

Slender women and overweight men: gender differences in the educational gradient in body weight in South Korea

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Obesity has become increasingly prevalent in Asian countries where it was rarely a problem in the past. Several factors account for this, including the experiencing of remarkable economic growth in these countries, and the emergence of an obesogenic environment. The emergence of obesogenic environments makes the human agency and knowledge that accrue from schooling more important for obesity prevention as people are exposed to fast changes in physical activity patterns and dietary intake.

Obesity is typically more prevalent among women because women's bodies are adapted to store more fat due to biological factors related to reproduction. The experience of childbirth also significantly increases the probability of obesity. Recent studies have documented that the gender differences in being overweight and obesity prevalence vary by social and cultural contexts, which indicates that gender is an important social factor of obesity as well as a biological marker.

Research links higher education with a lower risk of obesity but whether the shape and strength of the relationship varies by gender is inconclusive. Relatively less is known about the gender-specific mechanisms through which education is associated with weight status in non-Western societies with a gender hierarchy that have experienced a rapid rise in their obesity rates. Men and women are exposed to higher education in different ways and gain unequal socioeconomic returns to their levels of education in these societies. Furthermore, there are potential gender differences in the cultural ideologies regarding body shape, which contribute to generating different motivation for men and women to manage the emerged obesogenic environments.

The educational gradients in being overweight and obesity may be steeper for women than for men. Education is closely associated with cultural capital and predisposes people to be knowledgeable about normative codes of desirable physical appearance. Therefore, the variation in the educational gradients in weight status among men and women may be reflective of gender-linked differences in normative codes regarding ideal body size. Social pressure to conform to ideal body shape may vary between men and women. In developed societies, obese individuals are often stigmatized and social penalties for being obese are greater for women than for men. Women are more sensitive to their body shape particularly in anti-egalitarian countries where they are more likely to be evaluated by societal conventions based on physical appearance than men.

It may not be common for people to relate Koreans in South Korea with obesity, especially when they generally appear slender in Korean dramas and films. Although the prevalence of obesity in South Korea is relatively moderate compared to other high- and middle-income countries, it has been growing quickly, especially among middle-aged men although the same trend has not been observed among women. However, educational disparities in weight status have been observed only for women in recent years. According to the cross-national statistics among the 11 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the largest educational differences in being overweight and obesity have been observed for Korean women along with Spanish women, while the smallest educational inequalities have been found for Korean men. Despite the stark gender differences in educational gradients in weight, little is known about what creates the variations between men and women in this society.

Despite the expansion of higher education, which has reduced the gender gap in educational attainment, gender inequalities in labor force participation, wages, and type of employment remain substantial in Korea. According to the “glass-ceiling index” of the Economist (2016) based on the latest cross-national data, Korea is the worst place to be a working woman among 30 OECD countries. Korea has the largest gender wage gap and Korean women are least likely to be in senior managerial positions, which is far behind women in Scandinavian countries. Thus, it is possible that for women the effect of schooling may not be attributable to economic resources and play a direct role in determining health behaviors. In the context of a strong gender division of labor, women's bodies are often sexually objectified by men in the process of mate selection, which may drive women toward investing in human capital to achieve physical attractiveness. On the other hand, Korean men are less likely to be under appearance-related social pressures and less likely to be sensitive to body size. In this society, women's beauty is more likely to be valued as a symbolic asset, e.g., a beauty premium, which translates into tangible social resources in the labor and marriage market.

Health-related lifestyles are sometimes at odds with the ideology of the groups or organizations that people belong to. Individuals are expected to conform to the group's dominant ideology in order to avoid any possible disadvantages from not fulfilling the normative rules. Collective practices in Korea support the norm favoring longer working hours. The 2014 OECD statistics show that Korea has the longest working hours compared to other high income countries. Long working hour decreases workers' time for outdoor activities and sleep which play a significant role in the etiology of obesity. Korean male workers are also under pressure to participate in drinking gatherings as an extension of formal working hours to improve work place relations. Embedded in a cultural system of social interactions, alcohol consumption, a 'social lubricant', is positively perceived by professional and sales workers as a way to show solidarity with one's business network and to ease the stress associated with work. Unhealthy behaviors such as sitting behind a desk all day, overworking while reducing sleep hours, and binge drinking have been supported as a virtue shared by elite groups that measure social success among Korean men of working age. This may lead Korean men with college educations, who are generally more likely to have sedentary jobs and higher incomes than men with low levels of education, to be exposed to higher behavioral risks for gaining weight.

More attention should be paid to investigating why gender differences in the educational gradients in weight status and weight perception strongly exist in specific social contexts. My recent study which is appearing in *International Journal for Equity in Health* extends previous literature by examining how the link between education and weight status operates before and after controlling for other socioeconomic characteristics and health behaviors within the structure of gender relations in South Korea where huge gender differences have been observed in the educational inequalities in weight status.

Using the Korean National Health Survey (N= 17,947) conducted in 2008–2012, quantile regression models were estimated to assess the associations between education and body weight distribution. The mean difference in the predicted probabilities of perceiving body image as average was also compared by educational attainment for women and men. Highly educated Korean women were more likely to utilize their knowledge to obtain slender body shape and the relationship was not mediated by economic resources. In contrast, education was positively associated with being overweight and obesity among Korean men, for whom behaviors promoting healthy weight often conflict with a collective ideology at work that strongly supports long work hours and heavy alcohol consumption. Korean men traditionally tend to place a high value on socializing, while viewing drinking positively as a crucial component to building masculine social networks. Furthermore, Korean men were more likely to under-perceive their body size than Korean women, that is,

overweight men tend to consider themselves to be of 'average' weight, regardless of their educational attainment. Current study found that strict gender inequalities in social status in South Korea operate to affect the relationship between education and weight status among men and women in unique ways. Weight status can be socially patterned by the interplay between education, economic, and behavioral resources within the structure of gender relations.