

The Cumulative Effect of Number of Children on Wage Disparities by Gender in Later Life

Youly Yi, Yonsei University, South Korea

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Abstract

This study examines whether the effects of childbearing on women's wages persist and accumulate into later life, contributing to gendered wage disparities among older workers. Drawing on a life course perspective and gendered cumulative disadvantage theory, the study analyzes KLoSA panel data (2006–2022) for individuals aged 65 to 85 using three analytical models: Random Effects, Fixed Effects, and Growth Curve Models. Results show that older women consistently earn less than older men, and that the gender wage gap has widened over time. More children are associated with lower wages for both genders; however, wage trajectory analysis reveals that the number of children significantly slows wage growth only among older women, not among men. Women with two or more children exhibit markedly slower wage growth over time, while those with three or more children show virtually no wage growth throughout the observation period. These findings demonstrate that childbearing constraints accumulate across the life course and continue to shape economic outcomes in later life, operating as a structural mechanism of gendered inequality.

Keywords: aging, gender wage gap, life course, cumulative disadvantage, child penalty

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Introduction

South Korea entered a super-aged society in 2024, and the employment rate of older adults is among the highest in the OECD. However, many older adults work out of economic necessity rather than choice, and poverty rates among the elderly remain exceptionally high. These conditions reflect not simply the absence of adequate welfare provisions, but the cumulative outcome of a lifetime of unequal labor market experiences.

Among the structural factors shaping economic inequality in later life, gender is particularly consequential. Older women exhibit higher poverty rates than men, and the gender wage gap becomes more pronounced with age. This study focuses on one key mechanism underlying this pattern: the number of children. While prior research has established that childbearing constrains women's labor force participation and wages during working-age years, far less is known about whether these effects persist into later life and continue to shape how wages evolve over time.

This study addresses that gap by asking: does the number of children affect wage trajectories in later life, and do these effects differ by gender? Using KLoSA panel data from 2006 to 2022 and a three-model analytical strategy, this paper examines wage levels, within-person wage changes, and long-term wage growth trajectories among older Korean workers aged 65 to 85. The findings contribute to our understanding of how early-life caregiving responsibilities translate into lasting economic disadvantage.

Literature Review

Although older adults are frequently analyzed as a single age-based category, the elderly population is fundamentally heterogeneous in character. Even within the same age cohort, individuals do not share equivalent experiences or social positions, as each person occupies a distinct location shaped by a divergent life course (Laslett, 1996; Son, 2009). This internal heterogeneity is particularly consequential for understanding labor market participation in later life. Given that old age is the cumulative product of an entire life course, the labor conditions and income levels of older workers must be understood not as age effects but as the structured outcomes of accumulated experience (Son, 2009).

Research on the life course perspective has consistently demonstrated that inequality is not a snapshot at any given moment but the product of accumulated advantages and disadvantages over time (Mayer, 2009). Cumulative disadvantage theory further elaborates that early-life inequalities compound with age, producing increasingly divergent outcomes across individuals (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). Prior studies on Korean elderly populations corroborate this perspective, showing that current income inequality reflects differences in life trajectories, and that labor market advantages and vulnerabilities in younger years exert a lasting influence into old age (Hwang & Kim, 2013; Son, 2009). Concretely, those who held stable, well-paying employment during their prime working years tend to maintain stable labor and income after retirement, while those who did not are more likely to remain in precarious and low-income conditions in old age (Seok & Im, 2007; Son, 2009).

These accumulated inequalities are, however, not gender-neutral in how they form. Because the life stage characterized by productive labor and career investment structurally overlaps with the period of childbearing and caregiving, women are confronted with a double burden that is difficult to sustain simultaneously (Moen, 1992, 2011). Applied to gender, the cumulative

disadvantage framework highlights that women's dual responsibilities in paid and unpaid work generate career interruptions with long-term consequences for wages, employment stability, and advancement opportunities (DiPrete & Eirich, 2006). Women who exit or transition out of the labor market due to caregiving responsibilities experience reduced tenure, wage loss, diminished job security, and constrained promotion prospects (Kim, 2017; Moen, 1992).

Within this broader structure, the number of children functions as a concrete and quantifiable indicator of caregiving burden and its associated labor market pressures. Research has shown that between the 1940s and 1960s, the number of children and age were the most accurate predictors of women's employment in the United States (Moen, 1992). Women with more children were more likely to exit the labor force, accept part-time or lower-paying positions offering scheduling flexibility, or delay childbirth and reduce family size in order to maintain labor force attachment (Budig & England, 2001; Moen, 1992). These interruptions disrupt human capital accumulation and seniority-based wage progression common in many labor markets. For men, by contrast, childbearing has frequently been associated with a wage premium, as fatherhood is linked to perceptions of reliability and commitment (Correll et al., 2007). This asymmetry underscores the extent to which the effects of children on labor market outcomes are structured by gender.

Studies that have extended the analysis to older populations confirm that such effects persist into later life. Among Korean elderly women, those with a greater number of children are more likely to enter low-wage, unstable occupations in old age (Lee, 2023), and the accumulation of children has been shown to exert a negative effect on income levels in later life (Jang & Choi, 2025). Research examining school-age and preschool-age children separately has further shown that the presence of preschool children may constitute a particular constraint on women's re-entry into employment (Park et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, existing research is subject to several important limitations. First, studies analyzing the effect of children on elderly women's income often restrict their samples to women alone, making gender comparison structurally impossible and weakening the evidential basis for gender-based arguments (Jang & Choi, 2025). Second, by treating women as a homogeneous group, this body of research forecloses examination of within-group heterogeneity — that is, the extent to which women's outcomes in later life diverge depending on their individual family and labor histories. Third, prior research has largely treated the number of children as a determinant of static outcomes such as occupational status or income level at a given point, without examining whether and how it shapes wage trajectories over time. The question of whether the number of children influences not only where older women are positioned in the labor market but how their wages change across time remains insufficiently addressed. The present study directly addresses this gap by incorporating both men and women into a comparative framework and examining wage change trajectories among elderly workers in South Korea.

Based on the theoretical framework and prior literature, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). Older women are expected to exhibit lower average wages than older men.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). A greater number of children is expected to be negatively associated with average wages among older workers.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). The effect of number of children on wage growth trajectories is expected to be significant among older women only.

Methodology

Data

This study uses data from the Korean Longitudinal Study of Ageing (KLoSA). KLoSA surveys individuals aged 45 and older residing across the country (excluding Jeju Island), with biennial main surveys conducted in even-numbered years. The data used in this analysis are restructured files that include variables derived and organized from the original raw data. As the dataset is designed specifically for older populations, it was deemed appropriate for research on an aged society.

The analytic scope covers Waves 1 through 9 (2006–2022), and panel data were used accordingly. While cross-sectional data can capture wage gaps at a single point in time, they are limited in their ability to track whether such gaps widen or narrow over time. Panel data were therefore selected to enable longitudinal analysis.

Individual-level, rather than household-level, data were used in order to examine gender-based wage gaps and life course differences. Individual-level data are better suited to capturing personal experiences and thus allow for greater analytical precision.

Analytic Sample

It has been noted that defining “older adults” is challenging due to the flexibility inherent in biological and social criteria (Laslett, 1996). Existing studies vary in the age thresholds they apply depending on their research objectives. This study focuses on the labor of older adults and accordingly sets the lower age boundary at 65, as this is the age threshold used in most social security systems and is generally considered the point at which post-retirement employment becomes active (Kim, 2021). The upper age limit was set at 85 in order to restrict the sample to individuals who are realistically engaged in paid work. To account for the nonlinearity of age effects, both a linear age term and a squared age term were included in the analytic models.

Cases with missing responses on “total wage income in the previous year” were treated as missing, and a log transformation was applied to reduce skewness. A one-period lag was applied given that the survey item refers to the previous year.

Number of children was categorized into three groups: “0–1 child,” “2 children,” and “3 or more children.” The 0- and 1-child categories were combined due to their small proportions (2.36% and 9.23%, respectively), and because from a life course perspective, having two or more children involves distinct patterns of childbearing, caregiving, and career interruption that justify treating them as separate categories.

Marital status was coded as “married” or “not married” (including separated, divorced, widowed, and never married). Education was categorized into four groups: elementary school or below, middle school graduate, high school graduate, and college graduate or above. Self-rated health was measured on a five-point scale. The residential area variable was recoded into a binary distinguishing “urban” (metropolitan city) from “non-urban” (small-to-medium city and rural area). Asset income was coded as “has asset income” if any asset income was reported, and “no asset income” otherwise.

Analytic Strategy

The analysis draws on KLoSA panel data and proceeds in several steps: descriptive statistics, examination of wage income distributions and wage trends, followed by panel random effects models and growth curve models (GCM). Descriptive statistics provide a foundational overview of the sample's characteristics, upon which the subsequent models are built. Given the panel structure of the data, descriptive statistics are presented for the full panel sample and serve as contextual background for interpreting the analyses. Distributions of wage income and wage trends are also included, as they serve as indicators of how income gaps manifest in later life according to gender.

The panel random effects model is based on the assumption that unobserved individual heterogeneity is uncorrelated with all observed explanatory variables (Allison, 2009). This model is used to examine the association between number of children and wages in later life. However, the random effects model has limitations in capturing change over time, and the growth curve model is therefore employed to complement the analysis of wage trajectories. The growth curve model treats between-individual differences as random effects, allowing for the simultaneous estimation of heterogeneity in both initial wage levels and rates of change over time (Allison, 2009). It also has the advantage of constructing long-term trajectories from partially observed cohorts, thereby addressing issues of missing data and irregular observation intervals common in longitudinal data (Raudenbush & Chan, 1992). Together, these two models allow for a more comprehensive understanding of wage inequality in later life by capturing both the level and the trajectory of wage gaps.

Findings

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the full panel sample, comprising 8,547 observations from approximately 3,000 unique individuals. The mean age is 71.38 years, consistent with the study's focus on adults aged 65 to 85, and the mean log-transformed wage income is 6.70. Women account for 34.81% of the sample, and 79.85% of respondents are currently married. The mean number of children is 2.60. The mean education level of 1.82 falls between the “elementary school or below” and “middle school graduate” categories, and mean self-rated health is 2.99 on a five-point scale. The proportion reporting asset income is 16.56%, and 30.07% reside in urban areas.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Year	8,547	2014.187	5.079729	2006	2022
Female	8,547	0.3480753	0.4763879	0	1
Wage income (log)	8,547	6.702816	1.037881	0	11.0021
Number of Children	8,547	2.602083	0.598743	1	3
Age	8,547	71.37908	4.962152	65	85
Age2	8,547	5119.593	725.4624	4225	7225

Education	8,547	1.823096	1.002368	1	4
Self-rated health	8,547	2.986545	0.799562	1	5
Marital status	8,547	0.7985258	0.4011249	0	1
Urban residence	8,547	0.3006903	0.4585851	0	1
Asset ownership	8,547	0.1655552	0.3717026	0	1

Note. N = 8,547 person-wave observations from approximately 3,000 unique individuals.

Descriptive Patterns

Figure 1 presents gender-specific mean wage trends among older adults from 2006 to 2022. Across the entire observation period, mean wages for older male workers are consistently higher than those for older female workers. While mean wages for both men and women show an overall upward trend since 2006, the rate of wage growth for women is comparatively slower than that for men, indicating that the gender wage gap has persisted throughout the period.

These findings suggest that the wage gap between older male and female workers is a longstanding phenomenon that continues to the present. Notably, despite a general increase in average wage levels over time, the gap itself has not narrowed. While the gender wage gap is clearly observable, however, interpreting it solely as the effect of gender is insufficient. Given that men and women follow distinct life course trajectories and accumulate different experiences over time, further analysis is warranted to better understand the mechanisms underlying this gap.

Figure 1
Gender Wage Trends, 2006–2022



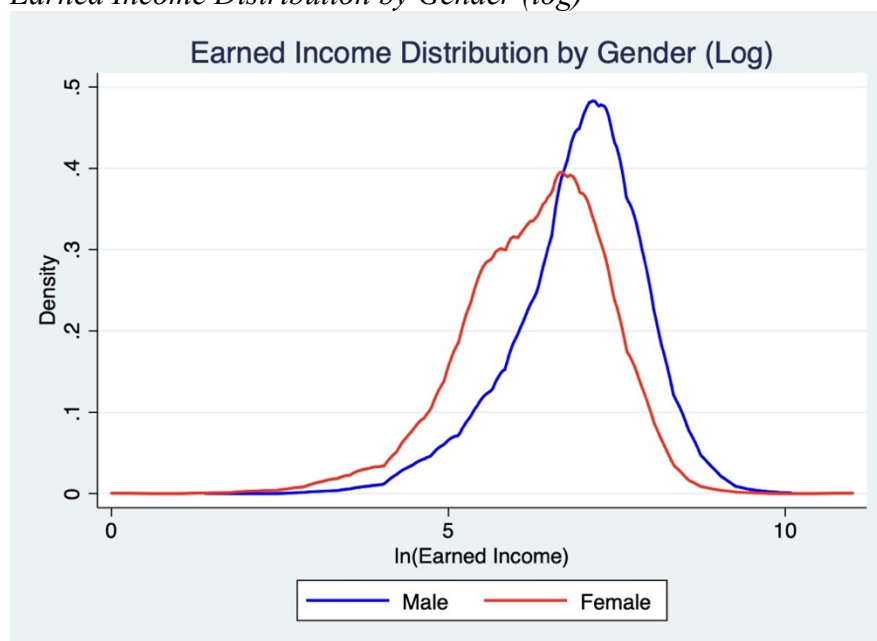
Figure 2 compares the earned income distributions of older male and female workers, demonstrating that the gender wage gap is present across the entire wage distribution. While the two distributions share certain similarities, clear differences in their shape are evident.

Older male workers are observed to be more heavily concentrated in higher wage ranges, whereas older female workers are more densely distributed in lower wage ranges. Moreover, even within the same wage range, women account for a smaller share than men. This indicates that men tend to cluster more strongly at higher income levels. These distributional differences confirm that the gender wage gap exists across the full spectrum of the income distribution.

Taken together, the preceding analyses demonstrate that the gender wage gap among older adults has persisted over an extended period and is distributed across the entire income range. These findings provide a foundation for understanding the nature and structure of wage inequality in later life. Building on these results, panel random effects models and growth curve models are employed to examine the effect of number of children on wages by gender, as well as to identify gender-specific wage trajectories.

Figure 2

Earned Income Distribution by Gender (log)



Random Effects Model (RE)

Using a panel random effects model, this study examined how the number of children and other individual-level variables are associated with wage levels among older adults, separately by gender. The number of children was found to be significantly associated with earned income for both men and women, with a greater number of children corresponding to lower earnings. The effect of the children variable on earned income thus showed no substantial difference between the two gender groups.

Age was not statistically significant in either group, indicating no clear relationship between age and earned income. Educational attainment was significantly associated with earned income in both groups. Marital status, self-rated health, and asset ownership all showed significant positive associations with earned income for both older men and women.

These findings suggest that individual characteristics may be associated with wages in later life. Notably, the significant association between number of children and earned income for both men and women implies that caregiving responsibilities may negatively affect income

regardless of gender. Given that the random effects model accounts for both between-individual differences and within-individual variation over time, it is capable of capturing the association between number of children and wages; however, it is limited in its ability to explain the wage trajectories of men and women over time. The central question regarding the gender wage gap in old age concerns whether the gap emerges anew in later life, what trajectory it follows over time, and how it varies by gender and number of children. Old age is not a period in which new inequalities arise, but rather one in which previously accumulated inequalities manifest in a concentrated form. The wage trajectories of older adults are therefore not simply the product of an age effect, but are the cumulative outcome of labor market experiences across the life course—and as such, constitute an important object of analysis for verifying this process.

Table 2*RE*

VARIABLES	Male	Female
Number of children	-0.152*** (0.031)	-0.120*** (0.046)
Age	0.031 (0.060)	0.070 (0.112)
Age2	-0.00038 (0.0004)	-0.001 (0.001)
Middle (ref. Elementary)	0.296*** (0.052)	0.468*** (0.074)
High school	0.431*** (0.047)	0.677*** (0.084)
College or higher	0.581*** (0.076)	0.558*** (0.211)
Marital	0.125* (0.066)	0.100** (0.048)
Self-rated health	0.073*** (0.015)	0.090*** (0.024)
Asset ownership	0.067** (0.028)	0.120** (0.048)
Constant	6.475*** (2.174)	4.385 (4.052)
Observations	5,572	2,975
Number of pid	1,826	1,205

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Fixed Effects Model (FE)

To address potential bias arising from unobserved time-invariant individual characteristics, a fixed effects (FE) model was estimated separately for older men and women. As shown in Table 4, neither the time slope nor any of the children \times time interaction terms reached statistical significance for either gender group. For older men, the time coefficient was negative and non-significant ($\beta = -0.021$), and the interaction terms for two children ($\beta = 0.013$) and three or more children ($\beta = 0.004$) were likewise insignificant. A parallel pattern was observed among older women, with a near-zero time slope ($\beta = 0.002$) and non-significant interaction effects for both child-count categories. These results indicate that once unobserved individual heterogeneity is accounted for, the effect of number of children on within-person wage change is no longer detectable for either men or women.

This null finding is theoretically interpretable rather than simply a failure of detection. Because number of children is a time-invariant characteristic, its influence is fully absorbed into the individual fixed effects and cannot be separately identified within the FE framework. The FE model is therefore structurally limited in its capacity to capture how a stable life-course variable such as fertility history shapes long-run wage trajectories. This limitation motivates the use of a Growth Curve Model (GCM) as the primary analytical strategy, as GCM is better suited to modeling the ways in which time-invariant characteristics — including number of children — differentially condition the rate and direction of wage change over time.

Table 3*FE*

VARIABLES	Male	Female
t (time)	-0.0211 (0.0168)	0.00207 (0.0218)
(ref. Children 0–1)	-0.106 (0.266)	0.265 (0.366)
2 children		
3 + children	-0.0537 (0.294)	-0.0845 (0.421)
2 Children * t	0.0130 (0.0179)	-0.0218 (0.0270)
3+ Children * t	0.00374 (0.0173)	-0.00660 (0.0227)
(ref. Elementary)	-0.144 (0.394)	0.569*** (0.0300)
Middle school		
High school	-0.134 (0.273)	-0.602** (0.302)
College or higher	-0.573 (0.413)	(omitted)
Marital	0.107 (0.101)	-0.0159 (0.0750)
Self-rated health	0.0339** (0.0167)	0.0281 (0.0288)
Asset ownership	-0.0101 (0.0308)	-0.0294 (0.0571)
Constant	7.027*** (0.331)	6.271*** (0.368)
Observations	5,572	2,975
Number of groups	1,826	1,205

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Growth Curve Model (GCM)

The Growth Curve Model (GCM) was estimated to examine how the number of children shapes wage trajectories over time among older workers, allowing for the differential conditioning of wage growth by this time-invariant life-course variable. The results first establish that wage trajectories in later life are not static: the time slope was positive and statistically significant for both older men ($\beta = 0.022$, $p < 0.1$) and older women ($\beta = 0.063$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that wages continue to increase over time for both gender groups, with women exhibiting a steeper average rate of growth.

The critical finding, however, lies in the children \times time interaction terms, which reveal a pronounced gender asymmetry. Among older men, neither the two-children ($\beta = -0.003$, n.s.) nor the three-or-more-children interaction term ($\beta = -0.019$, n.s.) reached statistical significance, indicating that the number of children does not significantly differentiate wage trajectories among older male workers. Among older women, by contrast, both interaction terms were negative and statistically significant: women with two children experienced a significantly slower rate of wage growth over time ($\beta = -0.042$, $p < 0.05$), as did women with three or more children ($\beta = -0.039$, $p < 0.05$), relative to those with zero or one child. These results provide support for Hypothesis 3, confirming that the constraining effect of number of children on wage trajectories operates exclusively among older women. This gendered pattern is consistent with a cumulative disadvantage framework, wherein caregiving responsibilities — disproportionately borne by women across the life course — continue to exert a suppressive effect on wage growth well into later life, producing a progressively widening divergence in earnings trajectories between older women with differing reproductive histories.

Table 4
GCM

VARIABLES	Male	Female
t (time)	0.0220* (0.0116)	0.063*** (0.017)
(ref. children 0–1)	0.058 (0.149)	0.581** (0.242)
2 children		
3+ children	-0.0585 (0.141)	0.339 (0.214)
2 Children * t	-0.00346 (0.0126)	-0.042** (0.019)
3+ Children * t	-0.0188 (0.0122)	-0.039** (0.017)
(ref. Elementary)	0.312*** (0.0538)	0.378*** (0.077)
Middle school		
High school	0.460*** (0.0474)	0.588*** (0.087)
College or higher	0.588*** (0.0672)	0.449** (0.175)
Marital	0.161*** (0.0616)	0.228*** (0.046)
(ref. very poor)	0.244*** (0.0630)	0.295*** (0.076)
Self-rated health		
Poor		
Fair	0.365*** (0.0627)	0.352*** (0.078)
Good	0.413*** (0.0643)	0.413*** (0.086)
Very Good	0.524*** (0.0978)	0.735*** (0.188)
Asset ownership	0.0358 (0.0266)	0.132*** (0.048)
Constant	6.066*** (0.158)	5.063*** (0.220)
Observations	5,572	2,975
Number of groups	1,826	1,205

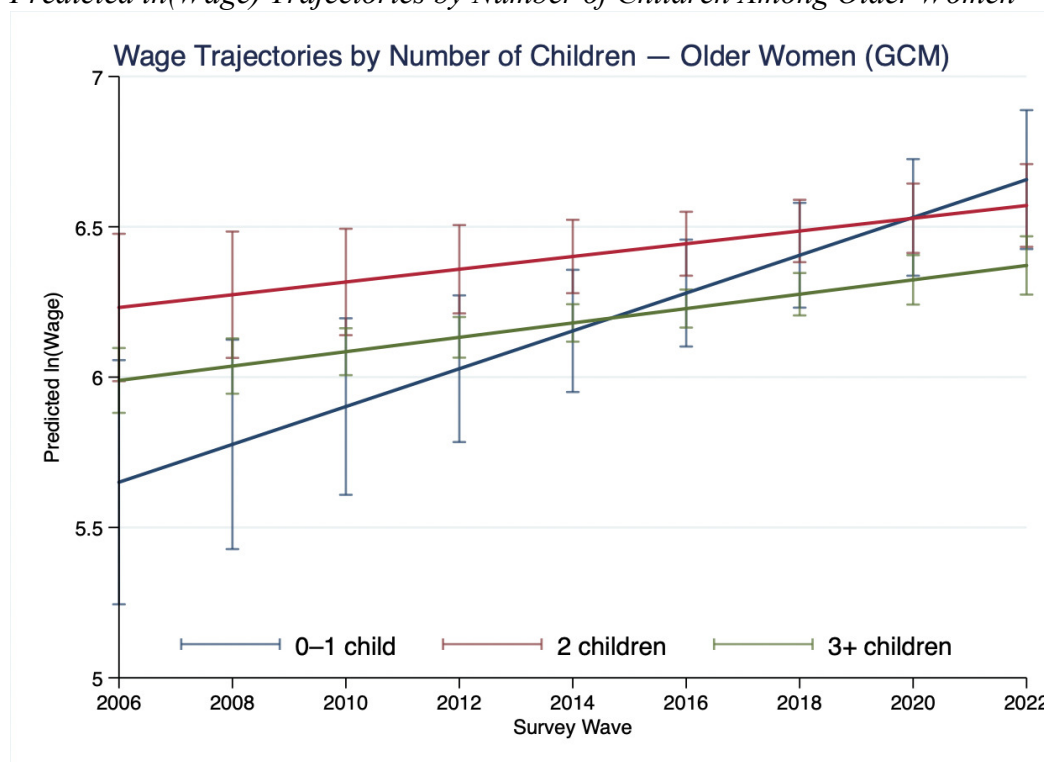
Note. Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Figure 3 illustrates how wage trajectories among older women diverge according to the number of children over the observation period from 2006 to 2022. Women with zero or one child exhibit the steepest upward wage trajectory across survey waves, while those with two children show a higher starting point but a comparatively flatter rate of growth, and those with three or more children display the most minimal wage growth throughout the observation period. By the end of the panel, the wage trajectory of the zero-to-one-child group converges with and ultimately surpasses those of the higher-parity groups, despite beginning from the lowest initial wage level.

The steep upward trajectory of the zero-to-one-child group suggests that older women who remain in the labor market with fewer children are more likely to be positioned in jobs where wages can be maintained or improved over time. This pattern may reflect the enduring advantages of relatively stable and continuous labor force participation across the life course — accumulated occupational capital that continues to manifest in later life. Conversely, the flatter trajectories observed among women with two or more children are consistent with a history of interrupted or constrained labor market attachment associated with greater caregiving demands.

Crucially, these results do not represent a simple age effect. Rather, they capture the wage trajectories that form as older women remain in the labor market over time, and demonstrate that these trajectories are systematically differentiated by number of children. Number of children does not determine where older women start in terms of wages — but it shapes how far they are able to go. In this sense, fertility history functions not as a fixed wage penalty, but as a structural constraint on the capacity for wage growth in later life.

Figure 3
Predicted $\ln(\text{Wage})$ Trajectories by Number of Children Among Older Women



Discussion

The findings of this study offer several important insights into the relationship between fertility history and wage outcomes in later life. Taken together, the results from the random effects, fixed effects, and growth curve models suggest that the gender wage gap in old age is not a phenomenon that emerges anew in later life, but rather the cumulative product of labor market experiences and family-related conditions accumulated across the life course.

The random effects model established that number of children is significantly associated with earned income for both older men and women, suggesting that fertility history carries wage implications that extend into later life for both gender groups. However, the fixed effects model revealed that once unobserved individual heterogeneity is controlled for, this association disappears entirely, indicating that the observed relationship is largely driven by selection processes and stable individual characteristics rather than a within-person causal effect of children on wages. Fertility itself does not appear to causally alter wages at the individual level. Rather, number of children functions as a marker of accumulated life-course conditions—particularly the cumulative labor market consequences of caregiving responsibilities—that are differentially distributed by gender.

This interpretation is most clearly supported by the growth curve model results. Among older men, the number of children had no significant effect on wage trajectories, with no meaningful differentiation across child-count categories. Among older women, however, having two or more children was associated with a significantly slower rate of wage growth over time, while those with zero or one child exhibited the steepest upward trajectory across the observation period. This asymmetry points to a structural, gendered mechanism through which the same life-course factor produces fundamentally different outcomes depending on gender. The

difference is not merely one of effect magnitude; it is a difference in whether the effect exists at all. This suggests that caregiving is not a private or individual matter, but a structural determinant of long-term wage inequality that operates differentially across gender lines.

These results align with a cumulative disadvantage framework, wherein disadvantages accumulated during the early and middle life course—through career interruptions, constrained labor force participation, and occupational segregation associated with caregiving—compound over time and manifest in the wage trajectories of later life (Moen, 1992; 2011). Later-life wage inequality is therefore best understood as a cumulative outcome, not a product of old age per se. Number of children operates as a structural, gendered life-course mechanism that shapes not where women begin in terms of wages, but how far they are able to go.

Conclusions

This study makes three contributions to the literature. First, it extends the analytical focus to later life, reframing old age as a period in which life-course conditions manifest in concentrated form. Second, it demonstrates that the same factor can operate in fundamentally different ways by gender—not as a difference in effect size, but as a difference in whether the effect is present at all. Third, it reveals heterogeneity within the older female population by disaggregating women according to fertility history, uncovering intra-group inequality structures obscured in analyses that treat gender as a binary control variable.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. The panel data capture only later-life observations, leaving mediation pathways—including timing of childbirth and the nature of career interruptions—untested. Selective attrition due to the unbalanced panel structure is also possible. Number of children should be understood not as a direct cause of later-life wages but as a condition reflecting cumulative life-course processes. Future research should additionally incorporate qualitative dimensions of work such as employment status and job quality.

Despite these limitations, this study identifies systematic gendered patterns in later-life wage trajectories and demonstrates that the association between fertility and later-life wages is fundamentally cumulative and gendered—shaped by life-course processes that disadvantage women disproportionately and persistently.

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Contact email: youly@yonsei.ac.kr