

The Gender Revolution and the Declining Fertility Rate in South Korea: What is happening behind the world's lowest fertility rate?

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South Korean society has undergone rapid changes over the past several decades, experiencing a 'compressed modernity,' reaching the same level in less than a half-century that Western countries achieved in more than two centuries. However, economic growth in the short-term is not the only thing that South Korean society has achieved in terms of modernization. South Korean society is also currently experiencing the world's fastest declining birth rate. Why has South Korea's fertility rate dropped to the world's lowest level at the fastest pace in history? This paper will focus on three indicators: educational attainment, labor market changes, and family and women's policies, and how they contribute to the declining fertility rate in terms of changes in cohort and gender relations. The findings of this study are summarized below.

First, in terms of educational attainment, both men and women enrolled in tertiary education at an unprecedented pace during the 1990s and 2000s. While the current level of tertiary education attainment for South Korean women born between 1957 and 1966 is less than 20%, this attainment for women born between 1987 and 1996 is close to 80%. Second, in terms of changes in the labor market, young women with higher education have been actively entering the labor force since the Asian financial crisis in 1997. As a result, women have been competing with men for a limited number of stable positions since then, heightening gender competition. In the South Korean labor market, where educational differences have become more relevant than gender differences, women's advancement to high-profile positions and professions has also been notable. Finally, in terms of family and women's policy, the introduction of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in 2001 increased the number of female government officials, resulting in more laws aimed at enhancing women's positions in South Korea. As women's rights have improved, young men's sense of relative deprivation has grown, leading to growing antagonism between the genders. The propensity of each gender to vilify each other through online communities, combined with the growing acceptance of the #MeToo movement, has spurred further animosity between young men and women.

The emergence of a large gap between the current values of young South Korean women and traditional conservative norms can be attributed to gender conflict and the rapid changes in women's roles, expectations, and opportunities. This gap is believed to be the main factor contributing to South Korea's rapidly accelerating low fertility rate.

keywords: gender relations, compressed modernity, Japan-South Korea: fertility decline comparison, life course transitions, educational attainment

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