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# Understanding Path-Departing Changes in Childcare Policy: The Influence of Self-Undermining Policy Feedback

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**ABSTRACT**

The debate surrounding policy feedback and policy developments has long revolved around self-reinforcing (positive) policy feedback. Recently, the literature has been enriched by a new research agenda that highlights the role of self-undermining (negative) policy feedback, which is also argued to significantly influence the evolution of policies. This study contributes to the existing literature by examining changes in childcare policy, a field that has thus far primarily analysed and emphasised positive policy feedback. By analysing the case of South Korea, we demonstrate that childcare policy is a good candidate for both positive and negative policy feedback. Furthermore, it is the combination of these pieces of feedback that determines the evolution of childcare policy. Additionally, this study illustrates that inadequately addressed negative feedback may lead to unforeseen policy shifts, as exemplified in the Korean case by the introduction of the cash-for-care policy.

## 1 | Introduction

The reciprocal relationship between policies and political institutions is a fundamental tenet of historical institutionalist thought (Béland 2010). Policies are not passive responses to political conditions; rather, they actively shape the political environment, influencing the distribution of resources, power dynamics, and the behaviour of political actors (Lowi 1964; Moynihan and Soss 2014; Pierson 1993). In other words, policies emerge from political processes, yet they, in turn, shape the course of future political and policy development. Scholars, such as Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol (1988), Skocpol (1992) and Weaver (2010), further highlight how policies, once established, reshape the organisation of the state and influence the goals and alliances of social groups engaged in ongoing political struggles. And they do so through two types of policy feedback: positive and negative.

*Positive*, or *self-reinforcing*, policy feedback occurs when a policy creates conditions that strengthen its own support over time,

rendering significant changes or reversals difficult to achieve (Brooks and Manza 2006; Pierson 1993, 2004). Advocates of this concept emphasise path dependence, indicating that past policy decisions and institutional structures constrain current choices and shape the trajectory of future policies. Pierson (1994) argues that existing policies create entrenched interests and constituencies that benefit from the status quo, leading to resistance against change and mobilisation to defend vested interests. This entrenched path makes it difficult to deviate from established policies or initiate large-scale reforms that contradict existing structures and interests. Consequently, policymakers often opt for limited reforms that build upon existing policy frameworks rather than fundamentally altering them (Pierson 1993).

*Negative*, or *self-undermining*, policy feedback, on the other hand, happens when a policy creates conditions that weaken its own support or effectiveness over time (Jacobs and Weaver 2015; Oberlander and Weaver 2015; Weaver 2010). For instance, a regulation might initially address a problem

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effectively, but over time, it could lead to unintended consequences that reduce its efficacy or generate opposition (Oberlander and Weaver 2015). External shocks or changing societal conditions may initiate processes that undermine the viability and popularity of established policies (Weaver 1986) and potentially lead to radical policy changes, either through policy reorientation or rollback (Jacobs and Weaver 2015). Weaver, along with others (e.g., Daugbjerg and Kay 2020; Fernández and Jaime-Castillo 2013; Jordan and Matt 2014), argues that self-reinforcing feedback effects represent only one aspect of the story, with self-undermining forms of policy feedback being widespread. They contend, instead, that it is the combination of positive and negative feedback that determines the evolution of policy regimes. As the policy feedback literature tends to be biased toward positive feedback, these scholars call for more attention to be given to negative feedback.

While scholars across various policy fields have endeavoured to investigate the impact of negative feedback in their respective areas (Fernández and Jaime-Castillo 2013; Jordan and Matt 2014; Millar et al. 2021; Skogstad 2017), those focusing on childcare policies have yet to fully recognise the role of negative feedback in facilitating institutional change.

The literature argues that childcare policy has undergone profound, revolutionary changes (Bonoli 2013; Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2015), with these changes being fundamental even in countries previously considered frozen landscapes (Ostner 2010). These changes align with Peter Hall's (1993) concept of third-order change, which entails a paradigm shift in policy goals and instruments. Originally, many European countries adhered to a model of familialism by default or explicit familialism, where responsibility for childcare rested predominantly with families, with either minimal state intervention or transfer-intensive approaches (Leitner 2003; Saraceno 2016). However, as societal values have evolved, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of state involvement in the provision and regulation of childcare services (Orloff 2006; Ostner 2010). This shift toward de-familialisation aims to support working parents, promote gender equality, and ensure child development, marking a fundamental reorientation in policy thinking and objectives (Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2015).

Conversely, there have also been remarkable alterations in policy logic in the opposite direction, as shown by the dismantling of childcare services in the Czech Republic after the collapse of communism (Hašková and Saxonberg 2016) and the introduction of cash-for-care allowances in Scandinavian countries (Eydal and Rostgaard 2011). Traditionally, Scandinavian countries have been known for their extensive state-supported childcare services, designed to promote gender equality and enable high levels of female workforce participation. However, the cash-for-care approach, which provides parents with a direct subsidy to care for their children at home instead of using public childcare services, introduces a different dimension to childcare policy. As such, the introduction of cash-for-care represents a complex and fundamental shift in policy that challenges the balance between supporting parental choice and maintaining the progressive achievements in gender equality that have characterised Scandinavian welfare states (Hiilamo and Kangas 2009).

Consistent with the general feedback literature, we should assume that the effects of negative feedback determine the evolution of childcare policy regimes and that positive feedback effects do not overwhelmingly govern the realm of childcare policy. In fact, over the last two decades, negative feedback may have been even more influential than positive feedback. However, it is evident that academic scholars studying changes in childcare policy have predominantly focused on and emphasised the role of positive feedback (e.g., Morel 2007; Oliver and Mätzke 2014). In addition, fundamental shifts in the childcare policy regimes have been attributed to various drivers of change, including socioeconomic challenges (Seeleib-Kaiser 2016), ideational change (Himmelweit and Lee 2024; Seeleib-Kaiser 2016), electoral competition (Fleckenstein and Lee 2017; Seeleib-Kaiser 2010), or new cultural constellations (Ostner 2010), though negative feedback is seldom considered. This discrepancy prompts us to question whether the concept of negative feedback is theoretically useful for interpreting childcare policy change or if scholars in this field are overly biased towards positive feedback, neglecting the significance of negative feedback as a driver of policy change.

We assert that including both positive and negative feedback is crucial for understanding policy change in this field. This argument is substantiated by an in-depth analysis of childcare policy changes in South Korea, which has experienced significant shifts in childcare policy in both directions mentioned earlier (Gurín 2023), making it an ideal case for studying positive and negative feedback. The first major shift in childcare policy occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s when governments transitioned from a male-breadwinner model to market-driven de-familialisation. Nearly a decade later, the second shift happened with the introduction of a cash-for-care allowance, (partially) re-familialising in part the childcare policy regime. Empirical investigation reveals that the fundamental policy shifts in both instances were driven by negative feedback. In the first instance, the negative feedback was a result of the unsustainability of past policy approaches, marked by the absence of childcare services, influenced by changes in family dynamics, ongoing industrialisation, and the desire for OECD membership; while in the second, it was due to dissatisfaction with the poor quality of newly-established private services, which the government failed to improve because of resistance from early winners opposing reforms. In other words, the very services that were established in response to negative feedback eventually became targets of negative feedback themselves.

This case illustrates that childcare policies can be susceptible to both positive *and* negative feedback. Childcare policies may evolve in ways unintended by their designers, resulting in highly noticeable policy failures. Given the significance of childcare for the welfare of families and children, childcare policy failures can catalyse the formation of counter-coalitions, compelling policymakers to address negative policy legacies. These issues may largely go unheard during times when governments favour the status quo, but may be addressed when partisan allies take over the executive branch (Oberlander and Weaver 2015). Furthermore, our example demonstrates that inadequately addressed negative feedback

can contribute to unforeseen shifts in policy—exemplified in our case by the introduction of cash-for-care. Our findings underscore the significance and presence of negative forms of policy feedback in this policy field, emphasising the need for increased attention to negative policy feedback from childcare policy scholars.

The article is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of the current knowledge of negative policy feedback and presents an argument for why childcare policies are susceptible to negative feedback. Next, it presents the research methodology employed in the study, followed by an investigation of the childcare policy change in the period between 1990 and 2020 in the light of positive and negative policy feedback. The last part concludes.

## 2 | Childcare Policy as a Candidate for Negative Policy Feedback

Self-undermining policy feedback is understood in the political sense as a "backlash that threatens to destabilise a policy" (Daugbjerg and Kay 2020, p. 259). They represent a complex phenomenon in which the very policies that are implemented to address societal problems inadvertently contribute to their own erosion over time (Jacobs and Weaver 2015; Oberlander and Weaver 2015; Weaver 2010). According to Weaver (2010), self-undermining or negative policy feedback (as he originally termed them) operate over extended periods of time and serve to create a political and policy-making environment that is conducive to the emergence of interest groups that seek to undo or significantly alter current policy instruments and paradigms.

Proponents of negative policy feedback criticise the policy feedback literature as biased toward positive feedback and thus offers only one aspect of the story (Fernández and Jaime-Castillo 2013; Jacobs and Weaver 2015; Jordan and Matt 2014; Oberlander and Weaver 2015). They argue that negative forms of policy feedback merit greater scrutiny from researchers given their prevalence and significant potential for understanding policy change (Jacobs and Weaver 2015; Weaver 2010). This is because negative policy feedback helps illuminate the path-departing changes observed across policy fields, with negative feedback gradually creating the conditions for such changes (Weaver 2010). Therefore, they believe that it is the combination of the effects of positive *and* negative feedback that determines the evolution of policies (Jacobs and Weaver 2015).

One primary cause of negative policy feedback stems from unintended consequences (Jacobs and Weaver 2015; Mettler 2016). Policies may be designed with noble intentions, but unforeseen outcomes can emerge during implementation. These unintended effects may include social disruptions, economic imbalances or unintended burdens on specific groups. As these consequences become apparent, they can generate dissatisfaction among the public and policymakers, which in turn leads to a reassessment of the policy's effectiveness (Fernández and Jaime-Castillo 2013; Oberlander and Weaver 2015). Societal changes, evolving values, and shifts in public opinion can also contribute to negative policy feedback (Weaver 2010). Policies that were once aligned with prevailing norms may become obsolete or face increased

scrutiny as societal attitudes evolve. The disconnect between the policy and current social dynamics weakens its legitimacy and support, which can lead to calls for reform or replacement. In addition, the emergence and empowerment of interest groups can play a pivotal role in undermining policies (Jordan and Matt 2014). Policies often create winners and losers, and those adversely affected may organise themselves into interest groups that advocate for policy reversal or adjustments. These groups exert political pressure and create an environment in which the original policy is challenged by factions seeking to protect their interests. Finally, Daugbjerg and Kay (2020) argue that too much positive feedback over extended periods of time, where the policy is no longer consistent with its context, can lead to a self-undermining policy trajectory, i.e., "policy pathway is undermined by positive instrument feedbacks" (p. 254).

While negative policy feedback can create internal tensions and pressures, the broader context and a combination of factors determine whether it translates into policy change (Jacobs and Weaver 2015; Skogstad 2017). As Oberlander and Weaver (2015, p. 44) note, actors seeking policy change "may have to wait until sympathetic politicians gain power in order to redress their grievances." Indeed, the willingness of political actors to respond to negative feedback is crucial. If policymakers are committed to preserving the status quo or lack the political will to address the feedback, the self-undermining dynamic alone may not lead to policy change.

While social policies are often described as prime candidates for positive policy feedback (Campbell 2012; Pierson 1993), it has recently been emphasised that these policies can also be good candidates for negative policy feedback (Weaver 2010 and Fernández and Jaime-Castillo 2013, using the example of pension reforms). It is our view that this could also pertain to childcare policies, which could similarly result in unforeseen costs and unintended grievances that could undermine their persistence.

Negative feedback may arise when childcare services are underdeveloped or unavailable. Historically based on a male-breadwinner model, the lack of childcare services can generate negative policy feedback as societal norms shift toward dual-earner families and gender equality. Without adequate childcare, working parents, especially women, struggle to balance work and family, leading to lower workforce participation, career stagnation, and income inequality, which reinforces traditional gender roles and hampers labour market equity (Lauri, Põder, and Ciccia 2020). Moreover, the absence of childcare limits the effectiveness of poverty reduction and family welfare policies, forcing parents to choose between work and caregiving (Plantenga and Remery 2009). These ongoing challenges are driving demand for policy changes, recognising that without (comprehensive) childcare support, the broader objectives of welfare states cannot be fully realised (Bonoli 2013).

Even with childcare services in place, negative feedback can occur. Childcare policies can be criticised by a variety of stakeholders, each highlighting different issues and advocating for specific policy changes. Parents and families may criticise the high cost, limited availability, poor quality and inflexibility of childcare services. They may demand increased subsidies,

expansion of public facilities, greater regulation to improve quality, and more flexible childcare options (Thévenon and Luci 2012; Saraceno 2011). Parental trust in the childcare system, both public and private, is crucial. Negative perceptions, whether due to real incidents or public discourse, can undermine trust in childcare services and prompt parents to seek and/or demand alternative arrangements (Roberts 2011). Feminists and gender equality advocates may (and often do) point out that inadequate childcare services limit women's workforce participation and reinforce traditional gender roles. They may call for fundamental policy changes that promote work–family balance, increase women's labour market participation, and encourage shared caregiving responsibilities (Oliver and Mätzke 2014; Orloff 2006). Opposition political parties may criticise inequities in access to childcare, particularly for low-income or rural families, and criticise the inefficiency of the existing system. They may demand comprehensive reforms, greater investment in public childcare infrastructure, and family-friendly policies to boost fertility rates (Ostner 2010; Seeleib-Kaiser 2010). Finally, businesses and employers may also express concerns and demands, pointing out that insufficient childcare options lead to higher employee turnover, absenteeism and reduced productivity (Baek, Sung, and Lee 2011). They can advocate for employer-sponsored childcare programmes, tax incentives, and public-private partnerships to increase childcare availability.

Childcare policies can lead to negative unintended consequences due to various factors such as inadequate regulation and insufficient funding. For instance, when state oversight is minimal, childcare providers may not meet essential quality standards. This can result in overcrowded facilities, unqualified staff, and unsafe environments, which can adversely impact children's development and well-being (Burchinal et al. 2000). Inadequate regulation can also lead to financial mismanagement and fraud within private childcare centres, as seen in numerous cases of financial irregularities uncovered in South Korea (Hwang 2021; Jo 2018).

Childcare policy systems include monitoring and review systems which, as Skogstad (2017, p. 25) argues, are "capable of revealing lapses in a policy's performance." Visible government failures resulting from poor policy design and/or unintended consequences then could push governments to change inherent negative policy legacies. At the same time, given the significance of childcare for the welfare of families and children in particular, childcare policy failures may catalyse the formation of strong counter-coalitions, comprising parents, childcare policy experts, and the political opposition. This may compel policymakers to address negative policy legacies by making adjustments, adopting alternatives, or even terminating the policy.

The literature contains several cases that exemplify negative feedback in childcare policy. For instance, the poor design of childcare services was a crucial issue during the communist period in the Czech Republic, resulting in eventual dismantling of these services after the collapse of the regime (Hašková and Saxonberg 2016). The marketisation of childcare services has been argued to bring several negative consequences, including poor quality and inequalities in access, which policymakers

often do not foresee at the time of adoption. In competitive markets, childcare service providers prioritise attracting customers and maximising market share over ensuring quality and addressing societal needs. This competitive pressure incentivises cost-saving measures and corner-cutting practices that compromise service quality and reliability (see, for example, Gallagher 2018). Daly (2010) and Lewis (2013) document that such a policy path prompts dissatisfaction and criticism from parents, who demand a policy reorientation. However, these pleas are only partially, if at all, addressed since they often collide with strong self-reinforcing feedback from private childcare providers.

Hence, it is understandable that childcare policy scholars pay attention to positive feedback as they resist, block or blunt new policy approaches (León 2007; Naldini and Saraceno 2008; White 2002), often expanding the inherent policy legacies instead (Daly 2010; Lewis 2013), or changing policies while maintaining their traits or imprints (e.g., Morel 2007). However, how negative policy feedback contribute to the understanding of childcare policy change and how these emerge in the first instance, remain largely unexplored. The numerous policy changes in recent decades, marked by significant shifts in childcare policies among welfare states, suggest that self-reinforcing feedback effects are not universal, with negative feedback being more prevalent and influential than commonly assumed. This study therefore addresses two main questions: *What are the mechanisms by which self-undermining policy feedback emerge in childcare policies? And how these pieces of feedback shape the trajectory of childcare policy regimes?*

## 3 | Methodology

Policy change is influenced by a range of factors, including socioeconomic and demographic pressures (Bonoli 2005; Hantrais 1999), policy dynamics, shifts in the actors responsible for collective decision-making (von Wahl 2008), electoral competition (Seeleib-Kaiser 2010) and evolving prevailing ideas (Béland 2016). These factors are exogenous to the policy itself—they originate outside the policy and exert external pressure on decision-makers to adapt or change course. While these factors may set the stage for policy change, policy feedback specifically refers to how existing policies loop back to influence the future policy environment. As previously mentioned, feedback can either *reinforce* a policy by creating stakeholders who benefit from it (Pierson 2004), or they can *undermine* a policy if the unintended consequences erode public or political support (Jacobs and Weaver 2015). Therefore, recognising policy feedback involves identifying how past policies have reshaped the political landscape, altering the incentives, constraints, and preferences of actors in ways that impact future decision-making (Weaver 2010).

Determining whether self-undermining policy feedback is a sufficient cause of policy change, as Oberlander and Weaver (2015) suggest it rarely is, or a contributing factor, necessitates a thorough and detailed analysis. A single-case study is an effective strategy for investigating policy change and the influence of policy feedback as it allows for in-depth analysis, captures

context-specific insights, and enables detailed process tracing (Yin 2018). South Korea was chosen because it represents a notable example of a country that has undergone significant policy changes (toward de-familialisation and re-familialisation of childcare), thus falling under the purview of negative feedback theory.

To assess the presence or absence of positive and negative feedback and their impact on policy stability and change, document analysis and expert interviews were employed. Throughout, the document analysis focused on the preferences and roles of actors, including target populations and other politically significant actors such as pressure groups, in the policy-making process. This involved gathering public statements both in support of and in opposition to the policy. This included examining strategic policy documents, government reports and media coverage of reforms where policymakers explicitly reference the consequences of and feedback towards previous policies as reasons for changing course. This method provided a broader perspective on stakeholder perceptions and official narratives, revealing how policy feedback is discussed and addressed. In addition, we gathered and used academic studies (written in English and Korean) that assess the impact of policy feedback on decision-making processes, providing empirical evidence of the link.

Complementing the document analysis, semi-structured interviews and information inquiries were conducted with three renowned Korean scholars in the field of childcare policy, who are either well knowledgeable about or have collected testimonies that influenced policymakers to change policies in response to policy feedback. These interviews and information inquiries shed light on how feedback mechanisms influenced decisions and uncovered contextual factors not evident in written documents. To adhere to ethical principles, the identities of those interviewed are kept confidential.

## 4 | Case Study: Self-Undermining Policy Feedback in the Korean Childcare Policy

### 4.1 | Early Expansion of Childcare Services With the 'Help' of the Market

To determine whether a radical policy change has occurred due to negative feedback, it is essential to establish a reference point (Seeleib-Kaiser 2016). Here, the reference point denotes the initial childcare policy that was in place before radical discontinuities in policy were introduced in the 1990s and 2000s.

Childcare services and facilities were first introduced in Korea during the postwar period, under The Child Welfare Act of 1961. These services were targeted exclusively at children from low-income families. The prevailing notion at the time was that mothers are primary providers of childcare, and government intervention or support in childcare was considered a measure of last resort (Lee 2018). No direct child benefits were provided and childcare services served only those whom the regime understood as the most deserving: single parents and couple families with the lowest income (Fleckenstein and Lee 2014). Accordingly, the childcare policy regime could be characterised

as a classic example of implicit familialism (Leitner 2003) or familialism by default (Saraceno 2016).

The Infant Care Act of 1991 marked a major policy shift, as it recognised the joint responsibility of central and local governments in providing childcare, not just a familial one. This change was driven by concerns about the sustainability of past policy trajectories in the face of shifting policy dynamics and rapid industrialisation (Jeong, Oh, and Ahn 1995). The rising demand for female labour and the shift to nuclear families underscored the need to reconceptualise childcare (Baek, Sung, and Lee 2011). An expert interview (expert I) revealed that South Korea's aspiration to join the OECD also motivated this policy change. Criticism from the OECD about low female employment and inadequate childcare pushed the government to act. As the expert explained, South Korea faced criticism for lacking sufficient childcare support, which was seen as a barrier to its recognition as a developed nation during the OECD accession process.

Consequently, childcare services witnessed an expansion during the 1990s (3-Year Plan for Expansion of Childcare Centres 1995–1997), aided by subsidies for low-income families in 1992 and the provision of free childcare for five-year-olds from low-income families residing in rural regions, still retaining residual traits. The productivist government (cf. Holliday 2000), however, was reluctant to directly provide these services and instead encouraged the private sector to take action—anticipating positive economic outcomes and avoiding strain on state finances from the need to build childcare infrastructure. As a result, the childcare policy system underwent de-familialisation through market-driven service provision, with the number of private childcare providers steadily increasing, while the number of public providers remained consistently low (Won and Pascall 2004).

The neglected status of childcare services, which hampered women's labour force participation and gender equality, also drew criticism from feminist groups. The continued neglect of childcare services could not be sustained when the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 severely impacted the South Korean economy (Jeoung 2021). Feminist activists urged the government to reform institutional structures to take into account women's interests in social policies and considered the participation of women in economic activity as an extremely important task. To ensure equal opportunity for both men and women and to encourage women's economic activities, multifaceted measures conducive to work–family balance were required (Baek 2009). The government of Kim Dae-jung (1998–2002), primarily focused on economic recovery, recognised the need to reevaluate the welfare state regarding childcare policy and proposed childcare policy focused on promoting women's labour force participation. The childcare subsidy programme was expanded to include middle-class and dual-earner households, in addition to low-income families, and active measures were taken to foster the growth of the private childcare sector (An and Peng 2016). Deregulation of the system led to a significant increase in the number of commercial childcare providers (from 6538 centres in 1997 to 11,046 centres in 2002; Fleckenstein and Lee 2017). Government's own involvement, however, remained minimal, at best consisting of passive administrative oversight and financial support.

## 4.2 | Negative (Self-Undermining) Policy Feedback Facing Strong Positive (Self-Reinforcing) Feedback From the Private Childcare Providers

The expansion of childcare policies took significant strides under the centre-left government of Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2007), at a time when South Korea faced its lowest-ever fertility rate of 1.08. This demographic crisis fuelled a 'national emergency' discourse, which gained traction with both the general public and influential actors who had previously been hesitant to fully endorse childcare reform and work–family balance initiatives (Kim 2018; Lee 2018). Roh's administration recognised the urgency of the situation, making work–family balance and social investment cornerstones of its policy agenda (Baek 2009).

The government's focus on childcare was driven by Roh's belief that investing in these services was key to addressing the challenges of an aging population. As a result, several pivotal reforms were introduced, including the revised *Infant Care Act* (2004), the *Sa-ssak Plan* (2006–2010), and the *Saeromaji Plan* (First Basic Plan for Low Fertility and Aging Society). Together, these reforms sought to enhance the affordability, quality, and diversity of childcare services (Baek and Seo 2004). A notable departure from previous administrations was Roh's commitment to reducing the market's dominance in the childcare sector. This was to be achieved by expanding public access to services and aiming for 30% enrolment in public childcare facilities, a strategic move toward 'de-familialising' care through state-supported social services. These reforms were met with support from key civil society organisations, such as the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy and the Korean Women's Association United, underscoring the broad-based coalition behind the government's efforts.

However, the drive for reform was not merely a proactive response to demographic concerns but also a reaction to the mounting dissatisfaction with the existing childcare system. By the early 2000s, chronic issues within the private childcare market had led to widespread parental grievances, particularly over the high costs and subpar service quality. Private childcare facilities were criticised for having high teacher-to-student ratios and lacking sufficient regulatory oversight, resulting in inconsistent and inadequate care (Baek 2009; Choi 2010). Furthermore, poor wages for childcare workers, especially in private centres, contributed to substandard service delivery, further eroding trust in the system (Hwang 2005; Na et al. 2003). Consequently, the First Mid- to Long-term Childcare Plan outlined five-year goals focused on strengthening public involvement in childcare, improving service quality, and reducing financial burdens on families. It prioritised creating a child-centred environment that better supported working families and addressed *public grievances.*

Thus, the most pressing policy need at this time was to increase the number of public childcare facilities, which parents preferred in terms of both cost and service quality. As proponents of self-reinforcing feedback would anticipate, however, strong opposition arose against this policy reform (cf. Daly 2010; Lewis 2013, for comparison with the UK case). Local governments and private providers fiercely opposed the government's plans to increase access to public childcare (Lee 2017).

The expert interview (expert II) reveals the depth of this opposition:

> When the government attempted to undermine private institutions and shift toward a public childcare model, private entities made it clear they would not stand idly by. From the perspective of private providers, they had a valid point: when the Korean government previously needed daycare facilities, it encouraged them to establish businesses, even providing loans to do so. Now, however, the government's plan to expand public daycare by 30% seemed unreasonable. (...) This led to significant conflicts between the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and private associations at the time.

Private childcare organisations viewed the proposed reform as a direct threat to their established interests and investments. They argued that the abrupt policy shift was unfair, especially since previous governments had actively encouraged their establishment. The expert describes this conflict:

> Private associations engaged in extensive lobbying, and at the central level, they staged protests in front of the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, as well as in front of city halls.

Also local governments were particularly resistant due to the substantial responsibilities imposed on them, such as managing land acquisition and the operation of public childcare facilities. They were also expected to contribute one-fourth of the budget for the expansion. As the expert notes,

> An important aspect to consider is that childcare funding comes not only from the central government but also from local governments. (...) At the local level, there is a close relationship between local governing councils and private childcare associations. Therefore, the government could not ignore these close ties.

Local politicians, often indebted to private childcare providers, exhibited passive behaviour towards the expansion of public facilities due to their intertwined interests (Chang 2011). The objections and threats from private childcare providers intensified, and the government feared that closing private providers could create significant gaps in childcare provision. Ultimately, the plan was halted by the Ministry of Strategy and Finance, which refused to allocate additional funds for the expansion of public childcare facilities. As Lee (2017) notes, this decision was heavily influenced by lobbying from private childcare organisations.

The government sought, at the very least, to regulate and enhance the quality of private childcare providers. As previously mentioned, earlier administrations had attempted to reduce barriers to entry and lower regulatory standards to foster competition. However, this approach led to numerous for-profit services failing to meet basic quality standards, resulting in widespread

dissatisfaction and distrust among users (Kim 2017). A new accreditation scheme was intended to address these issues. However, in contrast to the original draft, the evaluation criteria in the final proposal were not sufficiently robust. This was largely due to successful lobbying by private childcare organisations, which actively opposed the introduction of stricter accreditation measures, primarily due to concerns over increased costs. As a result, the government was compelled to compromise with the demands of the private sector (Lee 2017).

As it became increasingly difficult to challenge the position of private childcare providers, the government was forced to re-orient its policy towards utilising the existing, more expensive private services (cf. Hacker 2005; Pierson 2004). To reduce the financial burden on parents and thereby increase the take-up of services and enable higher female labour force participation, the government expanded differential childcare subsidies to also cover middle-income families and provided free childcare for children under 5 or children with disabilities (Baek 2009). In addition, the Basic Subsidy Scheme, directly paid to *private* childcare providers, for parents with children up to the age of two in private institutions was introduced in 2005. The aim was to reduce the cost difference between public and private providers and thus ensure greater fairness between users of childcare facilities. In contrast to the government's initial intentions, this "private-based publicness" (Kim 2017) led to the further expansion of the private sector—an outcome that many social actors (e.g., the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy) had warned about (Baek 2009; Lee 2017).

Nevertheless, the commercialisation of childcare was consistently criticised for numerous problems, including poor service quality and public distrust (Choi 2016). Despite these ongoing issues, the new centre-right government of Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) continued to view care as a market commodity. In an effort to enhance user satisfaction and improve policy efficiency, the government introduced an electronic voucher system in 2009 (Korea Institute of Child Care and Education 2009). This system was designed to replace the previous subsidy system, with the goal of improving the quality of private childcare providers and reducing the need for public service supplementation (Ma, Kim, and Lee 2016; Kim 2017). The central premise of the voucher system was that enabling "customers" to select and choose their childcare providers would promote cost-effectiveness and drive improvements in service quality (Kim and Nam 2011). Public daycare services were overlooked by the government, despite significant pressure from parents and civic organisations.

## 4.3 | Negative Feedback and the Unforeseen Shift in Childcare Policy: The Introduction of Cash-for-Care

As the historical accounts illustrate, the policy regime showed a clear preference for in-kind benefits over cash benefits, resulting in a noticeable imbalance. However, the need to introduce direct financial support in the form of child benefits has been highlighted and demanded by academics, civil society and political parties since the early 2000s. For example, the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy advocated for child benefit as an important measure to combat poverty (Choi 2020). The

idea of child benefit subsequently appeared on the government's agenda, first in 2004, when the Roh government examined the introduction of means-tested child benefit as one of the fertility-enhancing components, and later as a possible universal benefit for families regardless of their income (Lee 2017). However, implementation was considered a long-term task and was constantly postponed due to a lack of substantial (financial) support from businesses and the Ministry of Finance, which did not view the child benefit system as an "effective" measure to promote fertility (Lee 2017; Choi 2020). In other words, the idea of introducing a child benefit scheme encountered resistance from self-reinforcing policy feedback, which favoured maintaining the status quo and minimal state responsibility. As a result, the debate on child benefits was put on hold. This inertia in policy development, driven by financial considerations, illustrates the ways in which entrenched policy feedback can act as barriers to reform, perpetuating limited state responsibility in addressing fertility-related challenges.

Instead, discussions had begun about supporting families *not using* childcare services. In 2006, the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family announced a plan to review the introduction of a cash-for-care allowance as part of the 1st Basic Family Policy Plan (2006–2010). This was seen as a way to offer financial support to families, given that child benefit proposals faced positive feedback aiming to maintain the status quo. By September 2008, the Ministry of Health and Welfare officially proposed the introduction of a cash-for-care allowance, reflecting growing dissatisfaction among families who did not use childcare services but received no financial support.

As governments expanded support for families using childcare services that, however, lacked the trust of families, vocal demands of social justice and equity arose among families, who decided not to use (private) childcare services and, they argued, remained without support (Min and Jang 2015; Pyo and Kim 2021). And the government sought to address concerns regarding the fairness of its support to families as illustrated by a 2009 report from the Ministry of Health and Welfare (p. 17) which legitimised the introduction of cash-for-care policy accordingly: "*to address the fairness* of early childhood care support policies and meet the needs of parents who prefer to care for their children at home, it is necessary to establish government support for children not enrolled in childcare facilities. (...) Introducing a child-rearing allowance for children not using childcare facilities can be justified in terms of ensuring equity with childcare fee support." The negative feedback thus played a key role in the decision to introduce a cash-for-care allowance (a flat-rate benefit of 100,000 KRW per month) for low-income non-users of childcare services in 2009.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that other factors also contributed to the policy's introduction. The expert interview (expert I) highlighted the role of family and child studies which gained influence by aligning with power interests. These scholars believed that "*children should be raised by their mothers to foster attachment*" and opposed state-supported daycare, arguing that it was "*detrimental to the well-being of children*" (see also Song 2014). As this discourse gained traction, it was argued that without financial support, parents reluctant to use daycare would cause an "*unnecessary concentration of children in these*

*facilities*," which led to the rapid approval of the cash-for-care allowance. These positions were also firmly held by a large part of the ruling conservative party in which "policymakers took women support for children at home for granted", making the adoption of this policy a relatively easy process (Kim 2017, p. 69). Additionally, the expert (I) pointed out that the government's reluctance to invest heavily in improving daycare quality led to the decision to provide direct financial support to families, which was seen as a "*strategy to save money while gaining electoral support*." The Blue House discovered through polling that "women in their 30s" were largely opposed to President Lee Myung-bak, leading advisors to propose a policy to distribute cash to this demographic, as these parents were frustrated by the lack of support for home care despite daycare being free for enrolled children.

Criticism of the cash-for-care allowance was strong, particularly from civic groups and childcare organisations. Civic groups, including the Korea Women's Associations United and the National Childcare Center Association, opposed the policy, arguing that it should not be implemented without first expanding public childcare services. These groups, which advocated for greater state responsibility in childcare, feared that the allowance would weaken public investment in high-quality childcare facilities (Lee 2017). This self-reinforcing feedback from proponents of public childcare services was, however, unsuccessful in preventing the policy's adoption.

The cash-for-care allowance, representing an explicit form of familialism, marks another significant policy change in the Korean childcare policy regime. This time, the shift was driven by dissatisfaction with existing services, which themselves emerged from negative feedback, as previously discussed. Dissatisfaction with existing childcare services, exacerbated by the government's failure to expand public options or improve the quality of private ones, regardless of the introduced voucher system, led to a substantial rise in families opting for the allowance over formal childcare services. The number of families using the cash-for-care allowance even surpassed those utilising childcare facilities (Kim 2017).

## 4.4 | A Window of Opportunity for Public Childcare: Change in the Government

Concurrently, the problems with the private daycare providers persisted. For instance, many childcare providers have circumvented centralised accounting monitoring systems (Hwang 2021). A sequence of special audits conducted between 2013 and 2017 uncovered 5951 instances of financial irregularities and accounting fraud in 1878 private kindergartens. In these cases, fees were misappropriated for personal purposes rather than being used for quality improvements (Jo 2018). Moreover, numerous instances of child abuse were reported in private daycare centres (Cho 2015), ultimately leading to the mandatory installation of surveillance cameras in daycare centres since 2015. It is therefore not surprising that the demand for public daycare services far exceeded the actual supply (Lee et al. 2018).

After the centre-left government regained control of the presidential office, the window of opportunity for public childcare

reopened. The Moon Jae-in administration (2017–2022), which identified "inclusive welfare" as the new main paradigm of welfare policy, had a clear policy orientation in favour of socialising care through the expansion of the public sector—a measure rated as the 'most desired' by 35.9% of respondents in the Ministry of Health and Welfare's nationwide survey (MHW 2018). The Fourth Strategy for an Aging Society and Population envisaged strengthening the responsibility of the state by setting the goal of increasing the enrolment rate in public childcare institutions to 40% by 2022 and to 50% by 2025. However, due to the activities of private childcare associations, again, the implementation of such a policy has been quite limited. For example, the amendment to the Child Care Act (2017), which would have allowed the construction of public childcare facilities in abandoned primary school classrooms, was put on hold due to vehement resistance from these associations.

At the same time, the government made great efforts to improve the standards of all daycare centres. As of 2019, all childcare providers are required to use the accreditation system, which was previously optional. By mandating participation in the assessment system, the government aimed to improve the quality of (private) facilities and close the blind spot where many of them remained uncertified. Additionally, the Moon administration established the Public Agency for Social Service (PASS) in 2019, which is responsible for managing and supervising public childcare facilities. This policy is groundbreaking in two ways: first, it enhances the central government's role beyond merely providing financial incentives and regulatory guidance, moving towards directly providing high-quality childcare; and second, it enables local governments to re-municipalise childcare they previously entrusted to the market (Yang 2020).

## 5 | Conclusion

The debate surrounding policy feedback and policy change has long revolved around positive (self-reinforcing) policy feedback (Pierson 1994). The literature has been significantly enriched by a newfound emphasis on negative (self-undermining) policy feedback, which occur when existing institutions and policies yield adverse socioeconomic consequences (Weaver 2010, p. 139). Interestingly, scholars in the field of childcare policy have also concentrated primarily on analysing and emphasising positive policy feedback and their impact on childcare policy evolution. However, they have largely overlooked the potential significance of negative policy feedback, which could have acted as a trigger and a catalyst for the transformative changes observed in recent decades.

We argue that childcare policies may be a good candidate for negative feedback. When childcare services are missing or severely neglected, negative feedback can arise. This is because, without formal childcare, parents, particularly mothers, may struggle to maintain employment or advance in their careers, leading to financial instability and hindering professional growth (Thévenon and Luci 2012). The shortage of childcare services may be a subject of criticism from the political opposition for various reasons, notably its detrimental effects on fertility rates and gender equality (Oliver and Mätzke 2014). Consequently, the absence of childcare services may generate widespread dissatisfaction and criticism, as it disrupts family life and individual career paths and has far-reaching

implications for economic stability. However, negative feedback can also occur in response to existing childcare services due to various factors that affect their perceived quality and reliability (Roberts 2011; Saraceno 2011). The cost of childcare, the quality of care provided, the caregiver-to-child ratio, concerns about the qualifications and training of childcare staff, incidents of neglect or abuse, and inflexible working hours can all contribute to negative feedback as they impact overall trust, satisfaction, and the perceived value of childcare services, prompting parents to voice their concerns and demand better alternatives.

Dissatisfaction and criticism can lead to fundamental changes in childcare policy, such as shifting from a male-breadwinner model towards a de-familialised system, and vice versa. Historical accounts of Korean childcare policy illustrate this dynamic. In the 1990s, the lack of childcare services faced heavy criticism from feminist groups and businesses, leading to a shift from implicit familialism to market-driven de-familialisation. The imprudent expansion of childcare services through the market, without adequate oversight and regulation by the state, however, resulted in unaffordable, low-quality services. This failure to ensure quality and affordability undermined parental trust and satisfaction, prompting demands for more credible alternative arrangements and solutions. The Roh Moo-hyun government attempted to address these negative legacies but faced strong reinforcing feedback that ultimately prevented any proposed reforms. Appeals for desired policy solutions went unheard, and, as Pierson (2004) and Hacker (2005) would predict, the government reverted to supporting existing arrangements. Consequently, non-users—those who chose not to use private childcare services—found themselves without support from the welfare state, which had thus far solely focused on (market-driven) services. This prompted vocal criticism, resulting in an unexpected shift in childcare policy: the introduction of cash-for-care in 2009. The absence of additional reforms to align the policy with parental demands resulted in increased take-up of cash-for-care following its expansion, further weakening the position of market-based childcare. When centre-left political forces regained executive power a decade later, a second, more successful opportunity arose to address negative feedback (cf. Oberlander and Weaver 2015). This contradicts the claim by proponents of positive policy feedback that policy change becomes increasingly challenging in the later stages of policy development.

In the light of this evidence, we believe that both scholars and policymakers should allocate greater attention to negative policy feedback and their causes. This is because inadequately addressed negative policy feedback may lead to a variety of negative consequences for both the government and the society it governs. Poorly or imprudently designed childcare policies, which fail to address crucial aspects such as safety, quality of care and equality in access, may negatively impact children's development (e.g., Burchinal et al. 2000). In addition, such policies may exacerbate gender inequality by disproportionately affecting women's ability to participate in the workforce (Leitner 2003; Saraceno 2011). Childcare policies that go awry can erode public trust in the government's ability to address pressing issues. If people perceive that the government is unable or unwilling to correct its mistakes, trust in governmental institutions may decline. Finally, as illustrated by the Czech case, widespread dissatisfaction with poorly designed childcare services can lead to their dismantling or termination, with subsequent restoration being a difficult task (Gurín 2024). Ultimately, this study underscores the need for careful policy design, continuous assessment, and adaptive governance to achieve positive outcomes.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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**Appendix A**

**Policy Changes and Mechanisms**

| Period | Policy change | Substance | Type of change | Feedback | Actors | Description | Other factors |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1991–1997 | Expansion of Childcare Centres | Recognition of childcare as a national issue, expansion through private sector | Market-driven de-familialisation (radical policy change) | Self-undermining | Businesses, families, OECD | Dissatisfaction with past policy trajectory (absence of childcare services) | Changing family dynamics, industrialisation, government reluctance to increase public spending |
| 1998–2002 | Expansion of subsidies | Inclusion of middle-class and dual-earner families, further deregulation of private providers | Expansion of target group (incremental policy change) | Self-reinforcing | Private childcare providers | Outcome: continuous growth of private sector | Economic recovery post-Asian financial crisis, feminist activism for gender equality, government reluctance to increase public spending |
| | | | | Self-undermining | Civic organisations, childcare experts, families | Unintended consequences: Subpar quality of private childcare services, public distrust Feminist and civic groups advocating for public childcare | |
| 2003–2007 (Reform attempt) | Reforms (Sa-ssak Plan / Saeromaji Plan) | Focus on reducing private sector dominance and improving its quality, increasing public childcare | Public-driven de-familialisation (incremental policy change) | Self-reinforcing | Private childcare providers, local governments | Resistance to public childcare expansion due to vested interests | For reforms: declining birth rates, female labour force participation, change in political leadership Against reforms: financial constraints, local political ties |
| | | | | Self-undermining | Civic organisations, childcare experts, families | Dissatisfaction with private services due to subpar quality of private childcare services, public distrust, low take-up of services and inequalities in usage | |
| 2005–2009 | Basic subsidy scheme | Direct subsidies to childcare providers (including private) | Incremental policy change | Self-reinforcing | Private childcare providers | Outcome: Continuous growth of private sector | Declining birth rates, economic downturn (for voucher) and financial constraint, change in political leadership, ideological push (neoliberalism) |
| | Voucher system | Introduction of market-oriented voucher system for childcare services | | | | Civic and feminist organisations critique (negative feedback): advocating for public childcare | |
| 2009 | Cash-for-care | Financial support for families not using formal childcare services | Re-familialisation (radical policy change) | Self-reinforcing | Scholars and civic organisations supporting traditional family values, ruling conservative party | Civic organisations and childcare advocacy groups consistently opposed this policy, fearing that it undermined the state's role in supporting institutional childcare. This pushback, while not successful in preventing its adoption, represents negative feedback that could be added as a counterbalance to the positive feedback from conservative actors | Budgetary constraints, electoral competition, ideological push (traditional family values), change in political leadership, declining birth rates, state negligence toward financial benefits (sole focus on services) |
| | | | | Self-undermining | Parents not using childcare services due to lack of public childcare and poor quality of private childcare (issue of inequity and injustice) | | |

(Continues)

| Period | Policy change | Substance | Type of change | Feedback | Actors | Description | Other factors |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2017–2022 | Moon Jae-in's public childcare expansion | Target of 40–50% public childcare enrolment; mandatory accreditation for all providers | Return to public-driven de-familialisation efforts (incremental policy change) | Self-reinforcing | Private childcare associations | Private institutions that had gained a foothold earlier continued to protect their interests | Ideological shift (inclusive welfare), declining birth rates, change in political leadership |
| | | | | Self-undermining | Civic organisations, experts, parents | Continued dissatisfaction with private services | |

*Source:* Author's own complication.