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## **A WAY FORWARD FOR SOUTH KOREA'S DEMOGRAPHIC POLICY: RE-THINKING OF EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICY**

In a globalized world with developing technologies and economies, the industrial revolution has shaped countries' economic, social, and demographic development processes. While total population figures are increasing led by Asian countries Eastern Asian ones are experiencing a demographic downfall. South Korea attracts attention with having one of the lowest birth rates in the world and changing labor market conditions which cause labor shortages in certain sectors. Despite all the efforts of different governments none of them manages to reverse the negative demographic trend of the country. The purpose of this paper is to analyze demographic indicators and identify the root causes of the negative demographic trends that become current bottlenecks for South Korea. With a combination of using historical data on demographic trends, analysis of government initiatives, and the current situation, this paper points out number factors that slow down the effectiveness of government initiatives and provides alternative solutions which are proven to be effective in different country experiences to reverse the demographic trends in the country.

**Key words:** Demography, South Korea, Labor Market, Oriental Studies, Fertility Rate.

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### **Оңтүстік корейдың демографиялық саясатын ілгерлетудің жана бастамасы: ерте балалық шақ саясатын қайта қолға алу**

Технологиялары мен экономикасы дамып келе жатқан жаһандану әлемінде өнеркәсіптік революция елдердің экономикалық, әлеуметтік және демографиялық даму үдерістерін қалыптастырады. Жалпы халық саны, әсіресе Азия елдерінде өскенімен, Шығыс Азия елдерінің демографиялық құрылымдарында төмендеу байқалады. Оңтүстік Корея әлемде туу деңгейі ең төмен елдердің бірі, сондай-ақ белгілі бір салаларда жұмыс күші тапшылығын тудыратын еңбек нарығының өзгеруімен ерекшеленеді. Түрлі үкіметтердің барынша күш салғанына қарамастан, ешқайсысы елдегі жағымсыз демографиялық үрдісті қалпына келтіре алмады. Бұл мақаланың мақсаты – демографиялық көрсеткіштерді талдау арқылы Оңтүстік Корея үшін қазіргі кездегі бөгеттерге айналған теріс демографиялық үрдістердің түпкі себептерін анықтау. Демографиялық тенденциялар туралы тарихи деректермен, үкімет бастамаларының талдауымен және ағымдағы жағдайдың жиынтық шолуын қамтыған бұл мақала әртүрлі елдер тәжірибесінде тиімділігі дәлелденген балама шешімдерді ұсынады, сонымен қатар үкімет бастамаларының тиімділігін бәсеңдететін бірқатар факторларды ашады.

**Түйін сөздер:** Демография, Оңтүстік Корея, Еңбек нарығы, Шығыстану, Туу деңгейі.

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### **Инициатива южной кореи по продвижению демографической политики: переосмысление политики в отношении раннего детства**

В глобализированном мире с развивающимися технологиями и экономикой промышленная революция сформировала процессы экономического, социального и демографического развития стран. В то время как общая численность населения увеличивается во главе с азиатскими странами, страны Восточной Азии переживают демографический спад. Южная Корея привле-

кает внимание одним из самых низких уровней рождаемости в мире и меняющимися условиями на рынке труда, которые вызывают нехватку рабочей силы в определенных секторах. Несмотря на усилия различных ведомств страны, не удается переломить негативную демографическую тенденцию. Целью данной статьи является анализ демографических показателей и выявление первопричин негативных демографических тенденций, которые в настоящее время становятся замкнутым кругом для Южной Кореи. Сочетая исторические данные о демографических тенденциях, анализ правительственных инициатив и текущую ситуацию, в этой статье выявляются численные факторы, которые замедляют эффективность правительственных инициатив, и предлагаются альтернативные решения, доказавшие свою эффективность, апробированные на опыте разных стран, для улучшения демографических тенденций.

**Ключевые слова:** демография, Южная Корея, рынок труда, востоковедение, коэффициент рождаемости.

## Introduction

Population dynamics on a global scale rapidly increased after the Second World War period especially starting from the 1960s. This is due to the high fertility rate around the world. However, when we focus on recent years we see a different picture where many countries are struggling with the growth rates of their population. Thus, every country goes through a unique path and follows different demography policies. Studying demographic trends and problems of countries gives us valuable lessons which could be taken into consideration by others that dealing with similar issues or could face them in near future. South Korea has one of the lowest birth rates in the world and facing a deep demographic crisis over the last 40 years despite many government initiatives to reverse this trend [World Bank, 2022]. This paper aims to analyze the root causes of these negative demographic trends and identify the difficulties South Korea is facing and provide solutions that could contribute to the reversal attempts of Seoul to its demographic situation.

Understanding demographic tendencies in Asian countries is usually overlooked in Oriental Studies because countries like China, India, and others consist of more than half of the world population and many low-income countries in this region also have good birth rate scores. However, the same could not be said for East Asian ones like Japan, South Korea, and others where these examples suffer from low fertility rates and the risk of depopulation. Therefore investigating the root causes of this difference is essentially important for Oriental Studies. The reasoning behind focusing on South Korea relies on the number of factors where the country has the lowest fertility rate, and has experienced different demographic policies including early childhood care. Moreover increasing shortage in its labor market about its skewed migration policies and changing profile of its workforce sparks a unique interest.

So far literature on demographic trends regarding South Korea is filled with researchers focusing on partial issues of the topic and lack of providing a general outlook and offering policy solutions to reverse this trend.

The paper first introduces the global population and fertility dynamics starting from 1960 until nowadays. Then it analyses the situation in South Korea and how it reflects on its labor market and current condition and problems in it. The following parts touch upon the government initiatives to tackle this issue and the representation of certain policy results. Finally, by using cross-country cases from France and Germany this paper displays potential solutions that have been used by Paris and Berlin to reverse their demographic trends towards a positive one and potential benefits for South Korea to learn from it.

## Materials and Methods

This paper discusses the demographic trends in South Korea through the qualitative analysis of different research in literature and backed by analysis of quantitative data taken from various international and national official sources. By analyzing the demographic indicators and government initiatives author aims to represent the current bottlenecks and ways for solutions with a cross-country analysis. To portray how current problems reach their level this research includes a historical analytical perspective to its assessments and critically approaches its reflection on current issues. The logic behind this analysis is to illustrate not only statistical data analysis but create a greater understanding which includes sociological, economic, and labor force entanglements that play a role in demographic trends in the country.

## General Outlook of Population and Demographic Dynamics

The world population has reached almost 8 billion people in 2022 due to positive demographic in-

dicators globally. Historically when we look at the World Bank data from 1960-2000 world population has doubled and reached 6 billion people, which was followed by another rise of 2 billion people in the following 22 years [World Bank, 2022]. The composition of these rising trends shows us that by number of population Asian countries like China, India, and some others consist of almost half of the world's population, meanwhile, the most rapid growth rates are occurring in low-income countries. In demography studies, one of the main indicators that allow us to predict trends in population is the total fertility rate (average number of children born by a woman during her fertility period) (TFR) [The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022].

Global TFR numbers show us that total birth rates are falling since the 1960s where starting from 1963 global TFR was 5.3 which reduced to 3.7 in 1980, 2.7 in 2000, and 2.3 in 2020. Although in the last 60-year world's TFR is fallen more than twice, however, the total population kept rising, this is due to United Nations' prediction on the sustainable population growth threshold being set to 2.1 TFR. Meaning for any country to sustain its population growth trend TFR needs to be higher than 2.1. Those who are below this threshold like many European countries, the U.S.A, and some Eastern Pacific ones experience a downfall in their population growth meanwhile in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia various countries whose birth rates are above 2.1 TFR still enjoy an upward trend in their population growth [World Bank, 2022].

When we conduct a demographic analysis of the decisions of individuals to start a family and have a child, family values in those societies and the economic concerns of families to have a child are carries great importance. As we see from the global birth rate numbers, the size of families is shrinking and some even falling behind the UN threshold and already starting to experience a decrease in their population and birth rates. Among them, South Korea sparks an interest where the TFR of the country reduced to 0.8 in 2022 [World Bank, 2022]. This is one of the lowest scores in the world. In this article, we will examine the causes of this situation, its spill-over effects on other areas, and potential solutions to revise this demographic trend.

Although historically in 1960 South Korea's TFR was 5.9 which was above even global average back then, however starting from the 1970s-1980s TFR decreased sharply and reached 1.7 in 1985. Later on, until 2000 it manages to stay around 1.5

and in the following years continued its downward trend reaching 0.8 in 2020 [World Bank, 2022]. If we take a look at how these reductions throughout the years have affected the total population of South Korea we see that every decade after the 1980s there was a two million loss in the growing population. If we illustrate this trend with numbers in 1980 South Korea's population reached 38.12 million people increasing by 6 million people between 1970-1980. Following decades this number fell substantially where in 1990 the growth figure fell by 4 million, in 2010 2.5 million, and in 2020 the population growth stopped and started to decrease whereas in 2022 total population fell by 0.3% [World Bank, 2022]. This figure tells us that every decade spend below 2.1 TFR has caused around a 2 million decrease in population growth meaning that there is a possibility that in the following decade, this trend could continue. According to the United Nation Population Division forecasts under the median scenario where everything stays the same as it is South Korea's total population will decrease to 51.2 million people in 2030, and 45.7 million people in 2050, where this falling trend would become much stronger after 2050 and lead to several populations to reduce to 35.9 in 2070 and finally to 24.1 million in 2100 [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, 2022].

All these indicators show that South Korea is facing a deep demographic crisis and attempts to revise these trends are not successful to turn the tide in favor of the country over the last 40 years. From now on Seoul needs to take more radical and comprehensive actions to battle against the negative demographic trend. Otherwise, the population forecasts would become the reality of the country. Approaching the demographic burdens with utmost care and attention is vitally important for any country around the world since the topic of demography is not limited to statistics of population and spans the economy, labor market, migration, security, and even nation-building topics. Hence labor market conditions are vital for many sectors' productivity which in the end has an enduring effect on trade and economic activities. From a social aspect decreasing population and ethnic kin numbers might create security threats for the future of that nation.

Starting from labor market concerns we can say that South Korea's labor market has two main issues. First – the rapidly aging workforce where the average working age is 43.4 years which is quite higher than the global average of 30 years. The second – education level of the workforce is on the rise

for the last two decades causing a unique problem for the labor market in the country. The working age population in South Korea was 39 in 2010 and during the last 11 years, it increased by 4.4 years and reached its current level [Statista.com, 2022]. One of the main reasons for this rapid increase is associated with the fact that more and more senior citizens are entering or staying in the labor market and fewer young people are stepping in as fresh workers. The general population age groups are portraying this issue very well where between 2000-2021 years period share of people over 60 years old increased from 12.1% to 28.3%, whereas the share of young people decreased from 46.7% to 29.8% [Hong, 2023].

The education-related issue in South Korea puts forward an interesting issue where a recent increase in the education level of a significant portion of the workforce in the labor market caused a labor shortage in sectors like agriculture, fishing, and manufacturing. Compared with 2000 in 2021 the share of people with tertiary education increased from 24.6% to 48.7% whereas secondary and primary education groups decreased by 58.4% to 44.7% and 17% to 6.6% respectively [Hong, 2023]. Thus, almost half of the workforce in South Korea has a tertiary education and an average age of 44, therefore reluctant to work in 3D (Dirty, dangerous, and difficult) jobs and above mentioned sectors that require mostly physical strength and do not require mostly a higher degree of education [Hong, 2023]. Therefore the majority of the demand is tried to be covered by foreign workers in these sectors.

Talking about foreign workers in South Korea in 2022 843,000 registered foreign people are working in the country [Xinhua, 2022]. This figure is equal to 3% of the total workforce in the country and almost 90% of them are coming from Asian countries [Seung-Cheol, 2018]. Ethnic Koreans who come from China take the lead with 35%, followed by China, the Philippines, and Uzbekistan. South Korea is known for its strict visa policies, especially for permanent ones [Seung-Cheol, 2018]. Moreover, up to date, there is still an untold practice of favoring people who have Korean ancestry in their families when giving long-duration visas like work permits, residence permits, and others [Seung-Cheol, 2018]. This situation is associated with certain well-established myths among Korean people that they are pure-blooded and want to stay that way [Yeseung, 2022; Ellermann, 2020; Chung, 2020; Gi-Wook, 2006]. Concerning these public sensitivities governments in South Korea tries to shape their migration and foreign worker policies without discomforting public concerns. To certain extent validity of this

argument also could be seen from foreign workers' statistics where the majority of the foreign workers are from the Korean diaspora coming from close neighborhood regions. On this point, experts indicate that such limitations on foreign workforce flow make it quite difficult to cover the shortages in different sectors.

## Results and Discussion

It would be also useful to mention how different governments reacted to the demographic situation in the country. By looking at the government plans briefly we can see that initiatives intensified in the late 2000s. Like many governments around the world South Korean are also emphasizing providing monetary support to families. Starting from the mid-2000s the demography policies of the country gave more importance to early childhood care where between 2006-2010 years under the Roh Moo-hyun government "Sprout Plan" set a target to increase the rate of state-supported child care centers to 30% in total [Lee; 2016; Lee, 2020; Lee, 2021]. However, we can see that this policy did not reach its goal in the following years since the share of private childcare centers stood at over 90% [Ministry of Health and Welfare of South Korea, 2013]. Later on, between 2009-2012 Lee Myoung-baek initiated a plan named "Loving the Children" aimed to provide subsidies to private childcare centers so they could provide free care for all children who are between 0-2 years [Chon, 2018]. After 2012 many politicians claimed to provide free care for children between 0-5 years [Chon, 2018; Lee, 2017]. As a result birth rates of the country clearly show that all these implemented programs did not reach their goals and are considered to be not effective. Moreover, new data indicates that the average number of people in a family reduced to 2.17 and the share of single-person households increased to 41% (9.72 million people) in total households.

It could be said that South Korean governments are trying to reverse the demographic trend that which country currently rolled in and spend enough time with the implementation of them to achieve positive results. However, due to certain issues, they could not reach their deserved achievements [Lee; 2016; Lee, 2020; Lee, 2021]. When we make a brief analysis of this point we can see that several factors prevent them to reverse the demographic trends. First, although South Korean governments tried the French model of emphasizing childcare services within family support programs, however, there

were problems with its implementation. In detail, it is been pointed out that not enough financial assistance is provided to the childcare programs without depending on different government agendas. On this point, it is being argued that the Central Government's arrangement of financing the child care centers as 20% for the central government and 80% for local ones has fueled more political debates and disagreements leading to not proper financing system for child care centers [Lee, 2021]. In addition to that pulling demographic topics into politics has blurred the real aim of these programs and turned them into parts of political debates among politicians [Chon, 2018; Lee, 2017]. Thus, it created an atmosphere where each government comes up with a different program, and trust in the longevity of these programs is shaken in the eyes of the public.

Demography studies show us that government supports for families usually starts when the children reach a certain age, for example in many countries families are eligible for certain financial assistance when their children pass 3 years or 3-6 years period and even higher. However, the literature indicates that families require assistance mostly when their children are between 0-3 years. Thus, by the time government support reaches them they already managed to raise their children to a certain age. At this point, another important finding is the accessibility and quality of the child care services that families and especially working women will receive from the state in child care between the ages of 0-3, without being left with the dilemma of having a child or making a career. The provision of such service is argued to have a positive effect on women's intention to have more than one child. In other words, the higher the ratio of working women in the labor market, the higher their desire to have more than one child, as long as they do not have to give up their careers for the care of their children.

South Korea, like many other Asian countries, has historically been an agricultural society and has maintained the concept of the extended family for centuries. In terms of family values, social values such as living with and caring for elders are among the core values of extended families. However, since the 1800s, mechanization and the industrial revolution have made individualism and the nuclear family structure widespread in the world, starting in Europe. While the industrial sector, which developed rapidly after the 1980s in South Korea, paved the way for it to be among the leading economies in the world and at the same time quickly imposed individualism and a nuclear family structure on Ko-

rean society. This situation creates an atmosphere of clashes between strong family ties and the concept of individual and small family structures seen in developed industrial societies.

The number of people in new families also shows us that new industrial values are beginning to dominate. Moreover, in an environment of increasing individualism, governments that carry out immigration policies based on the ethnicity sensitivity of their society and try to develop comprehensive solutions to the demographic and labor market impasse are going to be confining themselves to a very narrow area. As for South Korea without removing these narrow frameworks, attempts to solve the demographic problems will not have a sustainable effect as could be seen from the marriage visa initiative. In short, this visa gives a marriage visa to women who has resides abroad and have Korean ancestors, if they marry a Korean in South Korea [Seung-Cheol, 2018]. In such a way South Korean government aims to address low birth rates in the country without disturbing the ethnic sensitivities in the country. Under this visa category, approximately 120.000 visas were issued in 2017, while this category ranks fourth among the most visa-issued, just behind work permits and residence visas [Seung-Cheol, 2018]. Although it is a widely used visa option, however, its contribution to the demographic increase is debatable. On the other hand, if those living in the country with this visa decide to divorce, then they would lose their visa and it can cause different problems for these women, including their official stay rights in the country.

A proper solution should include flexibility and universality in their nature. On this point, two main options could be offered to overcome the demographic crisis in South Korea. First visa conditions need to be more flexible for foreigners to fill the gap of labor shortage mainly in agriculture, fisheries and manufacturing, and other sectors. One of the major steps regarding this point is to move towards a more universal approach in visa conditions and give up searching for and favoring Korean-origin workers to pave the way for other foreigners to easily enter the labor market of South Korea. Without this radical step labor market of South Korea would continue to suffer from labor shortages for labor-intensive sectors which is one of the core contributors to its export and domestic production. Second allowing non-Korean origin foreign workers to move freely in the labor market, where currently they could only work in their initial firm and cannot change their compa-

ny or sector. Allowing this flexibility would benefit both companies and foreign workers as could be seen from the Russian case. Until 2007 many foreign workers could only work in the company which acquired their visa, however with the renewal of this system with a working permit patent they could freely work in any sector until the end of their work permit date [Rosstat, 2013]. Such flexibility brings many benefits to Russian firms whereas the same could occur for South Korean ones. Moreover, the total number of foreign workers being below 3% of the total workforce would not create any major difficulties for local workers' job opportunities [Xinhua, 2022].

If we go back to demographic trends from a general perspective, the examples of Germany and France show us that important lessons should be learned in terms of increasing natural birth rates. In general, France was among the countries with decreasing birth rates, moving in line with other European countries that could be considered suitable for the shrinking family structure model. However, starting from the 1990s by implementing a plan that focuses on early childhood care, it is one of the closest countries to the 2.1 TFR in Europe with a TFR of 1.8 in 2021 [World Bank, 2022]. When we look at the factors behind this success, giving more emphasis on developing the support mechanism for the child care centers within family assistance policies plays a great role.

France mainly carries out its early childhood assistance to child care centers through Family Benefit Funds (Caisses d'allocations familiales) (FBF) which funds more than 100 family funds across the country and supports them with its 3.230 branches. Thus, public or private childcare centers are subsidized within an institutional structure, facilitating easier access for families. This service greatly supports families and especially working women to return to their jobs and careers in a short amount of time by providing them a service to take care of their 0-3 years old children. In 2018 France's family assistance allocation reached 90.2 billion euros which corresponds to approximately 4% of its gross domestic product (GDP) [Caf.fr, 2019]. When we compare this figure with other European countries, the average share of the European Union (EU) is 2.5%, while the average share of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is 2.3% [Chemin, 2015; The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021]. Within the budget of family assistance, early childhood and childhood and youth care expenses

constitute 40% of the total expenditure, while the others are spent on items such as cash assistance to families, housing, and job provision.

Moreover, 45% of the financing of childcare centers in France is covered by the Family Benefit Funds, 19% by local institutions, 18% by agreements between the state and businesses, and 18% by families. Thus, the French state allows families to benefit from the services of childcare centers with a very small amount at a time when families need help with childcare the most [Caf.fr, 2019]. The following figures indicate how widespread these assistances reach families where almost half of the population benefits from various social assistance opportunities and approximately 12.7 million people also reach to support services of Family Benefit Funds. These services also positively affect families' thoughts about having more children [Caf.fr, 2019].

Research conducted with families in France also supports the above mention argument where when ask how many children they want to have in their family, the average number of children was 2.4 [Caf.fr, 2019]. This result shows that within the comprehensive family support programs childcare services seem to have a greater effect on encouraging families to have more children than other initiatives. In other words, the French government's analysis of the family structure in the country and the needs of modern working life, especially of working women, and providing them a child care service seems to be more effectively influencing the demographic indicators than the rest of the support packages.

To show that the French success is not unique to them we can present the experiences of Germany. For a very long period, Germany put more emphasis on developing its cash distribution method to support families. Only recently the country shift towards strengthening the child care center services. The country experienced an interesting demographic trend where the TFR rate has fallen below 1.5 in 1974 and did not recover until 2016. During the last decade, the German government has implemented several comprehensive changes in the legislation concerning child support and significantly increased the funding for the early childhood period. For example in 2008 Child Promotion Law was adopted in the country which granted all children who turn 1 year old after August 1, 2013, to be able to place in child care centers. To match these requirements from 2010-2018 years 560.000 private childcare centers are opened for children who are younger than 3 years old. Moreover, efforts are being made to open 190.000 childcare centers during the 2017-

2021 years. In addition to these accomplishments in the 2019 Law on Further Improvement of Quality and Involvement in Child Day Care, the federal government and states and Quality Child Care Centers Act announced an additional 5.5 billion euros aid package for the years 2019-2022 [EuryDice, 2021]. According to 2019 data, 33.6 billion euros was allocated to early childhood education and care in Germany, which is double the budget in 2010. In total, it is stated that the aid provided to families within the social benefits in 2018 amounted to 73.8 billion euros [EuryDice, 2021].

If we look at the effects of these initiatives on the population we see a tremendous rise from 80.6 million in 2013 to 83.2 million in 2021. On this point, it is important to mention that Germany's total population was falling gradually from 82 million in 1997 to 2013 where newly childcare-oriented implementations not only allowed it to reach the 1997 level but also surpassed it only in 7 years. In short, Germany is one of the important examples showing how countries can change their demographic trends in a short amount of time by allocating sufficient financial resources, increasing the number of childcare centers, and facilitating easier access for families.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be said that this paper focused on the demographic situation in South Korea to identify its problems and bottlenecks of having a low birth rate in the country and its potential spill-over effects to related issues like the labor market and migration policies. As a result of this research, we concluded that the South Korean government is well aware of its demographic crisis however only

acted in recent years by trying different sorts of policies and programs which were not lead to desired outcomes. This is due to the lack of proper long-term financing for programs that are supposed to tackle the low birth rate and labor shortage issues. Moreover, in case of demographic trends and migration-related issues, ineffective management of demography-related programs and rigid structure of visa procedures favors ethnic Koreans over other non-Korean foreigners, thus creating a self-limitation barrier and making it difficult to cover the demand for workers in the labor market.

As for solutions flexible and universal visa procedures are recommended to remove the limitations over accepting labor migrants to fill the labor shortage gaps in sectors like agriculture, fishing, and manufacturing. In the case of increasing birth rates in the country, two successful examples from France and Germany have been put forward in detail. As a result, paying more attention to the early childhood period and strengthening infrastructure, and providing sustainable financial support to child care centers through subsidizing them regularly to increase the accessibility of families to good quality care centers focused on providing services mainly to 0-3 years old children. Because as French and German experiences show that among family support packages that aim to encourage families to have more children delivery of childcare service for 0-3 years old children has a greater effect over demographic indicators compared with other initiatives. Therefore further research needs to be conducted to identify the benefits of early childhood support by taking into consideration the success stories of France and Germany, which could lead us to a universal solution for the falling demographic trends around the world.

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