

Article

Perceived Gender Fairness, Perceived Social Mobility, and Life Satisfaction Among South Korean Wage Workers: Cross-Sectional Evidence from a Moderated Mediation Model

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Abstract

This study examines cross-sectional relations among perceived gender fairness, perceived social mobility, and life satisfaction in 4381 South Korean wage workers from the 2024 Social Integration Survey. Drawing on equity theory, the prospect of upward mobility hypothesis, and relative deprivation theory, I estimate a moderated mediation model in which perceived social mobility mediates between perceived gender fairness and life satisfaction, with gender as a first-stage moderator. Three observations emerge. First, the indirect statistical association between perceived gender fairness and life satisfaction via perceived social mobility is reliable ($ab = 0.051$, 95% CI [0.038, 0.066]). Second, the slope of perceived social mobility on perceived gender fairness is descriptively steeper for women ($B = 0.219$) than for men ($B = 0.131$), with the moderated mediation index reliably non-zero (Index = 0.026, 95% CI [0.007, 0.048]). Third, exploratory subgroup analyses indicate that the gender-conditional pattern is statistically reliable in the 20–39 subgroup but not in the 40+ subgroup, although the formal three-way interaction is not statistically significant. Given the directional ambiguity of the single-item fairness measure, the present design cannot adjudicate among alternative readings of the gender-conditional pattern. I treat all findings as descriptive patterns of statistical association in this sample.

Keywords: perceived gender fairness; perceived social mobility; life satisfaction; subjective well-being; moderated mediation; gender inequality; South Korea

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Research on subjective well-being has long examined how perceptions of institutional fairness relate to overall life satisfaction (Diener 1984; Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Oishi et al. 2011). According to cross-national evidence, perceived fairness explains variation in life satisfaction to an extent beyond that accounted for by objective socioeconomic conditions (Schyns 2002). However, the cognitive *mechanism* through which institutional fairness perceptions translate into individual well-being—and whether that mechanism operates similarly across structurally positioned groups—has received little systematic attention.

I address this gap by focusing on South Korea, an advanced economy distinguished by persistently high structural gender inequality. Specifically, South Korea's gender wage gap (31.2%) is the largest among member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and ranks at the bottom of *The Economist's* Glass Ceiling Index



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(OECD 2024). These macro-structural conditions provide an analytically useful setting for examining whether perceived gender fairness is differentially associated with men's and women's future-oriented cognition. The present analysis concerns subjective well-being and perceived fairness only, and does not address fertility, marriage, or other demographic factors.

Three constructs are central to the analysis, and I distinguish them carefully at the outset. *Perceived gender fairness* is a macro-structural cognitive appraisal of the extent to which society's gender-based treatment is equitable. *Perceived social mobility* is a self-referential, future-oriented belief that one's socioeconomic position can improve through personal effort. *Life satisfaction* is the cognitive-evaluative component of subjective well-being, a global assessment of the quality of one's life (Diener 1984). The three constructs differ in both referent (society, self, life-as-a-whole) and temporal orientation (present evaluation, future expectation, global judgment). This study's model posits a sequential pathway in which structural fairness appraisal is statistically associated with future-oriented mobility expectation, which is in turn associated with life satisfaction. The remainder of the introduction develops the theoretical rationale for this ordering and for the gender-conditional pattern constituting the focal hypothesis.

A complementary line of research, anchored in the prospect of upward mobility (POUM) hypothesis (Bénabou and Ok 2001), proposes that beliefs about future mobility shape tolerance for present inequality and sustain subjective well-being regardless of current material conditions. Hope theory (Snyder 2002) similarly holds that future-oriented cognition—agency and pathway beliefs—predicts engagement in long-term goal-directed behavior. Taken together, these frameworks suggest that perceived structural fairness may indirectly influence life satisfaction by sustaining the belief that personal effort can yield proportional rewards. Where this belief weakens, the theoretical literature predicts a corresponding weakening of future-oriented cognition (Bandura 1997; Seligman 1975).

This pathway is unlikely to operate uniformly across gender. Drawing on relative deprivation theory (Crosby 1976; Smith et al. 2012) and the minority stress framework (Meyer 2003), I hypothesize that members of structurally disadvantaged groups exhibit differential cognitive sensitivity to perceived structural unfairness. I label this proposition the *Gendered Fragility of Hope* (GFH) and develop it in Section 2.3 as a theoretical framework distinct from related constructs.

This study's empirical analysis is restricted to wage workers as the model's central constructs—perceived institutional fairness in gender-based treatment, perceived mobility through effort—are most directly experienced within labor market contexts. Including only wage workers in the sample reduces unobserved heterogeneity associated with differences in labor force position. The corresponding loss of generalizability to non-employed populations—homemakers, caregivers, the self-employed, and the economically inactive—is a scope condition addressed in the limitations.

1.2. Purpose and Scope

This cross-sectional study of a sample of South Korean wage workers has three objectives: to estimate the indirect statistical association between perceived gender fairness and life satisfaction via perceived social mobility; to test whether the strength of that association differs descriptively by gender; and, on an exploratory basis, to examine whether any gender-conditional pattern varies across age subgroups.

The contribution should be characterized modestly. Cross-sectional design and single-item measurement preclude causal inference, construct validation, and direct support for policy prescriptions. Nonetheless, the analyses can document descriptive patterns of potential use to a cumulative literature on subjective well-being and perceived institu-

tional fairness, and this study formulates the GFH as a theoretical framework that future research using stronger designs may test, refine, or revise.

1.3. Research Questions

RQ1. Is the association between perceived gender fairness and life satisfaction statistically mediated by perceived social mobility?

RQ2. Does the association between perceived gender fairness and perceived social mobility differ by gender, such that the slope is descriptively steeper for women than for men?

RQ3. As an exploratory question: Does any gender-conditional pattern identified in RQ2 vary across age subgroups (20–39 vs. 40+)?

2. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

2.1. Perceived Fairness and Life Satisfaction

The literature on social justice perceptions distinguishes two principal dimensions: distributive justice, concerning the perceived equity of outcomes, and procedural justice, concerning the perceived fairness of the processes by which outcomes are determined (Adams 1965; Tyler 2000; Tyler and Blader 2003). Both correlate with life satisfaction, though through partially distinct pathways: Perceived distributive justice principally shapes outcome-related satisfaction, whereas perceived procedural justice primarily shapes broader institutional trust (Tyler and Blader 2003). The single-item measure used in this study encompasses elements of both dimensions, a constraint I address in Sections 3.2 and 5.4.

Cross-national evidence consistently links institutional fairness perceptions to life satisfaction. Oishi et al. (2011), drawing on data from 54 countries, reported that national-level fairness mechanisms were positively associated with individual subjective well-being. Schyns (2002) found that perceived unfairness was a stronger correlate of reduced subjective well-being than was income inequality. In South Korea, perceived equality of opportunity has likewise been associated with life satisfaction, with the strength of this association differing across gender and age groups (Kim 2019); relatedly, perceived inequality spanning both opportunity and power domains has been shown to predict lower life satisfaction through reduced generalized trust (Park and Joshanloo 2024).

Life satisfaction, the cognitive-evaluative component of subjective well-being (Diener 1984), is shaped by a constellation of individual and societal factors. Established individual-level correlates include income, health, marital status, social relationships, and personality (Diener et al. 1999, 2018); societal-level correlates include institutional trust, social capital, and perceived fairness (Helliwell and Putnam 2004). The present study extends this literature by examining one specific structural perception—perceived gender fairness—and its statistical association with life satisfaction via perceived social mobility.

2.2. Perceived Social Mobility as a Mediating Mechanism

The POUM hypothesis (Bénabou and Ok 2001) anchors the role of perceived social mobility as a mediator. Individuals who anticipate upward mobility maintain higher subjective well-being even under present material constraints: The anticipated improvement in future status sustains a sense of meaning in present effort. Hope theory (Snyder 2002) supplies the complementary cognitive account that agency beliefs and pathway beliefs jointly sustain engagement in future-oriented behavior. Throughout this article, *perceived social mobility* refers specifically to the belief that one's socioeconomic status can improve through personal effort. The broader term *hope* is reserved for theoretical discussion only, in its delimited Snyderian sense.

Bandura's social cognitive theory (1997) and Seligman's work on learned helplessness (1975) converge on the common proposition that agency beliefs and pathway beliefs vary with perceptions of structural conditions. Specifically, it is theoretically expected that perceptions of fair conditions will correlate with stronger mobility expectations, whereas perceptions of unfair conditions will correlate with weaker ones. Empirical work in this tradition has documented positive correlations between perceived fairness and perceived mobility across a range of national and economic settings (Cojocaru 2014; Day and Fiske 2017; Hadjar and Samuel 2015).

Though often discussed in proximity, perceived fairness and perceived social mobility are conceptually distinct. Perceived fairness is a structural appraisal of whether the rules governing social rewards are equitable; by contrast, perceived social mobility is a self-referential future expectation of being able to ascend within the existing structure through personal effort. The two concepts are linked theoretically because evaluations of structural fairness inform the shaping of personal mobility expectations: when the rules are perceived as biased by ascriptive characteristics, the rational inference is that personal striving is unlikely to yield proportional rewards. The moderate bivariate correlation between them in this study's data (described in Section 4.1) is consistent with this conceptual distinction and with a meaningful but non-redundant empirical association.

2.3. *The Gendered Fragility of Hope: Definition and Empirical Implications*

This study's central theoretical proposition, the GFH, requires explicit development as a construct rather than a descriptive label. This section proceeds in three steps—definition, differentiation, and empirical implications—and refrains from elaborating the construct beyond what a single cross-sectional analysis can reasonably support.

I define the GFH as the greater cognitive sensitivity of structurally disadvantaged gender group members to perceived institutional fairness when forming future-oriented mobility expectations. Four definitional elements distinguish the construct. First, the GFH is *cognitive* rather than affective: It concerns the formation of future-oriented expectations, not the experience of distress, anger, or grievance. Second, it is *differential* rather than absolute, predicting that mobility expectations of disadvantaged group members are more contingent on fairness signals compared with the expectations of advantaged group members. Third, the GFH is *group-conditional*, referring to a pattern at the group level conditional on structural position, rather than to a stable individual disposition. Finally, the GFH is *operationalized as a moderation*—a statistically reliable empirical interaction between group membership and perceived structural fairness in predicting future-oriented cognition.

These four elements separate the GFH from three nearby constructs. *Relative deprivation* (Crosby 1976; Smith et al. 2012; Runciman 1966) refers principally to the affective grievance arising from unfavorable comparison, and meta-analytic evidence has documented its consequences for psychological well-being among members of disadvantaged groups (Schmitt et al. 2014). By contrast, the GFH concerns the cognitive contingency of mobility expectations on structural fairness signals and predicts a moderation pattern rather than a main-effect difference in grievance. Whereas *minority stress* (Meyer 2003) refers to the chronic, additive stress process arising from stigmatized social position, the GFH concerns a specific cognitive mechanism in expectation formation and predicts an interaction pattern rather than a main-effect elevation in stress markers. *System justification* (Jost and Banaji 1994) refers to the motivated tendency of disadvantaged group members to legitimize existing arrangements. Conversely, GFH makes no claim about motivated reasoning and is consistent with both system-justifying and system-challenging psychological orientations. The empirical signatures of these three constructs—*affective grievance*,

chronic stress, and motivated legitimization—differ from the GFH’s signature, a gender-conditional slope of mobility expectations on fairness perceptions.

The GFH implies a cognitive mechanism of differential informational value: Members of a structurally disadvantaged gender group are theoretically expected to weigh institutional fairness signals more heavily because such signals are more diagnostic of their own anticipated treatment. This account is consistent with broader work on group-conditional cognition, including the cognitive consequences of attributions to discrimination (Major et al. 2003), the self-protective properties of stigma (Crocker and Major 1989), and group identification as a moderator of responses to perceived disadvantage (Branscombe et al. 1999). The construct does not commit to a particular fine-grained account of how this differential weighting is realized cognitively, whether through belief updating, attentional allocation, or some combination. I treat that question as an open one for subsequent research using designs adequate to address it.

Two empirical implications distinguish the GFH from a mere descriptive label and ground it in falsifiable predictions for studies beyond the present analysis. The first concerns *specificity*: The differential pattern should appear in future-oriented mobility cognition but not in retrospective evaluations or present-moment affect, which prior research has shown to follow distinct dynamics. The second concerns *generalizability*: If the GFH operates as proposed, the pattern should extend to other dimensions of structural disadvantage when the disadvantaged group is appropriately identified at the macro-structural level; it should also be more pronounced under directional fairness measurement than directionally ambiguous measurement as employed in this study. Neither prediction is tested here; both are testable in subsequent research, and failure for either would constitute evidence against the construct.

A final issue requires explicit acknowledgment. The phrase “structurally disadvantaged gender group members” identifies, by definitional fiat, who is presumed to be the disadvantaged group in any given context. In the present application to South Korea, I draw on macro-indicators—the gender wage gap, the Glass Ceiling Index, and education-to-labor-market translation gaps—to ground the assumption that women constitute the structurally disadvantaged group. Although this assumption is defensible at the macro-structural level, the measurement instrument used does not, in and of itself, identify which gender group is perceived by respondents as disadvantaged. The fairness item (“How fair, do you think, treatment based on gender is in our society?”) does not specify the direction of any perceived unfairness. Any individual respondent’s score on this item is consistent with multiple substantive readings—a low score may reflect the perception that women or men are disadvantaged, or simply a generalized concern about gender-based treatment without a clear directional referent. The implications of this ambiguity for interpreting the moderation effect are addressed in Section 5.2.

The empirical implication for the present study is as follows: If patterns consistent with the GFH are present in the South Korean wage worker context, the slope of perceived social mobility on perceived gender fairness should be descriptively steeper for women than for men, after appropriate covariate adjustment. Section 4 reports the relevant test, and Section 5.2 explores which substantive readings of any observed pattern the design can and cannot adjudicate.

2.4. The South Korean Context

The South Korean labor market presents a distinctive configuration for the proposed analysis. Korean women report some of the highest rates of tertiary education among OECD countries, yet face the macro-structural barriers documented in Section 1.1. The persistence of women’s underrepresentation in upper management—a phenomenon doc-

umented across multiple national contexts (Hoobler et al. 2011)—is unusually pronounced in this case. The combination of high human capital investment with persistent structural barriers to advancement marks a society in which gender-related institutional features are unusually salient.

The macro-structural indicators noted above ground a substantive assumption embedded in the GFH construct: that women constitute the structurally disadvantaged gender group whose mobility expectations, as per the construct's logic, exhibit greater contingency on fairness perceptions. The assumption is defensible at the macro-structural level but not directly tested by the measurement instrument employed in this study (see Sections 2.3 and 5.2). South Korea is best characterized as a context in which the proposed model is empirically tractable but cannot itself be empirically established.

2.5. Hypotheses

The hypotheses are formulated in terms of statistical association rather than causal effect, consistent with the cross-sectional design (Figure 1).

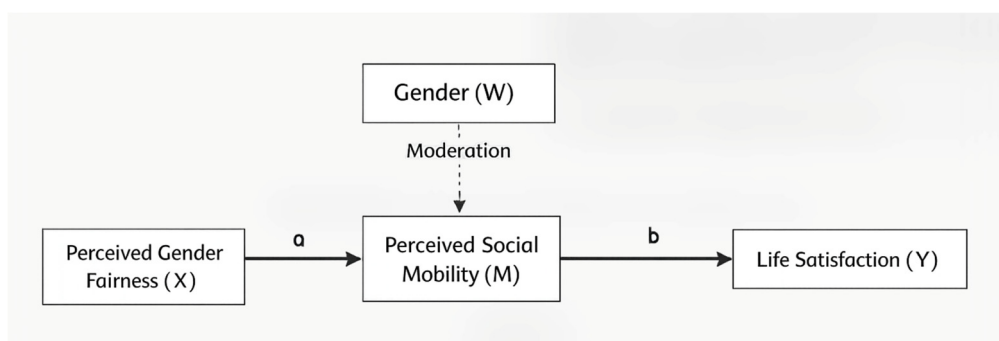


Figure 1. Conceptual model. Perceived Gender Fairness (X) is associated with Life Satisfaction (Y) through Perceived Social Mobility (M). Gender (W) moderates the X → M path (first-stage moderation).

H1. *Perceived gender fairness is positively associated with perceived social mobility.*

H2. *Perceived social mobility is positively associated with life satisfaction.*

H3. *Perceived gender fairness is positively associated with life satisfaction via perceived social mobility.*

H4. *Gender moderates the association between perceived gender fairness and perceived social mobility, such that the slope is descriptively steeper for women than for men.*

H5. *The indirect association in H3 is conditional on gender (moderated mediation), with a stronger indirect association for women.*

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Data and Sample

The study sourced data from the 2024 Social Integration Survey, an annual nationally representative survey of South Korean adults aged 19 and older. Conducted by the Korea Institute of Public Administration (KIPA), a government-funded research institute, the survey assesses public perceptions of social conflict, integration, and well-being. I restricted the analytic sample to respondents currently engaged in paid employment, yielding a final sample of 4381 wage workers (men: $n = 2373$, 54.2%; women: $n = 2008$, 45.8%).

The 2024 Social Integration Survey does not include measures of fertility intentions, marriage intentions, or number of children. This data limitation is one of several reasons for confining this study's empirical focus to life satisfaction and refraining from fertility-related inferences. All analyses were performed in Python (version 3.12, Python Software Foundation, Beaverton, OR, USA).

3.2. Measurement

The KIPA Social Integration Survey, as a large-scale government instrument, measures the focal constructs in this study using single items. Single-item measures offer parsimony and have demonstrated acceptable validity for global evaluative constructs such as life satisfaction (Cheung and Lucas 2014). However, they sacrifice the multidimensionality and reliability assessment that multi-item scales afford. I address this constraint through three strategies: a robustness check using a three-item composite subjective well-being index (Section 4.4); supplementary analyses using perceived gender discrimination as an alternative independent variable (Section 4.4); and transparent reporting of measurement properties—including the fairness item's directional ambiguity—throughout the article.

3.2.1. Dependent Variable: Life Satisfaction

Respondents were asked, "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life these days?" They answered on an 11-point scale (0 = *not at all satisfied*, 10 = *completely satisfied*). Life satisfaction is the cognitive-evaluative indicator of subjective well-being most appropriate to the present model: Because the independent variable and the mediator are both cognitive appraisals, a cognitive-evaluative outcome is theoretically more apt than an affective indicator (Diener 1984; OECD 2013; Veenhoven 2012; Suh et al. 1998).

3.2.2. Independent Variable: Perceived Gender Fairness

This variable was measured with the question, "How fair do you think treatment based on gender is in our society?" Responses were given on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all fair*, 4 = *very fair*). The item captures the *extent* but not *direction* of perceived fairness: respondents reporting low fairness were not asked to specify whether they perceive women or men as the disadvantaged group. This directional ambiguity is consequential, and I address it explicitly in Sections 4.1 and 5.4 and in interpretations of the findings throughout.

3.2.3. Mediator: Perceived Social Mobility

Respondents' perceived social mobility was measured with the question, "How likely do you think it is that your socioeconomic status will improve through personal effort?" Responses were given on a 4-point scale (1 = *very unlikely*, 4 = *very likely*). The translation from a group-level fairness appraisal (independent variable) to a self-referential mobility expectation (mediator) is theoretically grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), which posits that individuals draw inferences about personal prospects from assessments of how their group is treated within institutional structures.

3.2.4. Moderator: Gender

A dummy variable is included to denote gender (0 = male, 1 = female).

3.2.5. Supplementary Variable: Perceived Gender Discrimination

Respondents were asked, "To what extent do you think gender-based discrimination exists in our society?" They gave responses on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 4 = *very much*). This variable is used only in supplementary analyses because of its high multicollinearity with perceived gender fairness ($r = -0.42$).

3.2.6. Control Variables

Marital status (measured by dummies for *married* and *divorced/bereaved*, with *unmarried* as the reference category), employment type (measured by a dummy for *temporary or daily non-permanent employment*, with *permanent* as the reference category), household income, and education level are included as covariates. The dataset does not include several variables known to be associated with life satisfaction—health, personality, parental socioeconomic status, occupational prestige, and number of children; this constraint is discussed further in the limitations.

3.3. Analytic Strategy

Analyses were conducted in SPSS 27.0. Descriptive statistics and gender-disaggregated correlations were computed first. The mediation hypothesis (H3) was formally tested using bootstrapped confidence intervals for the indirect effect (5000 resamples), following current methodological standards (Hayes 2022). The regression steps of Baron and Kenny (Baron and Kenny 1986) are reported alongside, but for transparency only. The moderated mediation hypothesis (H5) was tested using conditional process analysis following the logic of PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes 2022), with bootstrapped confidence intervals for the conditional indirect effects and the moderated mediation index.

Common method bias was assessed by Harman's single-factor test. The first unrotated factor accounted for 34.78% of total variance, below the conventional 50% threshold (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Variance inflation factors for all predictors ranged from 1.03 to 2.10, indicating no multicollinearity concerns.

The explained variance (R^2) in the models is modest (3.6–4.8%), consistent with prior research using large-scale survey data to examine structural-level correlates of individual well-being: small but reliable associations can carry population-level substantive significance (Funder and Ozer 2019). Section 5 returns to the interpretation of effect size.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics and gender-based mean comparisons are presented in Table 1. The mean life satisfaction score was 6.56 ($SD = 1.39$) on the 0–10 scale, indicating moderate satisfaction; 82.3% of respondents scored above the midpoint. No statistically reliable gender difference emerged for life satisfaction ($t = 1.44$, $p = 0.150$) or perceived social mobility ($t = 0.19$, $p = 0.849$). However, women reported slightly higher fairness scores ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.70$) than did men ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 0.68$; $t = -3.00$, $p < 0.01$). Several non-mutually exclusive readings are available. System justification theory (Jost and Banaji 1994) suggests that members of disadvantaged groups sometimes endorse the fairness of existing arrangements. Alternatively, given the directional ambiguity of the fairness item, men's lower scores could reflect grievance perceptions about male-specific burdens (e.g., mandatory military service) rather than recognition of disadvantage faced by women. The data do not permit adjudication between these readings, so I avoid drawing strong conclusions from the mean difference itself. Given the absence of mean-level gender differences in life satisfaction and perceived social mobility, despite substantial structural inequality, the relational analysis of how associations between variables differ by gender is the appropriate analytic focus.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and *t*-tests by gender.

Variable	Total (<i>n</i> = 4381)	Male (<i>n</i> = 2373)	Female (<i>n</i> = 2008)	<i>t</i>
Perceived Gender Fairness	2.49 (0.69)	2.46 (0.68)	2.52 (0.70)	−3.00 **
Perceived Social Mobility	2.62 (0.73)	2.62 (0.73)	2.62 (0.73)	0.19
Life Satisfaction	6.56 (1.39)	6.59 (1.38)	6.53 (1.40)	1.44

Note. Standard deviations in parentheses. ** $p < 0.01$.

The bivariate correlation between perceived gender fairness and perceived social mobility ($r = 0.10$, $p < 0.01$) in Table 2a is positive and consistent in sign with the within-gender correlations reported in Table 2b (men: $r = 0.13$; women: $r = 0.20$) and with the multivariate coefficients reported in Section 4.2. The modest magnitude is typical for the cognitive coupling of structural fairness appraisals with self-referential mobility expectations. The stronger fairness–mobility correlation among women (0.20 vs. 0.13 among men) provides preliminary descriptive evidence consistent with the differential sensitivity hypothesis tested formally in Section 4.3.

Table 2. (a) Correlations among study variables. (b) Within-gender variable correlations.

(a)						
Variable	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived Discrimination	2.57 (0.69)	—				
2. Perceived Gender Fairness	2.49 (0.69)	−0.42 **	—			
3. Perceived Social Mobility	2.62 (0.73)	0.19 **	0.10 **	—		
4. Life Satisfaction	6.56 (1.39)	0.13 **	0.08 **	0.21 **	—	
5. Gender (female = 1)	0.46 (0.50)	−0.01	0.05 **	−0.00	−0.02	—

(b)		
Pair	Men (<i>n</i> = 2373)	Women (<i>n</i> = 2008)
Fairness ↔ Mobility	0.13 **	0.20 **
Fairness ↔ Life Satisfaction	0.04 *	0.04
Mobility ↔ Life Satisfaction	0.18 **	0.15 **
Discrimination ↔ Fairness	−0.07 **	−0.13 **

Note. (a) $N = 4381$. ** $p < 0.01$. All continuous variables were mean-centered prior to multivariate analysis. Variance inflation factors ranged from 1.03 to 2.10. (b) * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

4.2. Mediation Analysis

Table 3 presents the hierarchical regression results. In Model 1, perceived gender fairness was positively associated with perceived social mobility ($B = 0.171$, $p < 0.001$) after controlling for gender, marital status, employment type, household income, and education. In Model 2, perceived gender fairness was positively associated with life satisfaction ($B = 0.070$, $p < 0.05$). Following the addition of perceived social mobility as a predictor in Model 3, the association between perceived gender fairness and life satisfaction became statistically non-significant ($B = 0.019$, $p = 0.535$), and perceived social mobility was strongly associated with life satisfaction ($B = 0.300$, $p < 0.001$).

Bootstrap tests of the indirect association (5000 resamples) yielded $ab = 0.051$ (Boot $SE = 0.007$, 95% CI [0.038, 0.066]). The completely standardized indirect coefficient was 0.025. Because the bootstrapped confidence interval excludes zero, the indirect association is statistically reliable. Combined with the non-significant direct association in Model 3 ($c' = 0.019$, $p = 0.535$), the pattern is descriptively consistent with a fully indirect statistical association—that is, with the absence of a residual direct association between perceived gender fairness and life satisfaction once perceived social mobility is included. I rely on the bootstrapped indirect effect as the primary basis for the mediation claim, in line with

current methodological standards (Hayes 2022); the Baron and Kenny (1986) regression steps appear above for transparency only.

Table 3. Result of the mediation analysis.

Variable	Model 1: Mobility B (SE)	Model 2: LS B (SE)	Model 3: LS B (SE)
Intercept	2.077 (0.078) ***	5.700 (0.150) ***	5.077 (0.160) ***
Gender (female = 1)	0.018 (0.022)	−0.004 (0.043)	−0.009 (0.042)
Married (ref: unmarried)	−0.064 (0.027) *	0.137 (0.052) **	0.156 (0.051) **
Divorced/bereaved	−0.170 (0.069) *	−0.192 (0.132)	−0.141 (0.130)
Temporary employment	−0.114 (0.037) **	−0.208 (0.070) **	−0.173 (0.069) *
Household income	0.007 (0.006)	0.037 (0.011) **	0.035 (0.011) **
Education	0.028 (0.012) *	0.092 (0.023) ***	0.083 (0.023) ***
Perceived Gender Fairness (X)	0.171 (0.016) ***	0.070 (0.030) *	0.019 (0.030)
Perceived Social Mobility (M)	—	—	0.300 (0.029) ***
R ²	0.036	0.024	0.048
F	15.01 ***	9.81 ***	18.37 ***

Note. N = 4381. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The explained variance in Models 1–3 ranged from 2.4% to 4.8%. Life satisfaction is shaped by a wide range of factors—genetics, personality, health, proximal life circumstances [1]—and R^2 values in this range are typical for large-scale survey research examining macro-structural correlates of individual well-being. As Funder and Ozer (2019) argue, statistical associations accounting for a small share of individual-level variance can nonetheless carry substantive significance when applied at the population scale. The principal finding of analytic interest is not the absolute magnitude of variance explained but the differential strength of the indirect association across gender groups.

4.3. Moderated Mediation Analysis

Moderated regression results are presented in Table 4. The interaction term (perceived gender fairness $\times$ gender) was positively associated with perceived social mobility ($B = 0.089$, $p = 0.005$). Simple slope analysis indicated that this positive association was approximately 1.68 times steeper for women ($B = 0.219$) than for men ($B = 0.131$).

Table 4. Result of the moderated mediation analysis.

Variable	Perceived Social Mobility B (SE)
Intercept	2.181 (0.087) ***
Perceived Gender Fairness (X)	0.131 (0.021) ***
Gender (W)	−0.209 (0.084) *
Fairness $\times$ Gender (X $\times$ W)	0.089 (0.032) **
Married	−0.064 (0.027) *
Temporary employment	−0.115 (0.037) **
Household income	0.007 (0.006)
Education	0.028 (0.012) *
R ²	0.038
F	14.44 ***
Simple slope: Men	0.131
Simple slope: Women	0.219

Note. N = 4381. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 5 presents conditional indirect effects, estimated via 5000 bootstrap resamples following PROCESS Model 7 logic (Hayes 2022). The conditional indirect coefficient was 0.039 (95% CI [0.025, 0.055]) for men and 0.066 (95% CI [0.048, 0.086]) for women. The

moderated mediation index was 0.026 (95% CI [0.007, 0.048]). Because the index's bootstrapped confidence interval excludes zero, the difference in indirect coefficients between gender groups is statistically reliable.

Table 5. Conditional indirect effects and moderated mediation index.

	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Men ($W = 0$)	0.039	0.008	0.025	0.055
Women ($W = 1$)	0.066	0.010	0.048	0.086
Moderated Mediation Index	0.026	0.010	0.007	0.048

Note. $N = 4381$. Bootstrap = 5000 resamples. PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes 2022).

Figure 2 displays the simple slopes. The descriptively steeper slope for women is consistent with the differential cognitive sensitivity element of the GFH framework. The interpretation of this descriptive consistency, including alternatives the design cannot rule out, is discussed in Section 5.2.

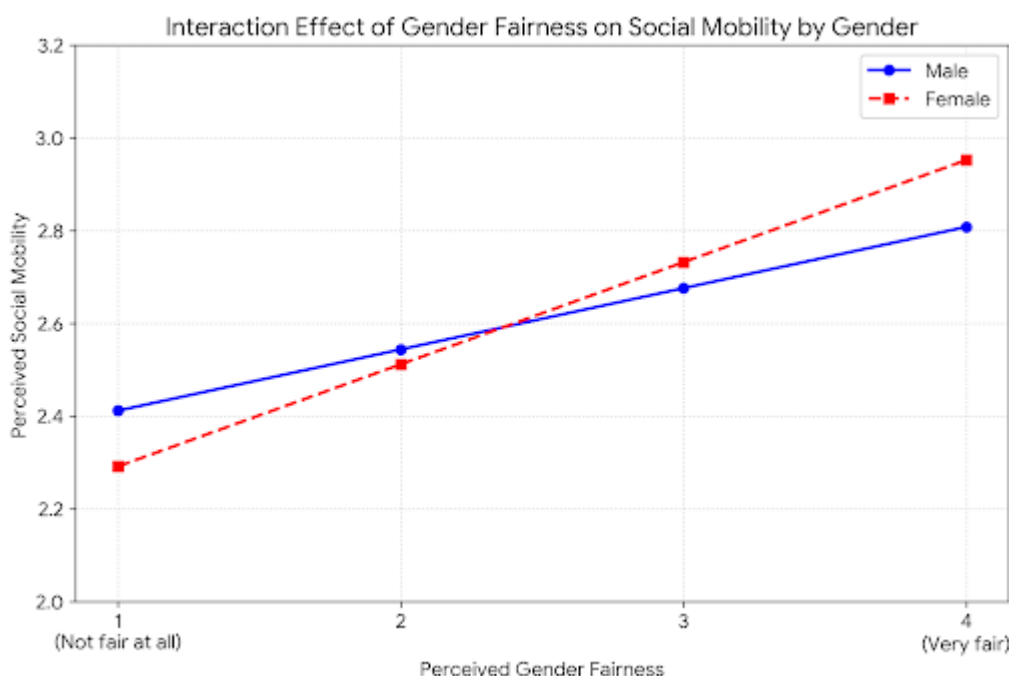


Figure 2. Interaction effect of perceived gender fairness on perceived social mobility by gender.

4.4. Supplementary Analyses

Several supplementary analyses were conducted to assess the robustness and scope of the main findings. Please see Appendix A Table A1.

4.4.1. Specification of Socioeconomic Covariates

Re-estimating the moderated mediation model with alternative specifications of the socioeconomic covariates (excluding household income and education) yielded substantively identical results, with the interaction term remaining reliable ($B = 0.088$, $p = 0.005$).

4.4.2. Age-Subgroup Analysis

The sample was divided into a younger subgroup (20–39, $n = 1701$) and an older subgroup (40+, $n = 2680$). The interaction term was statistically reliable in the younger subgroup ($B = 0.120$, $p = 0.016$) but not in the older subgroup ($B = 0.069$, $p = 0.097$). Among younger respondents, the simple slope for women ($B = 0.229$) was approximately

2.10 times steeper than that for men ($B = 0.109$); among older respondents, the corresponding ratio was 1.48 (women: 0.213; men: 0.145). This analysis is exploratory, rather than confirmatory.

4.4.3. Three-Way Interaction

A three-way interaction model (perceived gender fairness $\times$ gender $\times$ age group) estimated using the full sample yielded a non-significant interaction term ($B = -0.052$, $p = 0.424$). Accordingly, the age-subgroup results reported above should be interpreted as exploratory and descriptive, not as evidence of a confirmed age-conditional moderation pattern.

4.4.4. Perceived Gender Discrimination as Alternative Predictor

The moderated mediation model was replicated with perceived gender discrimination substituted for perceived gender fairness. This yielded a non-significant interaction term (discrimination $\times$ gender: $B = -0.025$, $p = 0.428$) and a non-significant moderated mediation index (-0.008 , 95% CI $[-0.029, 0.012]$). Thus, the gender-conditional pattern emerged only for perceived gender fairness. Two readings of this contrast, both consistent with the data, are discussed in Section 5.2.

4.4.5. Income and Perceived Gender Fairness Within Gender

Among women, perceived gender fairness did not vary statistically reliably across income quartiles ($F = 0.804$, $p = 0.492$); a similar non-significant pattern was found among men ($F = 0.670$, $p = 0.570$). Perceived gender fairness operates relatively independently of income within the wage worker population, and the gender-conditional pattern documented in Section 4.3 is unlikely to be reducible to income-based differences.

4.4.6. Health Status

Including self-reported health status as an additional covariate, the interaction term remained statistically reliable ($B = 0.094$, $p = 0.003$), and health was independently associated with perceived social mobility ($B = 0.088$, $p < 0.001$).

4.4.7. Composite Subjective Well-Being Index

The moderated mediation was replicated using a three-item composite index (happiness, life satisfaction, perceived life meaning; $\alpha = 0.79$). Two negative-affect items (worry and depression) were excluded because their inter-item correlations with the cognitive-evaluative items ($r = 0.15$ – 0.21) were low, consistent with Diener's (1984) cognitive-affective distinction. The moderated mediation index remained reliable (Index = 0.031, 95% CI $[0.009, 0.054]$), with conditional indirect coefficients of 0.046 (95% CI $[0.030, 0.063]$) for men and 0.076 (95% CI $[0.057, 0.096]$) for women.

5. Discussion

5.1. Summary of Findings

The analyses examined the moderated mediation pathway connecting perceived gender fairness, perceived social mobility, and life satisfaction among South Korean wage workers. The indirect statistical association between perceived gender fairness and life satisfaction via perceived social mobility was reliable ($ab = 0.051$, 95% CI $[0.038, 0.066]$); the direct association became statistically non-significant when the mediator was included, descriptively consistent with a fully indirect statistical association rather than a residual direct association. The positive slope of perceived social mobility on perceived gender fairness was approximately 1.68 times steeper for women than for men, with the moderated mediation index reliably non-zero (Index = 0.026, 95% CI $[0.007, 0.048]$). Exploratory

subgroup analyses indicate that the gender-conditional pattern is reliable in the 20–39 subgroup but not in the 40+ subgroup, although the formal three-way interaction is not statistically significant.

The cross-sectional design and single-item measures necessitate treating these findings as descriptive patterns of statistical association rather than as evidence of causal effects. The patterns are equally compatible with alternative orderings, reverse causation, and shared antecedents. Interpretation of the gender-conditional pattern in particular—our focal finding—is taken up in Section 5.2.

5.2. Discussion of the Findings in Relation to Prior Literature

The pattern in which perceived gender fairness is associated with life satisfaction primarily through perceived social mobility, rather than directly, is consistent with the broader literature on the POUM hypothesis (Bénabou and Ok 2001) and hope theory (Snyder 2002), in which future-oriented cognition serves as a correlate of subjective well-being. However, cross-sectional consistency with a theoretical model is a weak form of evidence: Many alternative models would generate similar correlation structures, and the directional claims would require longitudinal data to assess.

5.2.1. Alternative Interpretations of the Gender-Conditional Pattern

The descriptively steeper slope of perceived social mobility on perceived gender fairness for women (vs. men) is the empirical pattern that the GFH construct was proposed to address. The pattern admits at least three substantively distinct interpretations that cannot be adjudicated by the present design. I outline the three readings in declining order of theoretical commitment to the GFH construct.

The first reading is that of the GFH itself. Based on this account, women in the South Korean labor market perceive themselves as the structurally disadvantaged gender group, register the fairness item as a signal about the equity of their group's treatment, and accordingly form mobility expectations more contingent on this signal compared with men's expectations. The steeper slope thus reflects a substantive psychological asymmetry rooted in structural position. This interpretation is consistent with the macro-indicators of structural gender inequality in South Korea documented in Section 2.4.

The second reading, which I term gender-differentiated interpretation, reasons that men and women interpret the fairness item differently in ways the instrument cannot detect. "How fair is gender-based treatment?" may be read by women as referring to women's treatment but by men as referring to men's treatment, to a generic gender-neutral evaluation, or to grievances regarding male-specific burdens such as mandatory military service. It is thus difficult to verify whether the two slopes are measuring the same psychological construct, and the moderation effect could reflect *measurement asymmetry* rather than psychological asymmetry. Suggestive in this regard is the supplementary analysis using perceived gender discrimination, with a clearer descriptive referent than the fairness item and no gender-conditional pattern. The contrast may reflect a substantive distinction between evaluative and descriptive judgments (Tyler and Blader 2003), as suggested in Section 4.4. Conversely, it may reflect that the discrimination item is less susceptible to gender-differentiated interpretation than the fairness item. The data cannot adjudicate between these readings.

The third reading, which I term expectations elasticity, attributes the gender-conditional pattern to a general feature of how mobility expectations are formed when individuals assess collective future prospects. Specifically, groups whose macro-position is more uncertain or contested may exhibit greater elasticity of mobility expectations to fairness signals, regardless of whether those signals are interpreted as advantageous or

disadvantageous to one's own group. Although more speculative than the other two, this reading underscores the broader point that the pattern does not *require* the substantive interpretation embedded in the GFH construct.

This study's design precludes choosing definitively among the three readings, and I make no claim that the data favor the first over the second or third.

5.2.2. What the Present Findings Do and Do Not Tell Us About the GFH Construct

Even if the GFH reading were correct, the present analysis tests only the empirical implication that—within a single sample—the slope of perceived social mobility on perceived gender fairness should be descriptively steeper for women than for men. The two further empirical implications specified in Section 2.3 remain open: (1) the *specificity* prediction that the differential pattern should be confined to future-oriented cognition and not appear in retrospective evaluations or present-moment affect; and (2) the *generalizability* prediction that the pattern should extend to other dimensions of structural disadvantage and be more pronounced under directional fairness measurement. Validation of the GFH construct would require, at minimum, longitudinal evidence of differential temporal sensitivity; replication across multiple national contexts; demonstration of discriminant validity against the related concepts of relative deprivation, minority stress, and system justification; and directional measurement of fairness perceptions sufficient to rule out the above-mentioned differential-interpretation reading. None of these elements is supplied by the present design.

The supplementary age-subgroup analysis—reliable in the 20–39 cohort but not in the 40+ cohort, with a non-significant three-way interaction—is suggestive but not confirmatory. One reading is that women whose labor-market entry coincided with mass female tertiary attainment differ in their fairness–mobility coupling from women whose entry preceded that demographic shift. I mention this pattern in the spirit of theoretical refinement rather than empirical confirmation, and note that alternative cohort-specific factors could produce the same effect.

This study contributes a single conditional element to a broader research program. The GFH construct is best understood as a hypothesis-generating proposal that the present analysis has provided a preliminary empirical occasion to formulate, and one that future research may build upon, modify, or revise.

5.3. Scope of Implications

I decline to draw policy implications from this analysis. The cross-sectional design, single-item measures, directional ambiguity of the fairness item, and modest explained variance together weigh against translating these findings into recommendations for policy or institutional reform.

Instead, the findings should be read as a descriptive contribution to research on the cognitive correlates of subjective well-being in contexts of structural gender inequality. Whether the patterns documented here would replicate in longitudinal data, other national contexts, non-wage-worker populations, or with directionally measured fairness perceptions are open empirical questions; normative and policy claims are appropriately left to studies whose designs are better suited to support them.

5.4. Limitations

The study has substantial limitations that constrain the inferences its findings can support. Each individual limitation weakens the inferential force of the analyses; their combined weight is greater still. Accordingly, the article's substantive claims are best regarded as descriptive contributions to a cumulative empirical literature.

The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Reverse causation cannot be ruled out: Individuals with higher life satisfaction may report higher perceived social mobility or higher perceived fairness, or all three may share common antecedents that produce the observed associations spuriously. Longitudinal panel data are needed to establish temporal precedence and support stronger causal inferences.

Each focal construct is measured by a single item. Robustness checks using a three-item composite subjective well-being index (Section 4.4) yielded consistent results, but single-item measures cannot assess internal consistency, capture multiple dimensions, or fully control measurement error. Future research should employ validated multi-item scales, such as Colquitt's (2001) organizational justice measures, Snyder's (2002) Hope Scale, and the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener et al. 1985).

The directional ambiguity of the fairness item is one of the most consequential limitations of the study, with implications throughout the empirical analysis. The moderation effect that constitutes the focal finding admits at least three substantively distinct interpretations, developed in detail in Section 5.2, that this study's design cannot adjudicate among. Substantive claims about gender inequality, structural disadvantage, or women's psychological vulnerability that depend on the GFH interpretation are, therefore, not warranted on the basis of these data alone. Future research should employ directional items that explicitly specify which gender is perceived as advantaged or disadvantaged, ideally with separate items measuring perceived fairness toward women and toward men. Such a measurement instrument would be more adequate to test the substantive moderation claim.

The dataset lacks measures of fertility intentions, marriage intentions, or reproductive behavior, limiting this study's empirical scope to subjective well-being. Whether the identified cognitive pathway has downstream associations with fertility decisions remains a question for future research using datasets that include such measures. The dataset also lacks several variables known to be associated with life satisfaction, including health (entered only as a robustness check), personality, parental socioeconomic status, occupational prestige, and number of children. The use of household-level rather than individual-level income may obscure within-household gender dynamics.

The analysis is restricted to wage workers, excluding homemakers, caregivers, the self-employed, and the economically inactive. Whether the patterns observed here generalize to these populations is unknown.

The R^2 values across models are small (2.4–4.8%). Although small associations can carry population-level significance (Funder and Ozer 2019), the modest explained variance indicates that perceived gender fairness and perceived social mobility account for only a fraction of the variance in life satisfaction, which is statistically associated with many other factors.

All measures are self-reported and drawn from the same survey instrument. Harman's single-factor test suggested common method bias is unlikely to be a serious threat (the first factor explained 34.78% of total variance), but the possibility cannot be entirely ruled out. Moreover, the findings come from a single national context—South Korea—at a single time point. Whether the gender-conditional pattern documented here operates similarly in societies with different structural gender inequality levels, welfare regimes, or cultural orientations toward gender remains an open empirical question.

5.5. Future Research Directions

The limitations suggest a substantial agenda for future work. Panel data would permit tests of temporal precedence in the fairness–mobility–life satisfaction sequence and allow examination of whether shifts in perceived fairness predict subsequent shifts in mobility expectations. Validated multi-item scales for each focal construct would strengthen

measurement reliability and enable separate assessment of the distributive and procedural dimensions of fairness. Directional fairness items—ideally measuring perceived fairness toward women and men separately—would address this study’s most consequential measurement limitation and allow direct testing of the moderation pattern. Cross-national comparisons across societies of varying gender stratification would test the generalizability of the gender-conditional pattern observed here; East Asian comparisons (Japan, Taiwan, China) and contrasts with Northern European cases would be particularly informative. Studies that replicate the moderation pattern with race, class, or other dimensions of structural disadvantage—with appropriate identification of the disadvantaged group at the macro-structural level—would test the GFH construct’s generalizability prediction. Relatedly, designs assessing multiple cognitive outcomes within the same population would test the prediction that differential sensitivity is specific to prospective cognition and does not appear in retrospective evaluations. Extension to non-wage-worker populations would clarify the model’s scope conditions. Finally, datasets including fertility, marriage, and family-formation measures would permit direct examination of whether the cognitive pathway identified here has downstream associations with life-course decisions—an investigation that should precede, not follow, fertility-related claims.

6. Conclusions

This study examined how perceived gender fairness, perceived social mobility, and life satisfaction are statistically related in a cross-sectional sample of 4381 South Korean wage workers. Three patterns emerged. First, the indirect statistical association between perceived gender fairness and life satisfaction via perceived social mobility was reliable, whereas the direct association was not. Second, the slope of perceived social mobility on perceived gender fairness was steeper for women than for men. Third, exploratory subgroup analyses indicate that this gender-conditional pattern is statistically reliable in the 20–39 subgroup but not in the 40+ subgroup, although the formal three-way interaction is not statistically significant. The age-subgroup results should, therefore, be read as descriptive rather than as confirming an age-conditional moderation pattern.

Beyond the empirical findings, this study proposes the GFH as a hypothesis-generating construct: It theorizes that in the formation of future-oriented mobility expectations, structurally disadvantaged gender group members are more cognitively sensitive to perceived institutional fairness. The construct is differentiated from relative deprivation, minority stress, and system justification, and is positioned as an initial proposal that may be built upon, modified, or revised by future research using longitudinal data, validated multi-item scales, and directionally specified fairness measures.

The study’s limitations—cross-sectional, single-item, and directionally ambiguous on the focal predictor—shape the interpretive scope of the findings. Within these constraints, the study offers a descriptive empirical contribution to the literature on cognitive correlates of subjective well-being in contexts of structural gender inequality, alongside a conceptual proposal whose broader empirical content remains to be tested.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

GFH	Gendered Fragility of Hope
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
POUM	Prospect of Upward Mobility
KIPA	Korea Institute of Public Administration
SWB	Subjective well-being
LS	Life satisfaction

Appendix A

Table A1. Robustness check using composite subjective well-being (SWB).

Outcome: Composite SWB (3 Items)	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Direct effects on Mediator (Social Mobility)				
Perceived Gender Fairness (X)	0.132	0.017	7.76	<0.001
Gender (W)	−0.008	0.016	−0.51	0.606
Interaction (Fairness × Gender)	0.088	0.024	3.67	<0.001
Direct effects on Dependent Variable (Composite SWB)				
Perceived Social Mobility (M → Y)	0.284	0.018	15.77	<0.001
Perceived Gender Fairness (X → Y)	0.041	0.015	2.73	0.006

Note. *N* = 4381. The composite subjective well-being index combines happiness, life satisfaction, and perceived life meaning ($\alpha = 0.79$). Results confirm the robustness of the moderated mediation pattern when the dependent variable is a multi-item composite rather than a single-item life satisfaction measure.

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