

Low Fertility and Policy Interventions in South Korea

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The population control policy that lasted from the early 1960s to the mid-1990s negatively impacted fertility. At the beginning of the 1990s, however, a controversy sparked renewed interest in the population control policy. This resulted in a policy shift that was merely meant to discontinue the population control policy rather than to formulate measures to address the low fertility rate.

It was not until the early 2000s that low fertility attracted wide attention as a serious social issue. At that time, the Korean society was aging at a faster rate than that of Japan, which had been the fastest aging society in the world; thus, low fertility emerged as an underlying problem in Korea. Since then, Korea has promoted the Basic Law on Low Fertility and Aging Society (Seromaji Plan), which emphasizes the importance of supporting delivery, child rearing, and simultaneous pursuit of child management and career building after marriage; moreover, as a nation, Korea has devised ways to socialize child management. Korea's economic crisis in the late 1990s resulted in the unemployment of a large number of people, and the policy to mitigate the labor market problems, enacted to overcome the difficult situation, increased the number of low-wage irregular workers, self-owned businesses, and small companies, resulting in an unstable employment situation. Youths were badly affected by employment instability, which ultimately affected their home lives and became the major cause of late marriages and unmarried that worsened an already bleak situation.

It is necessary, therefore, to address youth employment measures and the Selomaji Plan designed for the low fertility rate simultaneously as part of the policy to counter low fertility.

An overview of the Selomaji Plan and youth employment measures illustrates that the former develops with the emphasis mainly on the socialization of care, such as child rearing after marriage, while the latter focuses mainly on employment maintenance in the existing industry, employment creation through developing social enterprises, and the creation of short-term employment through introducing the internship system. Although each of these measures achieved success to a certain degree, the situation in which women must select either work or home following social norms based on male income earners is growing more conspicuous and affects the number of children a woman delivers. At the same time, promoting youth employment measures will result in a disparity among the youth considering the wage difference between large companies and medium-sized companies is growing wider, despite the promotion of the employment measures. These measures affect the present labor market in Korea and prevent the youth from envisioning their future, further facilitating late marriages or unmarried. Currently, Korea's low fertility rate is a result of life's anxieties and difficulty in envisioning one's future, combined with the current labor market affected by inequality between males and females. In the future, creating new working patterns by providing universal child-care services and developing social enterprises may play an important role in overcoming low fertility in South Korea.