

# Low fertility trend in the Republic of Korea and the problems of its family and demographic policy implementation

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## Abstract

The article analyzes the population trends and the family and demographic policy in the contemporary Republic of Korea. The main emphasis is made on the analysis of low birth rate in the country. Until the end of the 20th century, the two-child family model prevailed in South Korea, however, in the last decade birth and marriage rates have become among the lowest in the world. Why has fertility fallen so dramatically far below replacement level? The article discusses the causes of fertility decline, as well as the social factors that contribute to and hinder the implementation of state measures to stimulate and increase the birth rate in the Republic of Korea. In particular, the social and gender aspects of solving the problem of low fertility are analyzed.

## Keywords:

low birth rate, marriage, family and demographic policy, family culture, gender

**JEL Codes:** J10, J13, J18

## Actualization of demographic discourse in the Republic of Korea

In the Republic of Korea, an increasing number of young people decide not to marry. This social phenomenon is widespread in the society, and for these people there is even a special term “Sampo generation.” A similar phenomenon is observed in Japan — the emergence of the “Satori generation”, who practice giving up many values that are important to the generation of their parents, including sex, marriage and children. South Korea now uses the term “Nipo generation” for young people with the same lifestyle. This means that the younger

generation constantly declines hope for a better future, not only in relation to marriage and family, but also in other areas of life.

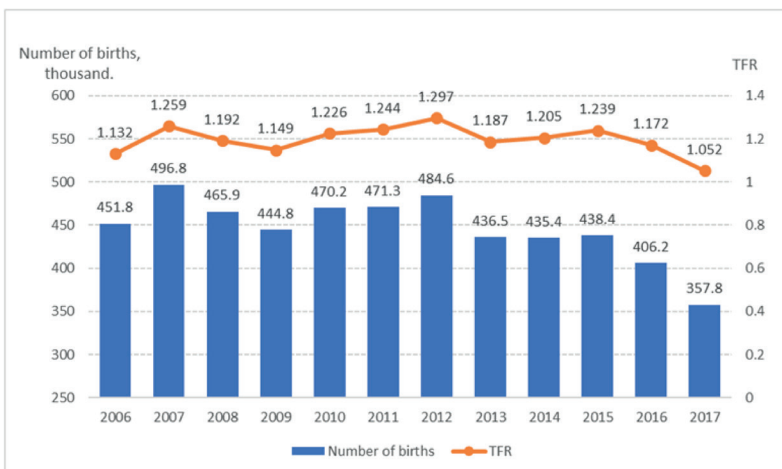
In the past 10 years, the Republic of Korea has recorded some of the lowest fertility and marriage levels in the world. In 2018, the total fertility rate in South Korea fell below one for the first time – to 0.98 (in 2017 it was 1.05, i.e. the decline was by 7.1%). According to UN forecasts, by 2021 it will decrease to 0.86, and after 2029 the country's population may begin to decline (KOSTAT 2018).

Since 2006, the Korean Government has invested heavily in population and family policies to increase birth rate. But most experts argue that the measures taken have not yielded results, as the birth rate continues to decline. Consequently, the low fertility and the possibilities of increasing it by means of family and demographic policies becomes a burning issue (Birth rate statistics... 2018; Preliminary fertility... 2018).

The article discusses some features of the demographic situation and causes of low fertility in the Republic of Korea and also, analyzes the social factors that contribute to and hinder the implementation of government measures to stimulate birth rate growth. The gender aspect of solving the problem of low fertility is addressed. Based on the analysis, the new approaches and measures of family and social policy in the area of fertility are proposed. In accordance with the purpose of the research, the article uses theoretical methods of research, namely secondary analysis of Korean sources and Korean research literature, analysis of government documents, official Korean statistics (KOSTAT) and sample surveys of the population of the Republic of Korea.

## Characteristics of the demographic situation in contemporary Korea

One of the most visible characteristics in the demographic situation of recent decades is unprecedented decline in fertility. By the beginning of the 21st century, academic and social discourse included the term “very low fertility”, i.e. a situation where the total



**Figure 1.** Number of births and total fertility rate in the Republic of Korea, 2006-2017. Source: KOSTAT, Birth Statistics 2017, № 10103. <http://kostat.go.kr/wnsearch/search.jsp>

fertility rate (TFR) falls below 1.3, which is typical for East Asian countries. In the early 2010s, TFR was 1.21 in Japan, 1.23 in the Republic of Korea (Fig. 1), 1.15 in Thailand, 1.11 in Singapore and the lowest TFR - 1.07 - was recorded in Hong Kong (CIA 2011). According to UN forecasts, stabilization of fertility at such a low level inevitably results in accelerated population ageing and depopulation (Table 1). Japan's Ministry of Health published data, according to which the country's largest population decline occurred in

**Table 1.** Projected share of population over 65 years of age in East Asia (%)

	2000	2020	2050
Japan	17.2	28.5	37.8
South Korea	7.2	15.6	38.2
Thailand	8.6	16.2	35.9
Singapore	7.2	17.9	32.6

**Source:** Sung Ho Chung 2013 : 32

2012, and South Korea's population decline is projected to begin between 2025 and 2030 (Sung Ho Chung 2013: 31).

In addition, under a patriarchal family culture prevailing in Korean society, the birth of a child may not normally occur out of a formal (registered) marriage. In South Korea, only 1.9 per cent of births are out of wedlock, it is the lowest rate among OECD countries. In Japan, which also has almost no extramarital births, this figure is 2.3 per cent. These rates are incomparable to the European Union countries where 42.6 per cent of the total number of births are born out of wedlock (Sung Ho Chung 2013: 32–36; Eurostat 2018). Consequently, in South Korea, as in many East Asian countries, the birth rate is correlated with the marriage rate more closely than in European countries. Whereas in 1990 the average age at first marriage for Korean men was 27.8 years and 24.8 years for women, in 2010 it increased to 31.8 years for men and to 28.9 years for women, and in 2018 the average age of first marriage for Korean men and women was 33.15 and 30.4 years respectively. Marriage has grown significantly “old” and in the last three years, the most significant decrease in the marriage rate occurred in Korean society (KOSTAT 2018).

In accordance with this marriage trend, the age of birth of the first child also increased. According to statistics for 2018, the age of birth of the first child was 31.9 years, the second child – 33.6 years, the third child – 35.1 years. At the same time, the number of young people who give up marriages and child births, even in legal marriage, increases. A special term DINK — Double Income and No Kids, appeared. In South Korea, traditionally known for large families, the emergence of childless marriages reflects deep transformations in the society, and many young people do not have intention to have children in their lifetime (Preliminary Fertility... 2018; Ueno Chicko 2017).

Modern Korean society is moving towards individualism, and this affects family values and the daily lives of the population: in 2017, the share of single-person households in Korean society rose to 28.7% (Single-person... 2018; Lee Yun Seok 2012: 68–69). The number of such households is growing in South Korea at the fastest rate among the OECD countries, and their share is projected to increase to 30 per cent by 2020. Transformations in the family model creates new trends in the culture of everyday life. Recently new consumer trends appear: “Hon-bap (eat alone)”, “Hon-sul (drink alone)”, “Hon-nol (play alone)”, etc. As a res-

ponse to such trends, new types of restaurants, bars, cafes, shops for single people appeared (in Japan a similar “Bento” culture appeared) (Yun Seok Lee 2012: 71).

## Social factors and causes of low fertility

Why do young people give up the idea to get children in East Asia in general and in the Republic of Korea in particular? South Korea has the lowest birth rate in the world, and if the situation does not change, the nation may be on the verge of extinction (Maybin 2018). According to P. McDonald, the trend of gender equality and market liberalization is a global phenomenon. Birth rate decline has spread across all countries, but East Asian region, including the Republic of Korea, has a lower fertility rate than most European countries: the total fertility rate is less than 1.5. Until the 1980s, in East Asian countries, there was a custom to get married, and a two-child family model prevailed (at least, reproductive plans included the birth of two or more children) (Sung Ho Chung 2013: 33). However, why did the marriage and birth rates decline so dramatically to a level far below replacement level since the early 2000s?

Firstly, in modern Korean society, fertility is increasingly declining with rising women’s overall education and employment, with an increase in the number of unmarried women. Modern Korean women want to live independently and put their dreams into reality; they are afraid to combine family and work, fear loss of independence and disruption of plans.

Secondly, after the financial crisis in South Korea in 1997 and in connection with the liberalization of the market on a global scale, the labour market in the country became very competitive, and young people should put in a lot of effort to reach a position at work. However, in Korea, compared to other developed countries of the world, the social security system does not sufficiently correspond to such conditions, despite rapid growth of the economy. It was a turning point from which the demographic situation in the country began to change dramatically. Therefore, young people either postpone marriage and, consequently, the birth of a child for the sake of their career, or do not plan to marry and have children at all in order not to lose their jobs. The marriage rate constantly reduces: in 2018, the marriage rate was 5 ‰, whereas in 2009 it was 6.2 ‰, in 1970 it was 9.2 ‰ (KOSIS 2018).

Thirdly, an important factor influencing the choice between giving or giving up child-birth is the fear of becoming a victim of child care and upbringing. In Korea, parents must spend their money on raising their children and education, including additional classes, on private education. Although public education is free, the competitive environment in schools forces parents to pay for additional education. It is a very common socio-cultural phenomenon in Korea, related to the negative side of academic sectarianism based on the traditional idea of “Korean Confucianism.”

Fourthly, an authoritarian patriarchal family culture is an important factor that has influenced the very low (by WHO criteria) birth rate and makes it difficult to solve the problem of low fertility in East Asian countries, including South Korea. According to social surveys, most girls say that they do not want to experience the pain associated with child-birth; moreover, having a child would harm their careers. The Republic of Korea has labour laws prohibiting discrimination against pregnant women, but trade unions say that these laws are often ignored. Quite often pregnant women worry about their future. In many ca-

ses, even if a woman is employed, the care for children falls almost entirely on her (Maybin 2018). According to statistics, the average South Korean male devotes 17 minutes a day to unpaid work, including housekeeping, and women spend 129 minutes a day, seven times more; as for care for children, men spend 14.9 minutes a day and women spend three times more – 52.2 minutes. At work, the situation is opposite: men devote 546 minutes per day to paid work and women devote 412 minutes, or 1.3 times less. Therefore, it is not only the fact that a young woman does not want to marry, but the socio-economic environment too, as an objective factor strongly influences the decision of a woman to give or give up birth (The 2018 National Survey...; Housekeeping time... 2019).

According to the Japanese researcher T. Suzuki, in East Asia, where the TFR is less than 1.5, the situation is as follows: the gender-role stereotypes in the family and at enterprise encourage low fertility; children start to earn their own money at relatively late age; the mother is more responsible for caring for children; very few children are born out of registered marriage (Suzuki 2019). This reflects the prevalence of traditional ideas in the society and explains the reasons for giving up marriage and childbirth among young generations (Sung Ho Chung 2013: 32–36; Chang Woo Park 2018: 288–290).

### **The problem of insufficient state measures to stimulate birth rate growth**

“The 2018 National Survey on Fertility and Family Health and Welfare” conducted by the Korean Institute of Health and Social Affairs presented the results of a survey of never-married men and women aged 20–44 years. 28.9% of men and 48.0% of women said that it was not necessary to have a child; the proportion of women and men who did not plan to have children doubled as compared to a similar survey for 2015 (The 2018 National Survey ...; There has been an increase... 2019).

In 1970, Korea’s TFR was 4.53, a very high level compared to other OECD countries; by 1983 it had more than halved, to 2.06, and in 1990 it was already 1.59. In 2017, South Korea’s TFR fell to 1.05, the lowest level among all OECD countries (the OECD average is 1.7, and 11 countries registered a TFR below 1.5) (KOSIS 2018).

The fall in birth rate is acknowledged a serious challenge for South Korea. Accordingly, a new law was adopted in 2005 to support fertility and mitigate the negative effects of population ageing. From 2006 to 2020, five-year basic plans for increasing fertility and slowing the ageing of society have been established. Over the past decade, the Government has spent a huge amount of about 80 trillion Won (USD 71 billion) for these purposes (80 billion Won... 2018; Chang Woo Park 2018: 267). However, official data showed that the fertility rate in South Korea last year reached another record low, falling below 1 for the first time — to 0.98 in 2018. Despite a number of Government measures aimed at overcoming the declining fertility trend, South Korea’s TFR is far below the 2.1 level required to maintain the population reproduction (Birth rate... 2019). In 2017, at a meeting of the Demographic Committee, President Moon also acknowledged that fertility policies were ineffective (The Seventeenth Monthly... 2019).

What is the problem of family and demographic policy in Korea? Many experts say that first of all a change of policy paradigms is necessary (Young Mi Kim 2018: 103–104). In other words, the first and second basic plan for increasing fertility and counteracting population ageing were grounded mainly on economic measures to encourage fertility.

But in order to increase birth rate to at least the replacement level, it is necessary to improve not only economic conditions, but also the socio-cultural environment. Gender inequality in the family and at work has not been sufficiently addressed in social policy. It is necessary to give people confidence in the future (Yong Tae Jo 2019: 193). When discussing family and population policies in the field of fertility, careful consideration should be given to the patriarchal structure of the social system and the social regimes that affect the socio-cultural environment (Sung Ho Chung 2013: 32–36 ; Chang Woo Park 2018: 288–290).

Accordingly, the Third Basic Plan for Low Fertility and Aged Society (2016-2020) is aimed at achieving a new quality of life for all generations and supporting not only officially married couples, but families and households of different types. The plan includes the concept of gender equality so that young people who delay marriage and childbirth or completely abandon it can effectively combine work and family. It is necessary to revisit the working regime, wage structure (reduce income inequality), maternity leave, housing problems for young families, etc. (Chang Woo Park 2018: 269–270).

## Conclusion

The South Korea's social policy failed to adequately address gender inequalities in the family and at work, and the need to give people confidence in the future. Therefore, when elaborating social policy in the field of fertility, it is necessary to take into consideration the patriarchal structure of the social system and the social regimes that affect the socio-cultural environment.

Many experts point out the high cost of raising children, the double burden of performing basic household and childcare duties for working mothers as reasons for the decline in marriage and birth rates. Others believe that the key factors are the competitive society of South Korea, including its rigid education system and the labour market. In our opinion, the family and demographic policies must combine elimination of the factors that make people give up marriage and childbirth and respect of fundamental rights and freedoms of people with a view to overcoming socio-economic inequalities.

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