children or while completing

one of the tasks their wives have instructed them to complete, such as cooking. With time, the initially incompetent fathers become adroit in providing childcare, and come to understand the hardships associated with childcare and housework for which the wives are primarily responsible.

*The Return of Superman* represents one of the so-called male childcare reality shows that deal with male celebrities' childcare experiences. The popularity of this genre started with the hit show *Dad! Where Are You Going?* (MBC, 2013–2015) that portrayed celebrity fathers travelling around Korea with their children. *Ob! My Baby* (SBS, 2014–2016) depicted the everyday lives of celebrity parents who spent most of their time with their young children.

Korean society has recently undergone an apparent paradigm shift with regard to the gendered disparity associated with housework. Growing recognition that fathers need to participate in childcare and housework is reflected in a rapid increase in the number of husbands taking childcare leave in recent years. In 2016, 7,616 men took paternity leave, which represented a 56.3% increase from the previous year (Statistics Korea, 2017). In contrast to this seeming change in the perception of gender roles, there is little evidence of progress elsewhere. According to the work-life balance index published by the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (2015), an average Korean man spends 45 minutes a day performing housework. While in 2009 Korean husbands from double-income households spent an average of 37 minutes per day on housework, this figure had only increased by 3 minutes to 40 minutes in 2014. The time spent on housework by wives who also worked outside the home decreased slightly during the same time period, from an average of 208 to 194 minutes.

We pose the following questions with regard to the conflicting discourses about the gendered division of housework in contemporary Korea. What are the social implications of successful childcare TV shows that portray men performing childcare and housework? How do these shows mediate audiences' perceptions of gender relations? If such shows portray roles that are contrary to traditional gender roles, can they be perceived as indicative of a changing notion of masculinity in Korea? What are the audiences' opinions of the shows' discourse on fathers' responsibilities for childcare? Can the shows' depictions of fathers' active participation in housework encourage the audiences to believe that the gendered division of housework has weakened?

By studying audiences watching *The Return of Superman*, we examine the social implications of male childcare reality shows in Korea. Not only is *The Return of Superman* the longest running Korean male childcare reality show, it has also achieved an average rating of 11% to 12% and consistently ranked in the top ten list of The Best TV Shows that Koreans Love to Watch (Gallup Korea, 2016). *The Return of Superman* has received numerous awards, including the Gender Equality Award from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family in 2014 and the President's Award in 2015, for portraying healthy families in which fathers perform childcare duties, thus promoting a gender equality culture. In 2014, Zhejiang TV in China began airing a Chinese version of *The Return of Superman* entitled *Dad is Back*. We believe that how audiences negotiate the meaning of men's roles in childcare can offer insights into the televisual discourse of shifting gender roles. Through an audience analysis, we investigate how both men and women react to gender roles in *The Return of Superman* and examine how their interpretation of the show is related to the progressive potential of male childcare reality shows.

### Gendered Division of Labor

Hegemonic masculinity is “the configuration of gender practice which [...] guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell, 1995, p. 77). While Confucian legacies have shaped Korea's gender hierarchy, three criteria, more specifically, have contributed to hegemonic masculinity in Korea: men's abilities to provide economic support for their families, to undertake military service, and the extent of their involvement in daily reproductive labor (Moon, 2002).

Korea has witnessed substantial changes in gender relations during the past few decades. The male role as the family provider has weakened with the increase in women's participation in the labor force. The labor force participation rate for college-educated women increased from 46.4% in 1980, to 65.1% in 2014 (Seo, 2015). The establishment of the Anti-Prostitution Law (2004) and the abolition of the patriarchal Family Head System (2005) represented significant progress in gender relations (Kim & Kim, 2011) and an increasing number of women are participating in traditionally male-dominated fields such as the military, the police, and the judiciary.

The series of social changes that have increased women's autonomy, however, should not be confused with gender equality or the subversion of gendered expectations about family life. Korea ranked 118th out of 144 countries in the World Economic Forum's 2017 Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2017), and strong evidence suggests an enduring gendered division of labor in domestic housework. On average, the number of hours Koreans work per week is the second highest among the 34 member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) after Mexico; achieving work-family balance is thus a challenging task in Korea. According to Statistics Korea (2017), 82,179 women took maternity leave in 2016, but only 7,616 men took paternity leave. While more women (73.5%) than men (66.3%) attend higher education in universities, women are significantly more likely than men to resign from their jobs, due to difficulties associated with balancing work and family life. Of women aged between 15 and 54, 46.3% have taken a career break to fulfill family-related obligations such as marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, childcare, and child education (Statistics Korea, 2017). When both parents are employed outside the home, men spend an average of 45 minutes a day on housework and women spend an average of 104 minutes (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2015).

Despite persisting gender inequality, young Korean men are expressing a growing dissatisfaction or anxiety over the loss of their male privileges (Um, 2011). During the current time of economic instability, men must compete with women for jobs and resources, even though they are under pressure to accept traditional male responsibilities that include military service and providing financial support for their families. Men often spread online hate speech against women and feminism as a way of compensating for their alleged victimhood (S. Kim, 2015). The popular term *Kimchi women* refers to Korean women as selfish, materialistic, and irresponsible, and encapsulates young men's attitudes toward women. The heated debate about gender inequality culminated in 2016, when a 34 year-old man stabbed a 23-year-old woman to death in the bathroom of a building near the Gangnam Subway Station. The police investigation revealed that the murderer had waited in the unisex bathroom until a group of six other men had left. He then killed the first woman who entered the bathroom. He stated that his motivation for the attack was to take revenge on women, because they had always ignored him (Park, Park, & Lee, 2016). This brutal

murder, also known as the Gangnam murder case, generated a heated public response from people who believed it was a hate crime motivated by *Yeosunghyumo* (Korean term of misogyny). The gendered response to the incident was intriguing. According to the research by the Korea Press Foundation, only 48.1% of male respondents, in contrast to 78.2% of female respondents, agreed that the homicide was a hate crime motivated by misogyny (Park & Yang, 2016).

Given this context, men struggle to reinforce Korea's traditional hegemonic masculinity, even as it is being challenged by changing gender relations. In their study of *Real Men*, a reality show that portrays Korean male and female celebrities' experiences in military training, Han, Lee, and Park (2017) observed Korean audiences' heightened sense of anxiety over the crisis of masculinity. While accusing women of not participating equally in military service, male audiences supported traditional gender roles by claiming that only men have the qualities required by the military. By emphasizing men's superior physical strength, maturity, and responsibility, male audiences inferred women's suitability as caregivers who perform traditional female roles.

A study by Lee and Park (2012) illustrated how media depictions of the rising status of women can foster a sense that men are being treated unfairly. They explored the cultural implications of the Korean comedy sketch *Nambowon*, which humorously depicts women exploiting men in dating situations. The male audiences argued that the reverse discrimination against men portrayed on the show was realistic and believable, although they did not have any real-life personal experiences that validated their claims. The study suggests that depicting the rise in women's social status can create a false perception about male victimhood, that is, the notion that while men no longer enjoy male privileges, they must nevertheless fulfill traditional male obligations (e.g., military obligations).

### **Critical Reading of Reality TV**

Reality TV has been widely criticized for the manipulative tendencies associated with its fictional construction and narrativization of actual footage. The major concern centers on the genre's manipulation of viewers' sense of reality. The construction of reality by commercially motivated, ethically irresponsible producers poses a serious problem, because reality shows can

foster a misleading sense of reality among members of the audience (Corner, 2004). While these audiences watch the real-life performances of ordinary people, it is always the producers who determine what and how these performances are shown, and thus the footage viewed by an audience is not necessarily a true portrayal of reality. The audience are often left with little idea of “how much is based on factual evidence and how much is essentially imaginative fabrication” (Kilborn, 1994a, p. 431).

Watching people’s unscripted performances on reality TV enables audience members to relate to the casts, and to a variety of the aspects portrayed. Despite the potential manipulation of audiences’ perceptions of reality, scholars nevertheless reject the notion of gullible audiences, and instead accept the concept of savvy audiences (Hendershot, 2009; Miller, 2000). They suggest that audiences are generally aware of the contrived nature of reality shows, and are therefore capable of distinguishing between fiction and reality. Kilborn (1994b, 2000) notes that as they have become increasingly cognizant of the fictional elements involved in the creation of reality shows—such as unrealistic settings, staged performances, and deceptive editing—audiences have also learned about the codes and conventions of reality genres. Although the audiences experience pleasure and perceive a great sense of realism in reality shows, this does not necessarily imply that they are susceptible to reality TV’s representation of reality, because their awareness of the reality genre’s contrived nature constantly mediates their reception.

During their readings of reality shows, audiences are always cognizant of the genre’s manipulative potential, and they do not necessarily believe the reality portrayed by the show. In an earlier study of the British show *Video Diary*, Keighron (1993) observed that the audiences had the capacity “to cut through the layers of skepticism and cynicism with which we have learned to protect ourselves from the professional media, the great manipulator” (p. 24). Hill (2002) conducted a national survey of British audiences of *Big Brother*, and found that British audiences of factual TV showed a high degree of distrust of the reality factual entertainment claimed to present. She characterized the British audiences as “cynical of the reality of real TV and alert to the performative nature of factual entertainment” (p. 328). Hill argues that reality TV viewers are neither passive nor voyeuristic, and many viewers are not attracted to reality programs precisely because they believe that reality shows are voyeuristic and manipulative. In his study

of the racial stereotypes presented in the show *Wife Swap*, Park (2011) observed that the audiences interpreted the visual evidence of the show critically, because of the strong sense of ingenuity and contrivance they perceived from the exaggerated portrayal of racial stereotypes. He concluded that the audience's awareness of the manipulative tendencies of the reality genre provided an interpretive context through which they engaged critically with the show's characters and narrative, and created oppositional discourses about the show's naturalization of racial stereotypes.

Our study can benefit from audience reception literature, which explores how audiences with different social backgrounds have divergent interpretations of media texts, and create meanings not necessarily intended by the texts. In their study of cross-cultural readings of *Dallas*, scholars documented how differently audiences in different geographic locations responded to this American soap opera (Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990). Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) discovered that Asian audiences of *Rush Hour 2* did not find its racial jokes offensive, and instead perceived the film as a sign of progress, because it featured Jackie Chan in the leading role, and Chan was someone an Asian audience could identify with and be proud of. We believe that an examination of how male and female audiences negotiate the meaning of men's childcare on *The Return of Superman* can provide insight into (un)changing gender roles in Korea.

## Methods

We employed a focus group to document audiences' readings of *The Return of Superman*. We investigated the degree to which these audiences found the show's discourse about gender to be realistic, and whether the audiences' assessments of the show's discourse were related to their evaluations of Korea's prospects for gender equality in housework and childcare.

Previous studies have demonstrated the merits of using focus groups to conduct critical investigations of audience responses, and their relationship to the ideological operation of TV (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Means-Coleman, 2000). We recruited respondents who characterized the show's target demographic of the show. All study participants were parents of a child or children under the age of 10. A total of 15 focus groups were formed, with two to four people per group. Of the 44 respondents who participated in the groups, 25 were female and 19 were male. The age rang-

es were as follows: female respondents, 30–45 (mean 33.9 years); male respondents, 35–41 (mean 37.4 years). With the exception of two groups that comprised married couples, the male and female respondents were separated into groups, to examine whether the respondents' readings of the show's discourse differed between the genders. Each group was comprised of respondents who were close friends, since it has been noted in other focus groups that it is important to create a comfortable atmosphere to encourage the discussion of potentially sensitive topics (Jhally & Lewis, 1992).

While all the respondents were familiar with the show's basic premise, their degree of interest in the show varied. While some reported having watched the show on a regular basis, others reported they had not. Prior to watching the show as part of the focus group, respondents were asked to watch an edited video of *The Return of Superman* (about 47 minutes), because previous studies have noted the effectiveness of previewing videos to facilitate active discussion (Park, 2011). The edited video included scenes we believed would either affirm or challenge the traditional notion of masculinity: a father who is inept at childcare (episodes 5, 15); a father having fun while caring for his children (episode 13); a father expressing patriarchal attitudes and demanding that his wife perform various types of housework (episode 13); fathers having a difficult time dealing with their children (episode 37); and a father showing fascination at his daughter's actions and behavior (episode 59).

The moderator (one of us) facilitated semi-structured discussions about participants' views on *The Return of Superman*, including aspects of the show they liked or disliked, their favorite characters, and their opinions on the celebrity fathers who performed childcare and housework. To determine the ideological role of a TV show that depicts reversed gender roles, the moderator probed respondents' readings of the show in relation to their views on actual gender roles in everyday life, whether they viewed *The Return of Superman* as evidence of shifting gender roles in Korea, or whether they made a distinction between the televisual depiction of husbands' active participation in housework and reality. The focus group interviews were conducted in environments that were familiar to the respondents, such as their homes, offices, or coffee shops, where they felt relaxed and comfortable. Each interview lasted from one to two hours and was tape-recorded and transcribed for later in-depth analysis.

The moderators' female gender and single status provided advantages.



The respondents, mostly female, were willing to talk to the moderators about what they considered to be the reality of married life, since they deemed their moderator ignorant of the intricacies of marriage. While informing their moderators about the realities of marriage, respondents expressed candid opinions about the gendered division of labor. Each respondent was compensated with KRW 50,000 (approximately USD 45).

### **The Show's Format and Description of the Edited Video**

Each season of the *The Return of Superman* revolves around four or five celebrity dads who face the daunting task of looking after their children during their wives' 48-hour absence. Each episode lasts about 1 hour and 30 minutes and is peppered with segments featuring the different families, in which the narrator guides the transitions between the individual cuts. The narrator, often a Korean female celebrity, provides brief narrations between family segments, and also describes the events awaiting the individual families. The show is mostly filmed at the celebrities' actual homes, thereby reflecting its purported goal of "return[ing] dads to their original places," and is also shot outdoors on days the celebrity dads have outside activities planned for their children. Cameras are installed around the celebrities' homes, and cameramen hide in tents set up in the living rooms. The children, however, are aware of the cameramen's presence, and are often observed striking up conversations with them, giving them snacks, and reaching out to touch their cameras. Cameramen accompany the families during the children's outdoor activities. The moms also make sporadic appearances on the shows and are seen saying their goodbyes to their children as they leave for their break. Each family segment of the show also includes narrators interviewing the celebrity dads, and occasionally their wives, who answer questions pertinent to the episode being aired. Children who are old enough are also interviewed occasionally. Quite frequently, special guests, often celebrity friends of the celebrity dads, are invited to their homes and featured as part of the episode. They come to help the celebrity dads look after their handful of children.

The edited video clip of *The Return of Superman* portrays four celebrity fathers and their children undertaking specific tasks and activities during their wives' 48-hour absence. The first segment features martial artist Choo Sung-Hoon and his daughter Sarang. Introduced by the narrator as the

show's most adept father, Choo is shown cooking dinner for Sarang, who is known to have a healthy appetite. While waiting for Choo at the dining room table, Sarang heartily devours her cup of yogurt. Choo soon joins Sarang at the table with a bowl of udon he has cooked for her. The scene then shifts to her bedroom and ends with Choo gently applying lotion to Sarang's swollen anus, to relieve her of pain from constipation.

The next segment presents comedian Lee Hwi-Jae and his infant twins Seo-Eon and Seo-Jun, who are awake at 5 am with gastroenteritis. Lee checks Seo-Eon's diapers and finds that he has diarrhea. Lee takes Seo-Eon to the bathroom to wash him, but Seo-Eon bursts out crying. Hearing his brother cry, Seo-Jun, who is waiting in the living room, also starts to cry. On the living room floor, Seo-Eon crawls toward his empty milk bottle, and reaches for it. Confused by Seo-Eon's behavior, Lee gives Seo-Eon more milk and he stops crying immediately. Lee confusingly mumbles, "I gave you the right amount." After Seo-Eon is fed, the house becomes peaceful again, and Lee looks at Seo-Eon with dumbfounded eyes. It becomes apparent that all along, Seo-eon had been trying to get his father's attention to show him he was hungry, and that Lee had given the twins 40 ml less milk than the usual amount they were given by their mom. In the interview clip Lee confesses "Nothing really works out the way we plan, yes? I was looking out the window into another apartment and saw a person watching soccer in the living room. I started tearing up." Realizing the stark contrast between his morning activity and that of his neighbor, he tells the production team, "This is what the twins' mom goes through every day [...] this is too hard."

The segment showing the Korean actor Song Il-Gook and his triplet sons Dae-Han, Min-Hook, and Man-Se follows Lee's segment. Sitting in their feeding booster seats, the triplets listen to their father as he asks for their cooperation for the next 48 hours. Song lets out a nervous laugh as he faces another daunting day without his wife. In the interview clip he shows the production team the text message he received from his wife in which she outlined his tasks for the next two days. The text reads, "Take the triplets to the dentist and trim their nails." Song, who is completely unaware of the significant challenges to be revealed within the next 48 hours, responds somewhat confidently by saying "These tasks are not too difficult. I can do them!" Before undertaking the assigned tasks, Song Il-Gook feeds the hungry triplets with relative ease. He kneels in front of

their feeding boosters and entertains them using various feeding techniques such as playing “airplane” with their spoons. However, unlike feeding the triplets, brushing their teeth is a challenging task. Song first grabs onto Min-gook and forces the toothbrush into Min-Gook’s mouth as he struggles vigorously to free himself from Song Il-Gook’s grip.

The last clip features actor Uhm Tae-Woong and his 18-month old toddler Uhm Ji-On. Unlike his charismatic image on screen, Uhm is very gentle and expressive in his relationship with Ji-On. Their segment begins with Ji-On and Uhm looking for their dog Saebom. Ji-On runs to the hallway and opens the door, finding Saebom waiting to be let inside. Ji-On follows Saebom into the living room and tries to imitate Saebom’s posture by lying down in front of her. Touched by Ji-On’s action, Uhm Tae-Woong lets out a joyful laugh that is soon followed by tears. His wife, Yoon Hye-Jin, who is sitting in the living room, exclaims “Why are you crying now? Honey why are you crying? Why are you crying again?” To wipe away his tears, Uhm Tae-Woong rushes from the kitchen and shyly says, “I was just yawning.”

### **Gendered Interpretation of Fathers’ Childcare**

Regardless of their level of enjoyment, most of the respondents agreed that *The Return of Superman* is a unique show. While the respondents had divergent interpretations of various aspects of the show, both male and female respondents considered the fathers on the show as significant departures from stereotypical Korean fathers; fathers on the show were considered to be gentle, affectionate, and fulfilling women’s traditional roles. For example, Uhm Tae-Woong was defined as a caring dad who listens attentively when his daughter talks to him. Song was seen as more maternal than moms, since he cooks every meal and communicates patiently with his triplets, on the same level as his children. As our study postulates, the interviews also validate the notion that *The Return of Superman* presents a new type of masculinity, distinctly different from the traditional type.

Despite the respondents’ varied interpretations, we observed a gendered reading of *The Return of Superman*. Overall, the show appears to fulfill the female audience’s vicarious pleasure of watching ideal husbands who may or may not exist in real life. The viewing pleasure derives from watching men perform tasks their own husbands rarely perform. The female re-

spondents almost always compared their husbands with the men on the show, expressing their wishes that their husbands would be more involved in housework and childcare. A few respondents complained that their husbands are too busy playing with their cell phones and do not fully focus on childcare when asked to look after their children; unlike their husbands, the men on *The Return of Superman* concentrate solely on childcare. Other respondents lamented, “Why is my husband not like that?” or “I wish I could live with a husband like them.” The female respondents’ wishful thinking is not surprising, because, although the actual amount of time their husbands spend on childcare may vary slightly, Korean husbands in general spend very little time on housework (Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2015).

One female member of the audience was motivated to watch *The Return of Superman* by her desire that men would learn to recognize the hardships that characterize women’s domestic labor. Many female respondents said they asked their husbands to watch the show with them, because it provides vivid evidence that childcare is a difficult and challenging task. They hoped that the TV audiences, and particularly the men who rarely take care of their children, realize the unjust fallacy of the popular saying “you (wives) have an easy job of looking after the kid(s) at home,” and would begin to participate in housework. In other words, women’s viewing pleasure was derived from watching men who fulfilled women’s traditional roles, and acknowledged the value of women’s labor at home. By vicariously fulfilling their desire to be emotionally rewarded for their housework, *The Return of Superman* enables female audiences to develop positive feelings about the tasks they perform in their everyday lives.

In contrast to female audiences who showed a strong interest in *The Return of Superman*, male audiences were passive in their viewing behavior. All male respondents were aware of the show’s popularity, and some said that the children on the show were cute, but none of the men we interviewed watched the show on a regular basis. Characterizing *The Return of Superman* as a women’s TV show, male respondents said they had watched the show several times (rather reluctantly) at the request of their wives. Female respondents also confirmed men’s overall lack of interest in the show, and said that men do not enjoy the show, because they do not wish to associate themselves with the male role it portrays: “Men do not really show sympathy or empathy toward those men who do childcare. It is men

who must understand the difficulty of childcare. But the problem is that only women enjoy watching the show” (Female, 33).

Most male respondents explicitly stated that they did not find pleasure in watching *The Return of Superman*. It was intriguing to find that those who did not watch the show on a regular basis were nonetheless familiar with the show’s premise, and even the names of the children in the show. We found that most male respondents preferred to watch *The King of Mask Singer* (a singing competition) or *Real Men* (a reality show portraying military experiences) that aired in the same timeslot on other channels. The men’s preference for *Real Men* was particularly revealing, because men’s military service is one of the key factors reinforcing hegemonic masculinity in Korea (Moon, 2002). According to Han et al. (2017), men in contemporary Korea no longer have access to the advantages they previously enjoyed, and the popularity of *Real Men* among male audiences is related to their desire to restore those advantages. This suggests that male audiences intentionally avoid watching *The Return of Superman*, because they resist the show’s discourse of shifting gender roles that can challenge the traditional notion of masculinity.

The gendered reading was salient in respondents’ different attitudes toward the interviews. While female audiences participated actively in the interviews (often with their young children), and discussed various aspects of *The Return of Superman*, most male respondents had less than lukewarm responses to the moderator’s questions. They were distracted by phone messages and calls throughout the interviews, and failed to stay focused on the conversations. Several of the male respondents said they did not watch the edited video of the show prior to the interview, because “the viewing was not necessarily needed for the interview.” This gender disparity is consistent with recent research results that 12% of women ranked *The Return of Superman* as their favorite show, compared to 1% of men (Y. Kim, 2015). Men’s lack of interest in *The Return of Superman* infers that men are reluctant to engage in a conversation about sharing domestic responsibilities.

### **Critical Reading of the Show’s Discourse of Men’s Childcare Role**

Despite the men’s seemingly realistic portrayals of how they fulfilled their childcare responsibilities—from which many respondents, and especially females, derived pleasure—most respondents were critical of how they did

housework on *The Return of Superman*. Based on their knowledge of the televisual construction of reality and lived reality, both male and female respondents generally agreed that the type of childcare portrayed on the show is unattainable in reality. We identified three main reasons for participants' skepticism toward the realization of men's equal participation in nurturing responsibilities.

First, the recognition of *The Return of Superman* as a reality genre provides a context in which the respondents are aware of the contrived nature of the show's gender discourse. Respondents frequently mentioned the unrealistic characteristics, including the show's basic premise and the portrayal of artificial situations designed to increase the audience's interest. For example, the premise that a man should take sole care of his children for 48 hours is intriguing yet unrealistic. Many respondents were very suspicious that *The Return of Superman* does not truthfully depict celebrity fathers' behaviors. Many commented that the fathers on the show would not usually help with childcare tasks, thereby providing evidence that the show's content supports their skepticism about whether every father participates in housework. For example, Jang Hyun-Sung could not distinguish between sea mustard and mushrooms, while Lee Hwi-Jae did not know how much milk his twin sons needed. The respondents interpreted these scenes as evidence that the celebrity fathers perform childcare and housework duties only when they are in front of the camera.

Second, the fathers' celebrity status on *The Return of Superman* increased the perceived gap between gender roles on TV and in reality. It is no longer a secret that TV celebrities must deliver the kind of performance that can enhance the show's entertainment value. Thus, the respondents recounted various differences between celebrity and ordinary fathers, and noted the vast differences in the amount of childcare they could realistically provide, and the types of affordable activities they could enjoy with their children. Examples given by the respondents included scenes in which the children on the show recorded songs in a professional recording studio, played sports with famous sports stars, and met many other celebrities. The respondents argued that these activities were only possible because the fathers were famous. Many respondents also commented that celebrities have flexible schedules, and can spend time with their children during the day, while ordinary men must spend the entire day in their workplaces. A few male and female respondents claimed that ordinary fathers would outper-

form the celebrity fathers if they had no other obligations and were given the same tasks to complete with their children for 48 hours.

Childcare is difficult for us (ordinary men) to do since we are not like celebrities on the show. We have to work all day leaving us little time to play with the kids. Celebrities would be super busy too at times, but between projects, they would have plenty of time to spend with their children. (Male, 40)

Finally, the celebrity fathers' class status creates a sense of implausibility for ordinary men's childcare. In other words, the perceived class difference is regarded as a barrier that prevents ordinary fathers from fulfilling paternal responsibilities. From the respondents' point of view, the fathers on *The Return of Superman* are capable of performing a variety of activities with their children (e.g., girls take an expensive ballet class and the fathers often travel to foreign countries with their children), because they are not only celebrities but also wealthy. Unlike fathers in affluent families, ordinary men do not have sufficient time and money to spare for their children, because—as the Korean term *Kwarosa* (death from overwork) indicates—most ordinary Korean employees typically overwork to support their families financially. Largely due to Korea's corporate culture of marathon workdays, the average number of hours a person in South Korea works is the second among OECD member countries after Mexico (Kim, 2016; Yoo, 2016). The respondents expressed frustration and even jealousy with regard to the celebrity fathers on the show, because they lived in a large house or a luxury condo, and the depiction of their own childcare on TV rewards them with even more money and fame. Several female respondents shared personal anecdotes (some with tears in their eyes) about their children, who often ask, "Why is it that my father doesn't play with me like the fathers on *The Return of Superman*?" One female respondent suggested that male audiences who do not have time and money to spend with their children would not be able to enjoy the show because of the sense of guilt it can provoke.

Recognizing that *The Return of Superman* is a reality show and the participating fathers are wealthy celebrities appears to diminish respondents' perceptions of the possibility of using gender equality to nurture responsibilities in ordinary people's everyday lives. While respondents constantly compared and contrasted ordinary fathers with the celebrity fathers on TV, a notice-

able gender difference was observed in their critical reading of *The Return of Superman*. For female respondents, the difference between the televisual reality of celebrities and ordinary people's everyday lives is frustrating, because it limits the actual realization of gender equality in housework. Consequently, the wishful thinking about an unfulfilled dream constitutes a large part of the female respondents' viewing pleasure. Male respondents, on the other hand, tended to use the show's atypical situation (i.e., reality genre, wealthy celebrity fathers) as an excuse for refusing to participate equally in housework. As discussed earlier, it was evident that male respondents were not interested in the show and preferred to watch shows in the same timeslot that represented hegemonic masculinity. They may intentionally avoid *The Return of Superman* because its portrayal of men's active participation in childcare not only reflects negatively on ordinary men, but also puts pressure on them. We argue that male respondents' critical reading of the fathers' domestic responsibilities on *The Return of Superman*, to varying degrees, helped justify their resistance to a new form of masculinity.

### **Pressure to Conform to Traditional Gender Roles**

The portrayal of men doing housework, which departs from traditional gender roles that are deeply rooted in Confucianism, does not necessarily translate into the acceptance of a new form of masculinity, since textual meanings are mediated by Korea's specific sociocultural context. Both male and female respondents generally agreed that Korean society is now witnessing changes in gender roles, and that men today participate more actively in housework and childcare than the men in their parents' generation. They also agree, however, that achieving gender equality in domestic responsibilities is impossible, due to the social and structural constraints that characterize Korea. Respondents observed that structural factors and social forces that uphold traditional gender roles and hierarchy inhibit the subversive potential of the new form of masculinity portrayed on *The Return of Superman*.

Traditional gender norms limit men's participation in childcare. Both male and female respondents frequently mentioned the negative cultural attitudes or prejudices faced by men who adopted the new gender roles. For example, fathers who spend time with their children during the day are likely to be given suspicious looks rather than approval. According to the



respondents, both men and women often ask dubious questions of a father who spends time with his children during the day, such as “What does he do during the day?” “Is he unemployed?” “Does he not have a wife?” “Is he a widower?” Aware of these attitudes, several female respondents said they might feel embarrassed if their husbands became a topic of conversation among moms in their neighborhoods. Given Korea’s social context and men’s separation from daily reproductive labor (Moon, 2002), male respondents commented that they reluctantly performed traditionally female tasks (e.g., collecting their children from a daycare center or a kindergarten) only under unavoidable circumstances.

The respondents also felt that Korea’s conservative family values hinder men’s equal participation in childcare. The Confucian values that embrace traditional gender roles ensure that different responsibilities continue to be assigned to men and women. Unsurprisingly, many of the respondents used the phrase “dads who are just like moms,” or “dads who are better than moms,” during the interviews, to describe the characters in the show, because the underlying assumption is that moms are primarily responsible for housework. Female respondents noted that their mothers-in-law would be upset and even angry if they knew their sons stayed at home to perform housework and childcare. A female respondent stated that her mother-in-law would not allow her to leave her child with her husband. One respondent told us that she would never allow her husband to change their daughter’s diapers or wash dishes in the presence of his mother, because it would upset her. Many female respondents considered *The Return of Superman* as unrealistic because the show portrays an ideal but unrealistic world devoid of conservative family values. The interviews indicated that clashes between traditional values (Confucianism) and egalitarian values (gender equality) often serve as the main causes of stress and anxiety among married Korean women.

Similar to the cultural constraints that limit gender equality in fulfilling domestic responsibilities, structural factors were frequently mentioned during the interviews as barriers to gender equality. While increasing in number each year, paternity leave tends to be more available to men working for large companies or public organizations. Men, however, find it difficult to apply for paternity leave in a male-dominated workplace culture, since it is often viewed as a sign of disloyalty to the organization (Park, 2015). Many female respondents did not necessarily have favorable views on paternity

leave, and some stated they would rather take maternity leave, because the disadvantages for men who take paternity leave in a male-dominant corporate culture could be considerably greater than those for women, and could therefore damage the family's future economic stability. Many female respondents were concerned that their husbands' paternity leaves would be viewed as a negative factor in their promotion evaluations, and one respondent commented that "Our company does allow paternity leave. But I have not seen any male employee who took paternity leave. It is only written in the company bylaws, but never utilized" (Male, 41).

Despite society's apparent gender discrimination, men often express anxiety and frustration about male victimhood in contemporary Korea (Lee & Park, 2012). Not only do Korean men feel the pressure to be financially responsible for their families, they must also work long hours while remaining separated from the daily work of reproductive labor (Moon, 2002). In this context, many men find it burdensome or even unfair to participate equally in childcare and housework, as is reflected in male respondents' critical interpretations of the new form of masculinity in *The Return of Superman*. In contrast with female respondents who viewed the husbands' participation in housework as a sign of gender equality or changing gender roles, male respondents regarded the show's discourse as affirming traditional gender roles. Male respondents claim that men are not suited for domestic work, as is evident from the clumsy husbands on the show. For example, Lee Hwi-Jae did not know how to cook baby food, so he simply microwaved the food his wife had prepared earlier. The husbands also phoned their wives frequently, because they could not find the laundry detergent for example. We found a strong tendency for male respondents to focus on the scenes that validated traditional gender roles, rather than ponder the show's gender-subversive aspects. By identifying the textual elements that align with their own views on gender, male respondents hoped to affirm the stereotype that housework is ultimately a woman's responsibility. For male respondents, *The Return of Superman* demonstrates that men can at best only play a supplementary role in housework.

## Conclusion

The gendered reading of *The Return of Superman* suggests that the progressive discourse on gender is not necessarily interpreted in a way that en-

courages men's equal participation in childcare. While female respondents enjoyed the show, they did not perceive its gender discourse as indicative of changing gender roles. In her earlier study of female soap opera fans, Ang (1985) claimed that although the soap operas were unrealistic, women tended to enjoy them because they allowed them to vicariously experience a different type of life. She argued that women often found soap opera liberating, precisely because they were fictional. Ang contended that women could derive pleasure from unrealistic TV texts, because doing so allowed them to assume different perspectives without worrying about their realistic values. Likewise, while female audiences of *The Return of Superman* did not necessarily find the show's portrayal of men performing housework realistic, they were able to enjoy the show because it helped them envision progressive gender roles and ideal men who participated equally in fulfilling domestic responsibilities. Women's wishful thinking about men's equal participation in housework is associated with their acknowledgement of structural constraints that deter the achievement of gender equality in reality. In other words, women were able to enjoy *The Return of Superman* because gender equality is unattainable in their own lives.

We argue that male respondents' obvious dissatisfaction with the show reveals two main aspects of gendered interpretations. First, Korea's structural factors have upheld different gender roles, thereby perpetuating gendered disparity in housework and childcare. Male respondents complained that the show portrayed ordinary fathers negatively by overlooking the reality that most men are unable to help their wives with household chores due to their male obligations (e.g., mostly job-related, financial obligations). Second, men are reluctant to fully accept a new form of masculinity that involves their participation in domestic responsibilities, because they wish to maintain hegemonic masculinity in Korea. We did not witness any evidence of male respondents critically contemplating gender inequality in housework during the interviews. We claim that the male audience's dislike of *The Return of Superman* could be a strategy used to reinforce traditional masculinity. Unlike the female participants who engaged positively with the men's housework roles on the show, the male respondents read the show as a way to validate men's inability to carry out housework and childcare. By emphasizing men's lack of knowledge and skills in childcare, male audiences were able to perpetuate the belief that women are better suited for domestic responsibilities.

Overall, this study's male and female respondents were fully aware of the differences between TV and reality in terms of gender roles, as seen in their critical engagement with the fathers' childcare tasks in the TV show, *The Return of Superman*. For most respondents, the context portrayed on the show is too idealistic for contemporary Korea, where the Confucian legacy continues to hinder gender equality in housework and childcare. In addition to the awareness of the structural factors that shape the gendered division of labor, the audience's awareness of the contrived nature of reality shows featuring celebrity fathers also increased skepticism about the truthfulness of fathers' everyday participation in childcare. Overall, the unavoidable gendered division of labor was consistently reinstated in respondents' discussions about the show. This suggests that reality TV's progressive discourse on gender equality is insufficient to challenge existing assumptions about gender.

The representation of men in women's traditional roles and vice versa undeniably has the potential to bring about positive social changes to gender stereotypes. We argue, however, that to presume that the popularity of male childcare reality shows indicates gender equality is premature, considering that both male and female viewers are skeptical of the show's portrayal of reality, and thus are not hopeful about the feasibility of achieving gender equality in housework in their own everyday lives. Moreover, *The Return of Superman* leaves us with an ideological problem, because, as Kim (2014) claims, the depiction of men's childcare on the show can make the lives of the women who must face childcare-related constraints every day invisible.

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