

# *Research on the Factors Contributing to Low Fertility in South Korea*

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**Abstract:** In 2023, South Korea had a fertility rate of 0.8831, the lowest in the world. Compared to most other east Asian countries, Korea recovered from the Second World War relatively earlier and is home to some of the most influential companies in the world today. Therefore, while other east Asian countries are in the industrial stage characterized by moderate to high rates of population growth, Korea is already a post-industrial society, marked by low population growth. This paper aims to identify the contributing factors to South Korea's low fertility rate by examining previous surveys completed by Koreans, interviews done with Koreans, and statistics about the Korean economy and society. These surveys, interviews, and statistics show the current economic, social, and cultural characteristics of the country and the flaws in them that lead to low fertility rate. The first significant factor related to the low fertility rate in South Korea is the high economic uncertainty due to rising living costs. Many Koreans struggle to achieve financial independence and move out of their parents' homes, which is a barrier to starting a family. The second factor is the rising number of women obtaining higher levels of education and subsequently entering the workforce. The last factor is the practice of neo-Confucianism beliefs that are patriarchal in nature. Therefore, the proposed solution is that the Korean government should focus on changing current social and cultural beliefs to minimize the conflict between family and work for Korean women.

**Keywords:** Fertility, Korea, workforce, patriarchy, living costs, education

## 1. Introduction

The miraculous economic growth of South Korea after the Second World War, otherwise known as "The Miracle on the Han River," officially transformed the country from developing to developed, with many Korean companies like Samsung and Hyundai currently exerting significant influence over the global economy [1]. Consequently, South Korea's GDP per capital has experienced rapid growth since the late 20th century, going from only 279 US dollars in 1970 to 35,000 US dollars in 2021 [2]. Thus, South Korea experienced an earlier population and wealth boom compared to most countries in Asia and is one of the select few Asian countries that have already begun exhibiting a low or negative population growth rate [3], a characteristic of stage 5 in the demographic transition model. The population growth rate of South Korea has decreased so severely that in 2022, it was the country with the lowest fertility rate in the world, with 0.78 children per woman, a record low for the country [4]. A low fertility rate and increasing life expectancy due to rising living standards will likely cause

the elderly population to be the majority in the country. Thus, additional pressure will be put on people in the labor force as they must support a larger percentage of non-working people. The workforce must pay more income tax to provide government transfer payments for elderly people unable to economically support themselves and have more social responsibility in their families than in past generations to sustain themselves and their non-working family members. Moreover, the country will experience less economic growth with fewer workers, and industries like education and childcare will significantly shrink due to decreasing demand. Therefore, this paper aims to explore the social, cultural, and economic factors that influence South Korea's dramatically low fertility rate.

## 2. Economic Factors

The high living costs of South Korea caused by rapid urbanization are making having children an impossible choice for an increasing number of young people as economic uncertainty rises. In a ranking of the cities with the highest costs of living by Mercer, Seoul, the capital of South Korea, ranked number 16 [5]. Based on a report by Statistics Korea stating that at least 42.5 percent of South Koreans born from 1980 to 2005 still live with their parents [6], it has become increasingly clear that South Koreans are struggling to afford living costs independently, without the help of their family members or the government. As more young people are currently struggling to purchase homes and sustain themselves due to continuously increasing living costs, the opportunity cost of having children is significantly increasing. Jaya Dass, Ranstad's Asia-Pacific managing director, commented in a CNBC article that "Having a child is tied to many things — the affordability of a house, a spouse, and the maturity of the job market that makes you feel secure enough to do it." [7]. Yun-Jeong Kim, a 31-year-old South Korean woman, showcases the reality that South Koreans must face in an NPR article. She states that her dream of having children has become a fantasy after the lease on her Seoul apartment became too expensive, and she had no choice but to move back into her parent's home [8]. The insecurity that the South Korean youth feel about their housing and working environments causes them to feel discouraged and have a negative opinion about having children.

## 3. Social Factors

The empowerment of South Korean women, through increasing educational and occupational opportunities, is a contributing factor to their negative perception of having children. Currently, 64.6 percent of students in South Korean universities of education are women [9], which shows that in the present, more women have access to the job market and have the ability to provide for themselves than before. Moreover, the birth rate of women who graduated from university and lived in urban areas was significantly lower than that of those who graduated from high school and lived in rural areas [10]. Seung Hyun Seo, a sociology professor at Sogang University in South Korea, claims that the reason for this trend is that South Korean women with higher levels of education and employment can live independently without support from a patriarchal figure and have their dreams that they want to achieve [11]. The industrialization of South Korea has caused its labor market to become extremely competitive, and many women don't want to sacrifice their independence and dreams to have children for fear of losing their jobs. It is also extremely difficult for women in the labor force who want to have children to contribute to the fertility rate because their work may cause them to try to have children after the age of 30, which is when fertility falls significantly [12]. As women age, the risk of infertility increases as their ovaries age and decline in quality [12]. Therefore, when most women have a stable occupation and are not easily replaceable in the workforce, fertility starts to rapidly decline, making it difficult or impossible for these working women to get pregnant.

#### 4. Cultural Factors

The current cultural system of South Korea, neo-Confucianism, enforces outdated moral standards on women, thus discouraging them from having children. A study done by a professor at Myongji University in Seoul, Korea on how children and wives view their fathers/husbands found that roughly half of the children regarded their father as authoritative [13]. Moreover, 93.1% of children saw their father as an un-affectionate figure whose mood was the biggest determinant of their family atmosphere [13]. Therefore, men are viewed as the authority figure in Korean society and culture showing that the ideas of neo-Confucianism are highly patriarchal. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, patriarchy is “social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line” [14]. Korean culture regards women as inferior to men and one of the greatest examples of this is the value of women’s chastity. Since women are supposed to depend on men in all aspects of life, having children out of wedlock is considered a severe way of breaking a woman’s chastity, bringing shame down on the woman and her family. Korean culture also conditions women to feel guilty and blame themselves for the loss of chastity even if it happened through no fault of their own [15]. Thus, there is no way to have children that is morally regarded as right other than in marriage. The reclamation of women’s sexuality is also a contributing factor to the low fertility rate in Korea. Through neo-Confucianism ideals, sex was simply viewed as a form of procreation for women and although these ideals persist in the majority of Korean culture, Korean women are starting to reclaim sex as a way to gain pleasure [15]. The acceptable standard of chastity has lowered in Korea to the point where sex outside marriage is acceptable. However, majority consent still draws the line at having children out of wedlock, suggesting further improvement in cultural attitudes toward the sexuality of women in the future.

#### 5. Potential Solutions

A study done by professors from various universities in Korea, including Semyung University, showed that current fertility promotion policies proposed by the Korean government did not successfully encourage growth of the country’s fertility rate. It was also concluded that cash support is no longer an effective incentive [16]. Therefore, the government should overhaul its current policies that are ineffective and focus on changing Korean society’s perception of women. Currently, there is a conflict between the work life and home life of women, forcing them to choose between having children or working. The government could promote gender equality in the workforce by destigmatizing pregnancy and supporting women’s roles. This could help to create a more inclusive and supportive culture for women in Korean society. The first way the government could increase support for women in the workforce is to increase campaigns that highlight and advocate for working women to show support for them.

Another way to destigmatize pregnant women in the workforce is to offer monetary incentives to companies that have pregnant women as employees. Monetary incentives can come in the form of tax cuts, fund subsidies for the company, or any other way that changes the company’s perception of pregnant women from harming company growth and revenue to helping it. Therefore, tax cuts, fund subsidies, etc. that companies receive make up for the revenue and productivity lost when pregnant employees must go on maternity leave. The government should also extend the qualifications for paternity leave by increasing the number of people eligible and the amount of compensation.

#### 6. Conclusion

South Korea has been marked in the 20th and 21st centuries by rapid industrial development, leading to a rise in costs of living, a change in gender roles, and a persistent neo-Confucianism culture that is

slowly adapting to the country's current level of development. Furthermore, it has shaped the South Korean workforce to value high output productivity, with a negative consequence being the disregard of the needs of its workers and it goes directly against the efforts of the country's women to liberate themselves and their sexualities. Therefore, many people are hesitant or do not plan to have children because the time and money cost of supporting children is too great for them to handle, and women are afraid it will trap them in the constraints of neo-Confucianist culture. A high productivity environment might benefit companies and corporations in the present and the abundance of patriarchal values by Koreans might have worked in the past, but these practices are not economically and socially sustainable, and will eventually cause significant repercussions for South Korea's socio-economic environment in the future.

Overall, there are many other niche factors contributing to Korea's low fertility rate that were not explicitly discussed or implied in this paper. Korea's large gender divide, and feminist movements were not discussed in further detail. The dominance of companies like Samsung in the Korean economy and their influence on government policies and social standards were also not mentioned. However, the dominance of these companies is a significant factor that encourages the highly competitive atmosphere of the Korean economy. In addition, the highly competitive nature of the education system in Korea was not mentioned but is also a negative economic factor that discourages many people from having children. Furthermore, biological factors influenced by industrialization, climate change, etc. could also affect fertility rate. Future research could focus on how other countries facing low fertility problems have addressed the issue and how Korea could apply the policies of other countries based on their successful experiences.

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