

FORUM: General Assembly

ISSUE: Measures to Mitigate East Asia's Declining Fertility Rate and Its Socioeconomic Consequences

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Introduction

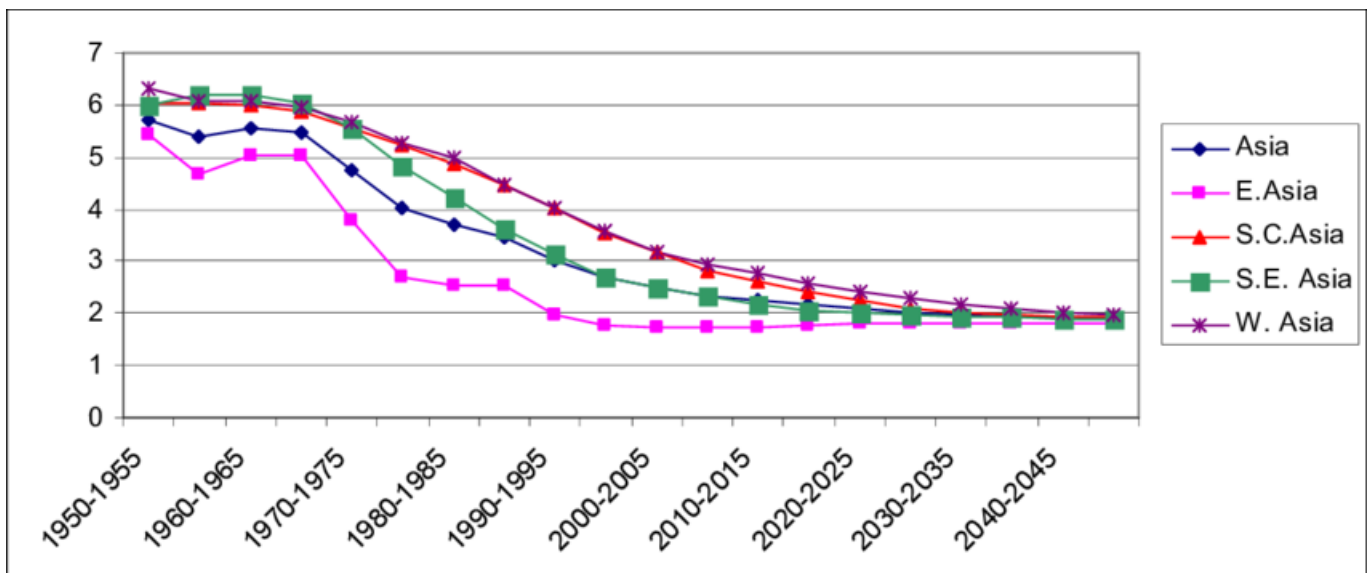


Figure 1: Total fertility rates in Asian regions, 1950-2050

With a rapidly growing economy and developing societies in the world, one of the major problems is the decline in fertility rate. For the last 70 years, fertility rate has decreased worldwide, with a total decline of 50%. Currently, even in the most advanced economies, the average fertility rate is known to be 1.6 children per couple, a value far below the recommended rate of 2.1 to keep a steady population in a nation (Rajvanshi). Nevertheless, the rate in East Asian countries was steeper than anywhere else in the world. South Korea's Vice Finance Minister has declared the dramatic decrease as a "death cross" for the nation's future population, while Japan has issued a warning of the country being "on the brink" demographically. Moreover, China has reversed its one-child policy which was originally used to prevent overpopulation in 2016 to now encourage families to have more babies. Despite a diminishing population that is expected to result in risk for economic and societal development in East Asia, some experts point out its beneficial side, indicating its potential to improve gender equality and respect for women's individual choices. In this vein, it is essential for the General Assembly to create feasible yet effective



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solutions that can mitigate East Asia's declining fertility rate and its socioeconomic consequences to support every member state.

Background

East Asian women resisting traditional gender roles

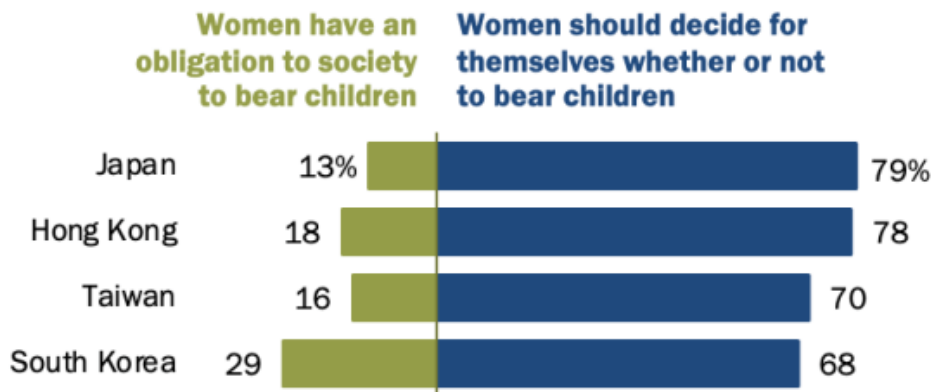


Figure 2: East Asian country's public opinion about bearing children in 2023

With the rapidly growing economy in East Asia over the decades, the countries got more urbanized, and educational opportunities for women have increased drastically. In the past, due to Confucianism based society, East Asia's stereotypical women's role was related to the wife's obedience to her husband and taking good care of her family to support the dominating males. Furthermore, Confucianism has emphasized the importance of continuing the family line as an unavoidable social responsibility for thousands of years in East Asian cultures (Myong, Sunha, et al.). Yet, the increase in female education made their perspective towards the society to broaden and questions the traditional roles, as exemplified by Philippines' fertility rate dropping to 1.7 by 2025 (Gregorio). Moreover, the improvements in standard of living have decreased infant and child mortality, making the couples expect their children to survive until adulthood. This increased confidence in child survival and reduced the necessity to bear large numbers of children, limiting family size and making them likely to have fewer children (Rajvanshi). Consequently, many East Asian women tend to resist traditional roles such as living as a housewife and mother in order to follow their own desires to build strong careers, as indicated by figure 2 above.

This change in cultural attitudes among the younger generation is now amplified with rising housing and living costs in cities (McCartney). For instance, more than half of the population in South Korea currently lives in or near the capital Seoul, where major opportunities are situated. This has created huge pressure on the cost of apartments and resources, making couples already burdened with living costs to ultimately give up having children. Furthermore, there are lack of investment in childcare. In many East Asian



countries, parents invest heavily in their children's education from an early age, with an unclear distinction between private education and formal childcare. With the competitive environment towards the child's success, the education tends to begin earlier resulting in high-cost private education often taking prominence over childcare. This underscores an affordability concern created for the parents—even economies with regulatory frameworks around the public provision of childcare, such as China, which do not mandate free provision ("Low fertility in East Asian economies: examining the role of social norms and childcare investment").

Stringent working condition with inaccessibility to maternity leave

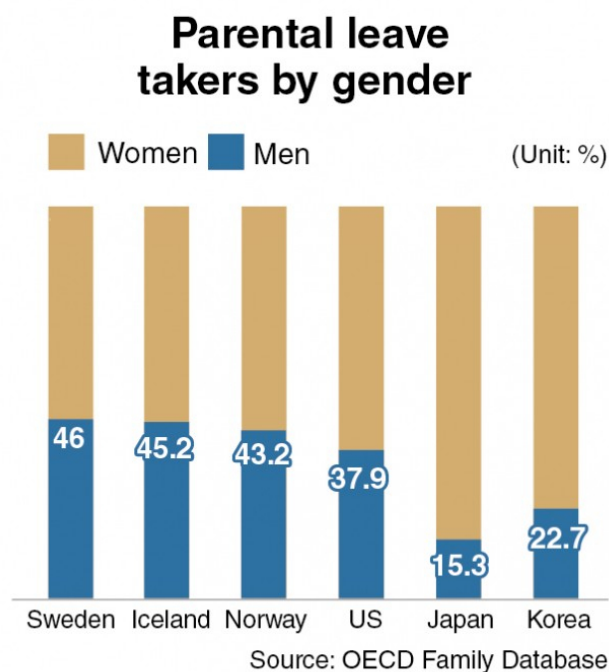


Figure 3: Graph of parental leave takers by gender in the world

Another key component that plays a significant part in the decline of fertility rate in East Asia is the stringent working conditions. With an unwavering workload and working hours, East Asians have insufficient amounts of time to care for their children. For instance, China's "996 working hour system", expecting people to work from 9am to 9pm, six days a week makes it almost impossible to take care of their children and work at the same time ("South Korea to China: Why is East Asia producing so few babies?"). At the same time, the pressure and expectation towards success constantly pressurizes the workers to work on self-improvements to not fall behind, further reducing their limited time (Mackenzie). A similar example can be found in challenging working conditions for women in Laos, including long hours, low wages, and limited social protections. This discourages many from combining career and family, contributing to delayed marriage and childbearing. Consequently, these labor market pressures



also exacerbate the country's declining fertility rate, as women face higher opportunity costs for having children.

Moreover, the use of maternity leave is more reluctant in East Asian countries, since cultural perspective views maternity leaves as unnecessary. Although maternity leave can be used, many are forced to leave their jobs or passed over for promotions after actually utilizing these employee benefits. The data from South Korea clearly displays that despite both men and women being able to utilize a year's leave during the first eight years of their child's life, only 7% of new fathers used their leaves, compared to 70% of new mothers (Mackenzie). Even if the mothers wish to get back to work after raising their children until certain age levels, the career gap created for the time used for parenting makes it extremely difficult for women to find new work in the competitive job market in East Asia.

Problems Raised

Labor shortages in aging population

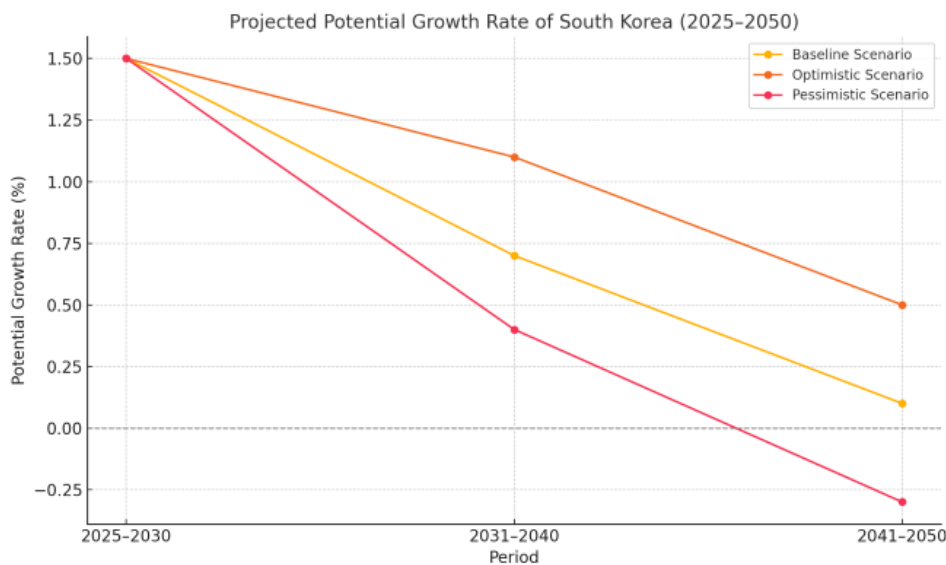


Figure 4: South Korea's projected potential growth rate from 2025 to 2050 under three scenarios (baseline, optimistic, and pessimistic) forecasted by the Korea Development Institute

With dropping fertility rates, many countries are encountering labor shortages under the strong demands of a rapidly aging population. Having life expectancy risen sharply due to improvements in health and science in recent centuries, life expectancy has risen drastically. Consequently, this raises concerns on growing an aging society with insufficient numbers of young workers to take care and support the older generation's healthy living (McCartney).

Furthermore, with less young people, slower activity will result in drops in fiscal revenue. Consequently, this lower tax income will limit public spending capacity, restraining the ability of East Asian countries to invest in infrastructure, education and innovation, which are essential for economic



growth of a nation . In the end, this will pull down the East Asian country's potential growth rate. For instance, South Korea's GDP grew by 1.3% in 2023, yet the rate is predicted to be as low as 0% by 2050. This demographic change places further pressures on the public finance, which has a greater responsibility to support the growing elderly population. For instance, fewer young workers will be contributing to the pension systems and healthcare funding while the government must provide welfare support for the older generations (McCartney). The consequences of this damage will extend beyond the domestic level, it will be deteriorating East Asia's central role in global trade, investment and supply chains, affecting global economy, growth, trade and finance.

Military forces shortage

The problem not only remains economically in East Asia, but it also influences its military. Being a divided nation, South Korea exceptionally strives for a strong military under the underlying threats North Korea. Despite its desire to maintain an active-duty force of approximately 500,000, in ten years, it is expected that within the next decades, there won't be enough young males to maintain the army. This shortage can result in South Korea's inability to defend its population and respond to potential conflicts, placing national security at risk (McCartney). Another case that exemplifies the decline in the army is Japan, with its number of applicants to Self Defense Force (SDF) has now declined by 30% over the past decade. In 2022, only 4,000 people has joined the SDF, which is considered as half of the original recruitment target (McCartney). These trends underscores how aging populations and low fertility rates not only constrain economic growth but also weaken the human resource base critical for national defense, highlighting the broader societal challenges created by demographic shifts in East Asia.

International Actions

Financial investment to family supporting programs by governments

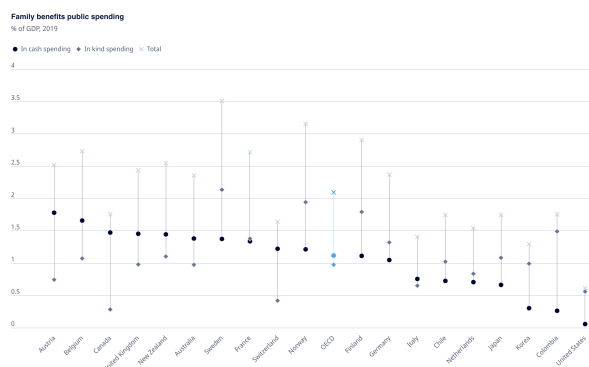


Figure 5: Graph indicating family benefits public spending by OECD indicators

Many East Asian countries have started introducing financial policies to encourage couples to have more children during the 1990-2000s. These measures are similar over various regions of the world,



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such as: payments for new parents, subsidized or free education, extra nurseries, tax incentives, subsidies for IVF and extended parental leave. From research, it has been quantified that the South Korean government has spent more than \$200 billion dollars over the past 16 years to increase the fertility rate. Despite these financial efforts, these investments are often determined to be inefficient due to the underlying problem of unaffordability in raising children and gender inequality (Oi). Moreover, as can be observed in figure 5, Japan and South Korea have the lowest family benefits of public spending according to the OECD indicators, further revealing how the amount of investment is considered insufficient.

Adapting to population decline through development in technology

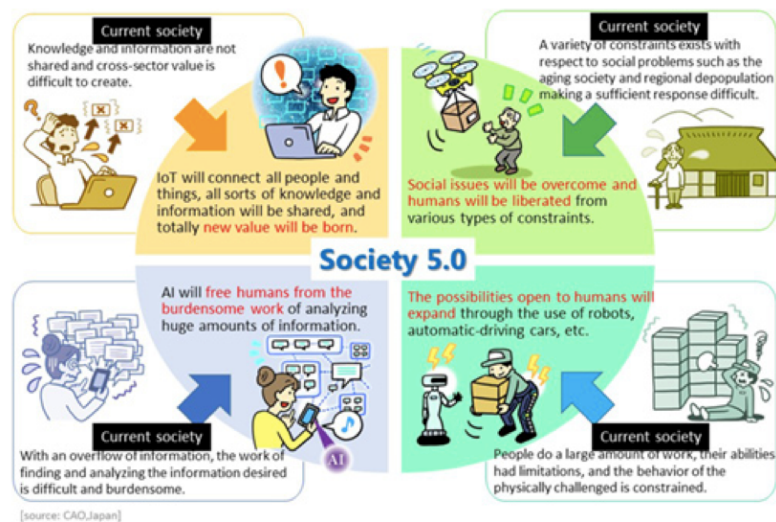


Figure 6: Projection of Japan's Society 5.0 strategy

Despite these efforts, it is a known truth that it is almost extremely challenging to reverse an already declining population. Thus, East Asian countries are actively utilizing development in technology to overcome upcoming difficulties as an aging society. For instance, Japan is now on-going with the “Society 5.0” strategy to utilize connectivity, AI, automation and robotics to sustain the society. To do so, they are aiming to use automated vehicles and robots in the agriculture sector. This allows East Asian countries to prepare for the near future with labor shortage to be replaced with technology (Sumi, Yuma, et al.)

Key Players

South Korea

Having the lowest fertility rate in the world, South Korea is facing a fertility crisis with the rate of 0.75, which is far below the level of 2.1 children per woman to replace the population. Although the fertility rate remains low, the demand for fertility services is still surging. This is because many women are currently delaying childbirth, marking the average age of first-time South Korean mothers to be 33.6.



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Moreover, there are more women wishing to take control over their reproduction through methods such as egg freezing and IVF. In order to overcome the demographic crisis, the South Korean government provides support such as subsidies for egg freezing and IVF, financial support for newlywed couples and families, especially those with pregnant mothers. Despite the small increase in rate in 2024, the experts still warn that underlying issues and societal expectations in South Korea have to be addressed to overcome the challenge, pointing out the limits in financial incentives (Koh, Ewe, and Rachel Lee.).

United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA)

UNPFA is the United Nation's sexual and reproductive health agency that has the aim to ensure sexual and reproductive rights for all people ("About Us"). To address population decline and aging society, it has established its programme on demographic resilience. The programme includes collection of population data, analysis of population development linkages and policy dialogues on population dynamics. Additionally, it provides technical support in forms of strategies, policies and programmes to promote healthy and active aging ("World Population Trend").

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

OECD is an international organization that works to develop enhanced quality of policies for better lives in the world. It works with policy makers, stakeholders and citizens to establish solutions to social, economic and environmental challenges such as population decline in East Asia. It is a unique forum designated as a knowledge hub for data, analysis and practices in public policy and albeit focuses on setting international standards and support implementations in each nation. Regarding fertility rate decline in East Asia, it regularly publishes reports with detailed case study research and policy recommendations, which are accessible on its website ("Who We Are.").

Possible Solutions

Incentivizing women to feel socially included

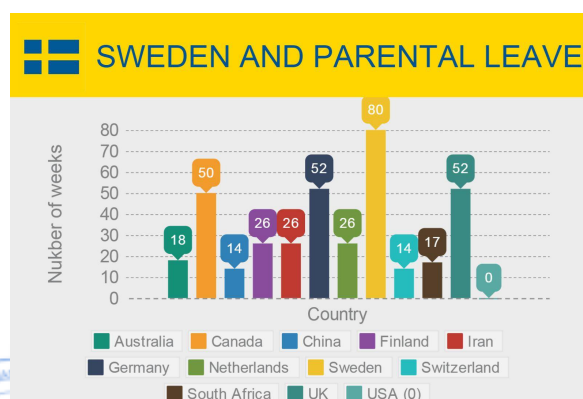


Figure 7: Sweden and parental leave

To persuade highly educated women to have more babies, a social revolution is required to advocate equal gender norms, to make women feel socially included and equal. This approach means to move on from upholding the traditional idea of a young, housewife mother and adapt to the new reality of more educated and career-centered women to achieve true gender equality in households. To do so, countries can follow examples such as Sweden's "use-it-or-lose-it" parental leave policy, in which each parent get 90 days guaranteed of the total 480 parental leave days yet if one parent doesn't use those 90 days, the other parent loses the 90 days as well. This means that if one of the parents decides to not use those 90 days, the time given will simply disappear, which will ultimately reduce the overall length of the parental leave. As a result, approximately 90% of Swedish fathers take on parental leave, not isolating their wives to be burdened with the pressure of parenting as new mothers. This encourages women to feel socially equal and has the potential to increase fertility rate (Savage).

Accepting immigrants from foreign countries

One of the potential solutions for East Asian countries is to accept for immigration. By doing so, the nation will be able to stabilize its declining fertility rate. For instance, Japan has relaxed their immigration policies in order to attract more foreigners to immigrate to Japan. This has resulted in 3.76 foreigners living in Japan by the end of 2024, comprising 3% of the whole population of Japan. Nonetheless, this solution is not always welcomed by the whole population of Japan, since most East Asian countries are not multi-cultural and have never accepted many immigrants in the past. This is especially evident in the conservative older generation, who are more easily found to be against immigration (Marsden). Therefore, it is crucial to find the common ground between the policy and the public sentiment for this solution, especially since it will be established in Confucianism based East Asia.

Glossary

Fertility rate

Fertility refers to the ability to become pregnant and give birth to children. The measure of total fertility rate is represented as the average number of children who would be born to a woman during her lifetime. It is assumed that the woman had spent her childbearing years conforming to the age-specific fertility rates (Glossary: Fertility).

East Asia

East Asia is a geographical region that includes countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and more. This region has its own rich diversity regarding culture and history such as



Confucianism which have influenced social norms and behaviors throughout the area (East Asia – World Geography).

Confucianism

Confucianism is a philosophy and belief system from ancient China that laid the foundation for much of East Asian culture, originated from Chinese philosopher Confucius. Its values had significantly shaped traditional gender roles by highlighting male authority and female submissiveness. Consequently, East Asian women are culturally expected to prioritize family care and give birth to children to continue the legacy of the family, especially by having a son (Bahr).

Financial incentives

Financial incentives refer to governments subsidizing childbearing to encourage fertility. These incentives could include subsidizing houses and free taxes for married couples. It could also extend to covering hospital and IVF treatment bills to encourage pregnancy for couples (Mackenzie). This strategy is extensively used by numerous East Asian governments to boost up fertility rate.

Fiscal revenue

Fiscal revenue means the income obtained by the government through all methods, both tax revenue and non-tax revenue. This fund is used by the government to not only support economic stability and public services but also maintain national infrastructure and sovereignty ("Government Revenue: The Lifeblood of Fiscal Policy.")

Natalism

Natalism is a belief system which highlights the significance of having large families, and views high birth rates as a benefit towards society. Pro-natalist policies encourage and support approaches to increase in fertility rates. On the other hand, anti-natalist policies make discouraging and unsupportive approaches to increase in fertility rates (Biscontin).



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