

Korea Analysis

En direct de Corée

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DEMOGRAPHY

1. The Korean Population: Recent Changes and Major Issues

KIM Doo-SUB

South Korea has undergone rapid population change since the start of the 20th century to reach in the mid-1980s the mortality and fertility rate of a developed country. The population of South Korea has increased continuously from 25 million in 1960 to 50.6 million in 2015, ranking 27th in the world, with an annual average growth rate of 0.4%. South Korea is expected to reach a peak of 52.2 million inhabitants in 2030, after which its population will start to decrease as a result of South Korea falling into a low fertility trap. Since the onset of the 21st century, Korean society has maintained one of the lowest birth rates in the world.

Another serious aspect of this issue is that not only is the Korean population decreasing in absolute figures, but its age structure is rapidly changing as well. As we can see in Figure 1, the population's age structure was a pyramid in the 1960s and it has evolved into a vase shape in 2015. In 2060, it is expected to take the shape of an inverted triangle. Moreover, while the share of the younger population is rapidly decreasing, on the other hand, the age group of those aged 65 and above is increasing at one of the fastest rates in the world. The share

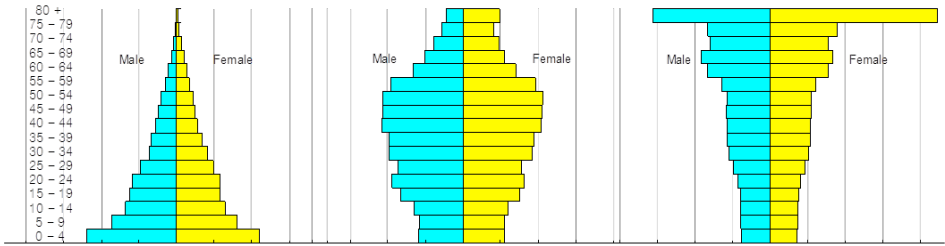


Figure 1. Changes in Age Structure, 1960-2060

Source: *Korea Statistical Information System* (<http://kosis.kr/>), 2015.

of the elderly population is 2.6 times greater today compared to 15 years ago. With the momentum of economic growth fading, the burden imposed on social services and public assistance such as pensions, health insurance and welfare benefits will be even greater.

Decline in Fertility

The fertility of the South Korean population has declined rapidly since the beginning of the 1960s and dropped below the 2.1 replacement level in 1983. Since then, contrary to the expectations of most demography experts, the total fertility rate has not stayed at a secure replacement level but has continued to decline rapidly. The Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s has further accelerated the pace of the decline in fertility.

Since the 2000s, the total fertility rate of the South Korean population has been one of the lowest in the world and the country ranked 4th after Taiwan, Portugal and Singapore in 2014. Of course, this type of fertility transition is not limited only to South Korea but also affects countries in Eastern Europe, East Asia and on the Mediterranean coast.

The fertility transition of South Korea can be divided into two phases: from 1960 to 1985, and since 1985. The first phase took place during the country's industrialization, urbanization,

economic development, and the ensuing change in values and norms. Two essential conditions were the simultaneous decrease in mortality and population movements to the cities. Moreover, South Korea received financial and technical assistance from the U.S. and international organizations and was able to introduce national family planning programs that were widely implemented. Three major reasons for the fertility transition were a rise in the age at first marriage, an increase in induced abortions, and the propagation of birth control options.

In contrast, the main factors behind South Korea's second fertility transition have been the economic recession, the instability of the labor market, delay and reluctance to start a family, and the wide dissemination of gender equality norms. There were much lesser effects of the decrease in mortality rates and population movements. In the 1990s, family planning programs were no longer effective, the restrictions and compensation systems for birth control ended, and population growth control policies were abolished. Rapid changes in values and attitudes towards marriage and childbirth, new lifestyle choices and the dissemination of the concept of gender equality brought about a rapid decrease in birth rates from the mid-1980s on.

Looking at Figure 2, we can observe that the total fertility rate has continuously decreased

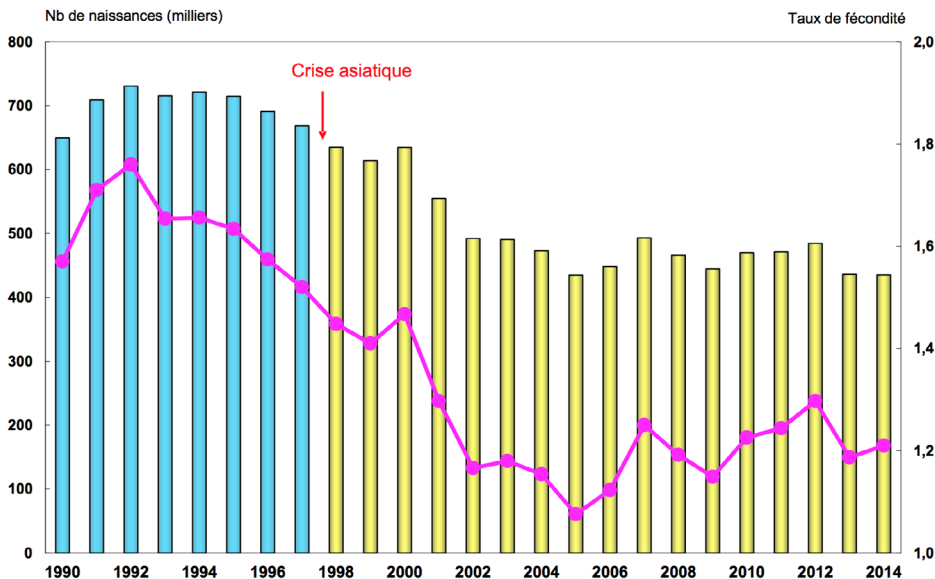


Figure 2. Trends in the Number of Births and the Total Fertility Rates, 1990-2014

Source: Korea Statistical Information System (<http://kosis.kr>), 2015.

until 2005, excluding the slight increase in the early 1990s. In 2005, the number of births was 435,000 and the total fertility rate was 1.08, the lowest in South Korea's history. The scope and the rapidity of the decrease in the fertility rate exceeded the estimations of demography experts. In this graph, the year 2000 appears as the time when the number of births and the fertility rate suddenly increased, mostly due to the phenomenon of the new millennium baby boom.

From the 2000s, with the economic recession and an unstable economic environment, the population of South Korea entered a low fertility trap as young people postponed their engagement or were reluctant to get married. A high unemployment level and the increase of poverty also amplified family dissolutions. Furthermore, the previous generation's low birth rate was another reason behind Korea falling into a fertility trap. Women's median age at first marriage was 24.8 in 1990, after

which the median age increased from 0.1 to 0.4 points each year to reach 29.8 in 2014. As women's age at first marriage went up, the age at first childbirth concomitantly continued to increase to reach 31.0 in 2014. Moreover, in the same year, the proportion of "old mothers" over the age of 35 increased to reach 21.6%.

As a result, the birth rate of the prime reproductive group, women in their twenties, fell surprisingly low. As shown in Figure 3, the birth rate of women in their twenties continuously decreased. In the two-year interval from the start of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 to 1999, the birth rate of the 25-29 age group decreased by 7.8%, and between 1997 and 2014, it further decreased by 60.3%. In contrast, the birth rate of women in their thirties increased. As a result, from 2007, the 30-34 age group surpassed the 25-29 age group to become the group with the highest birth rate.

One important cause of the decrease in fertility is a change in marriage behaviors. The number of marriages and the crude marriage rate were 435,000 and 9.4 marriages per 1,000 population in 1996. Both decreased continuously until 2003. Although a momentary uptrend of the crude marriage rate was observed in 2007 (the year of the golden pig), the 2000s registered between 6.4 and 6.6 marriages per 1,000 per annum. Recently, we have observed an increase in the number of unmarried persons due to postponement and reluctance to get married, while at the same time, there are more and more families without children. For example, the rate of unmarried men and women in their thirties was 13.4% in 2000 but increased to 29.2% in 2010. Moreover, in 2010, 7.1% of married women in their thirties had no children and 21.4% of them said that they had no plans to have a baby in the future.

In the near future, it will be difficult to change the norms and attitudes concerning an already rooted tendency toward smaller families. Without a clear economic turning point, the

younger generations will continue to postpone or avoid marriage. Moreover, with changes in attitudes and values towards married life, it is also quite unlikely that the divorce rate will decrease. It is very unlikely that the birth rate of the South Korean population will continue to increase after the slight rebound in the second half of the 2000s and we cannot expect the low fertility trap situation to end. Any change will depend greatly on the improvement of economic conditions in South Korea, such as unemployment rates and labor market insecurity.

Changes in Sex Ratio at Birth

The South Korean population experienced important changes in its sex ratio at birth (ratio of sons to daughters) over a 10-year period from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. While the birth rate has decreased rapidly in connection to socio-economic developments and the dissemination of a small family standard, a preference for sons has remained in that same time period. In this decade, the increase in the gender imbalance at birth

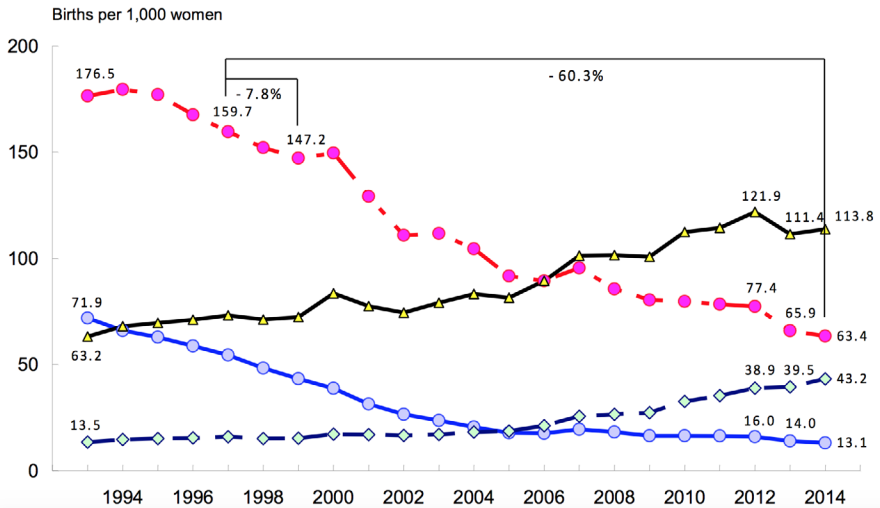


Figure 3. Changes in the Age-specific Birth Rates, 1993-2014

Source: Korea Statistical Information System (<http://kosis.kr/>), 2015.

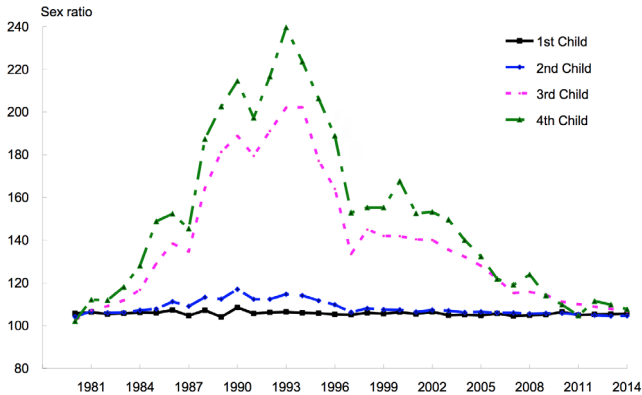


Figure 4. Trends in Sex Ratio at Birth by Parity, 1980-2014

Source: Korea Statistical Information System (<http://kosis.kr>), 2015.

is particularly noticeable in the Yeongnam region, which includes Daegu, Busan, Gyeongsangbuk-do and Gyeongsangnam-do. Moreover, in big cities, the higher the parity of children, the more pronounced the gender imbalance phenomenon is.

South Korea's sex ratio at birth registered a historically high level of 115 in 1990, 1993 and 1994. Later on, it went down and reached a normal level in 2007. Since then, the issue of gender imbalance at birth has not been a major problem for South Korean society. Recently, the sex ratio at birth in countries like India or Vietnam has been increasing and these countries are turning their attention to Korea, which is unique in having successfully lowered its sex ratio at birth in a very short time.

Generally, the gender imbalance at birth towards males has become more serious with the dissemination of medical technology and facilities that can reveal the sex of the embryo in advance. Some important reasons why South Korea was able to rapidly reduce the birth imbalance are as follows: 1) policies prohibiting sex-selective induced abortion were introduced by the government; 2) the problem was publicized in the media nationwide; 3) widespread social policies to

facilitate gender discrimination against females were introduced; and 4) a stronger preference for a small family exacerbated the preference for sons.

Decline in Mortality and Changes in Causes of Death

Over the past half-century, socio-economic development has resulted in an important reduction of the mortality rate of South Korea. In 1983, the crude death rate was 6.4 per 1,000 and the number of deaths was 255,000. The crude death rate reached its lowest level at 5 per 1,000 between 2004 and 2009, before increasing again from 2010 on to attain 5.3 per 1,000 in 2014. With 242,000 deaths, 2006 was also the year with the lowest number on record. Subsequently, the number of deaths continued to increase and reached 268,000 in 2014. The crude death rate and the number of deaths have had a tendency to increase in South Korea, notably as a result of the ageing of the population, and it is considered likely that this trend will endure.

The mortality level of the South Korean population is very low compared to the average value in the world as well as developing and Asian countries, but also compared to other

	Crude death rate (‰)	Infant mortality rate (‰)	Expectation of life (age)	
			Male	Femelle
World population	7.8	35.8	63.3	72.7
More developed regions	10.0	5.2	75.1	81.5
Less developing regions	7.4	39.2	66.9	70.7
Asian countries	7.0	31.1	69.7	73.6
Korea	5.5	2.9	78.0	84.6

Table 1. Mortality Indicators of World Population and the Korean Population, 2010-2015

Source: UN, World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision, 2015.

developed countries. The infant mortality rate is only 55.8% of that of developed countries. The rate of South Korea is markedly low, even among OECD members; it ranks just after Japan and Sweden. Moreover, South Korean life expectancy is three years longer than the median life expectancy of developed countries.

The main causes of death today depend on the level of socio-economic development, access to medical facilities and technologies, and they are therefore connected to the reform of healthcare systems. Generally, in societies with a high mortality level, the most important causes of death are epidemics, parasites and diseases related to the respiratory system. In developed societies where the mortality rate is low, the main reasons include heart disease, circulatory system diseases such as hypertension, different forms of cancer, accidents, and addictions. In South Korea, in the past 20 years, the most important causes of death are no longer related to digestive system diseases and deaths from cancer, circulatory system diseases and suicide in particular are on the increase.

The three most important causes of death in South Korea are cancer, cerebrovascular diseases and heart problems. In 2013, these three categories accounted for 47.4% of the deaths. However, the causes of death differ according to gender and age group. For example, substantially more men than women die from suicide, plane crashes and accidents. For the age groups between 10 and 29, the

most important causes of death are suicide and transport accidents. Another striking trend is the increase in deaths from lung cancer, liver cancer and stomach cancer, especially for the population aged 50 and above.

Trends in Population Ageing

With lower birth rates and higher life expectancy, the phenomenon of population ageing has become an important social issue in developed countries. As a population ages, the cost of elderly care and the demand for pensions, medical assistance and welfare benefits all increase. If this becomes too heavy of a burden for the social security system, there is a high risk of a potential conflict between generations in the future. With the lack of a young workforce, the drive for economic growth is weakening and it is increasingly difficult to improve the quality of life at the individual level.

Currently, the level of population ageing in South Korea is still relatively low compared to developed countries such as Japan and countries in Europe. However, South Korea is ageing at the fastest pace in the world and Korea is expected to surpass these countries in 2040. As Table 2 shows, the population aged 65 and above had reached 2.9% and the population over 80 had reached 0.2% in 1960. However, they represented respectively 13.1% and 2.8% of the population in 2015. It is expected that they will reach 40.1% and 17.2% respectively in 2060.

Year	Population (millions)	Elderly population (%)		Median age	Old age dependency ratio ¹	Ageing index ²
		65 or over	80 or over			
1960	25.0	2.9	0.2	19.0	5.3	6.9
3.8	38.1	3.8	0.5	21.8	6.1	11.2
2000	47.0	7.2	1.0	31.8	10.1	34.3
2015	50.6	13.1	2.8	40.8	17.9	94.1
2020	51.4	15.7	3.7	43.4	22.1	119.1
2040	51.1	32.3	9.4	52.6	57.2	288.6

Table 2. Trends in Population Ageing, 1960-2060

Source: Statistics Korea, Population Projections for 2010-2060, 2011

With the persistent ageing of the population, the weight of the eldest people is set to increase, including among the elderly population. As a result, the pressure to provide support costs and the demand for social welfare will also increase. In the future, the population aged 80 and over is set to increase in number and in relative weight. Moreover, the population aged 80 and over is clearly increasing at a faster rate than the population aged 65 and over. In 2060, the population over 80 is expected to reach 7.6 million, that is 42.8% of the population aged 65 and over.

The median age is an indicator that is often used to understand the level of ageing and the transition stage of a population. Generally, if the median age is under 25, the population is said to be a “young population” whereas if it is over 30, the population is said to be an “old population.” As we can see in Table 2, the median age is quite rapidly increasing. In 1960, South Korea was a “young population” with a median age of 19. But even before entering the 21st century, it had become an “old population.” The median age is estimated to be 40.8 in 2015 and it is expected to be as old as 57.9 in 2060.

With a low birth rate and the ageing of the population, the old age dependency ratio and the ageing index have increased at quite a fast rate. The old age dependency ratio was 5.3 persons per 100 economically active people in 1960 and in 2015, it is estimated at 17.9 persons, three times as high as its 1960 level. Furthermore, the old age dependency ratio will reach 80.6 in 2060 and it is expected that every 6 persons aged 15-64 will be in charge of 5 elderly persons. Compared to the old age dependency ratio, the ageing index has responded more sensibly to the decreasing birth rate of the last 14 years. Indeed, the ageing index has increased by 13.6 times between 1960 and 2015 and it is expected to reach 394 in 2060, which is more than four times as high as its current rate.

Geographic Distribution and Urbanization

In the second half of the century, South Korea's socio-economic development and industrialization went on a par with urbanization. In 2014, 81% of the South Korean population lived in cities and, excluding the population in the eup administrative division, only 9.6% of the population lived in rural areas. The urbanization trend is still ongoing and younger people in rural areas are continuing to leave for the city. Rural areas are experiencing a decrease in population as well as an ageing of the population.

¹ $(P_{65+} \div P_{15-64}) \times 100$.

² $(P_{65+} \div P_{0-14}) \times 100$.

Year	Seoul	Seoul metropolitan area ³	Capital region ⁴	Five large cities ⁵	Urban (Dong)	Rural (Eup/Myeon)	Entire country
1960	2,445	2,938	5,194	4,829	6,996	17,976	24,989
1970	5,433	6,327	8,730	9,239	12,709	18,172	30,882
1980	8,364	10,744	13,298	14,508	21,434	16,002	37,436
1990	10,613	16,508	18,586	18,828	32,308	11,101	43,411
2000	9,895	19,441	21,354	18,759	36,755	9,380	46,136
2005	9,820	20,960	22,767	18,669	38,515	8,764	47,279
2010	9,794	21,875	23,836	18,633	39,823	8,758	48,580
2014	10,103	23,205	25,364	19,124	41,840	9,488	51,328

Table 3. Geographic Distribution of Population, 1960-2014 (in thousands)

Source: Statistics Korea, *Korea Statistical Information System* (<http://kosis.kr/>), 2015

In the last half of the century, urbanization has been focused in Seoul, the capital region (Seoul, Incheon and Gyeonggi-do) and large cities. Seoul's population was 10.1 million in 2014, that is more than four times what it was in 1960. Seoul covers an area of 605 km² or 0.6% of the country. Yet Seoul concentrates as much as 19.7% of Korea's total population. Moreover, in 2014, the capital region concentrated 25.4 million inhabitants and 49.4% of the total population.

Between 1960 and 2014, the population in Seoul and the capital region quadrupled, while the population in the Seoul metropolitan area increased 7.9 times. The population in the large cities of Busan, Incheon, Daegu, Gwangju and Daejeon also quadrupled during the same period. Moreover, there were only 7 million urban (dong) population in 1960 as opposed to 41.8 million in 2014. Such a population increase in the cities is the result of massive population movements from the countryside. In parallel, the population in rural areas (eup/myeon) was reduced by half in the same period, from 18 million to 9.5 million.

A distinctive aspect of South Korea's urbanization process in the second half of the century is that the population increase in the cities was not homogeneous. The government recognized that the concentration of population and industries in Seoul was the root cause of endemic problems in other Korean cities, and from 1964, pushed for policies in order to curtail this concentration. Moreover, from 1972, the government implemented "multiple purpose land development" plans and maintained policies to support more balanced territorial development.

However, despite these measures, the concentration of the population and industries continued, which resulted in a deepening imbalance between cities and rural areas as well as among regions. In the future, the population in the rural areas may continue to decrease while the population in the Seoul metropolitan area and the capital region will continue to further aggregate.

Trends in International Marriage and Increases in Foreign Spouses

Traditionally a homogeneous society, South Korea has rapidly become a multicultural society in the last 25 years with an increasing

³ Seoul, Incheon and urban areas in Gyeonggi Province.

⁴ Seoul, Incheon and Gyeonggi Province.

⁵ Seoul, Busan, Daegu, Incheon and Daejeon.

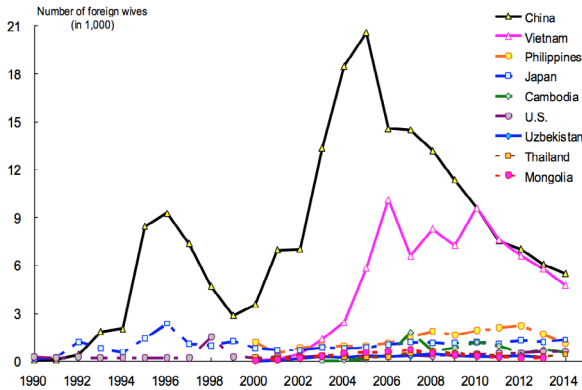


Figure 5. Trends in the Number of Foreign Wives by the Country of Origin, 1990-2014

Source: KIM Doo-Sub, *International Marriage of Koreans and Adaptation of Foreign Spouses*, 2015.

number of Koreans marrying foreigners. For example, there were 520,000 international marriages between 1990 and 2014. In 2014, the share of foreign women marrying Korean men was over 12% in 42 counties (si, gun, gu). Between 1990 and 2014, 373,000 Korean men married a foreign spouse, representing 71.2% of international marriages. However, while there has been a gradual change in marriages between Korean women and foreign men, their share in international marriages has been decreasing.

Marriage migration to South Korea, which has received increasing social attention, started in the mid-1980s and rapidly increased in the 2000s. In 1990, there were 4,710 international marriages according to the marriage registration data. The number of marriages with foreigners peaked in 2005, with 42,356 registered. Subsequently, this trend reversed and there was a substantial decrease in the number of marriages, totaling 23,316 in 2014. In parallel, these accounted for 1.2% of all marriages in 1990, 13.5% in 2005, and 7.6% in 2014 respectively.

While Korean Chinese brides represented the absolute majority among foreign spouses in the early stage, their number has been gradually

decreasing and the country of origin of brides has diversified to include various countries in Southeast Asia and Central Asia. As we can see in Figure 5, the number of marriages with Chinese women was greatly reduced after 2005. This results from the fact that there has been less demand as the government amended regulations for chosonjok (Korean Chinese) to have an easier access to employment when they enter the country to visit their relatives. According to the marriage registration data, in 2014, the main countries of origin of foreign brides were China (5,485), followed by Vietnam (4,743), Japan (1,345), the Philippines (1,130), the United States (636), Cambodia (564), and Thailand (439).

Most recently, there has been increasing attention to social policies for foreign spouses on issues such as the marriage process, life after immigration, the stability of the marriage and integration in society. In the future, increasing flows from globalization will further accelerate the advent of a multi-ethnic multi-cultural society.

Growth of the North Korean Population

Before the partition of Korea, it was generally considered that the South Korean and

North Korean populations maintained their homogeneity. According to a census carried out in 1944 by the government-general under Japanese colonial rule, if we divided the population according to the 38th parallel, there would be respectively 15.9 million inhabitants in the South and 10 million in the North. However, immediately after the independence and until 1949, and during the Korean War (1950-1953), many people moved from North Korea to the South, and the repercussions of the war had a great impact on the population of North Korea.

In the years following 1954 and until 1960, the growth of the North Korean population exceeded an average annual rate of 3%, while it sustained a high rate of 2-3% between 1961 and 1970. North Korea's population was estimated at 16.3 million in 1970. From 1982 to 1995, North Korea's population continued to grow at a below 2% rate, and from the 1990s, it is considered that the "Great Famine" caused a decade of low growth at around 1%. According to the UN, the population of North Korea was estimated to be around 20.2 to 22.8 million in the 1990s and 25.2 million in 2015.

In the years following the 1990s, bad harvests, famine, natural disasters, resource shortages and the collapse of the distribution system had a great impact on population growth. However, the North Korean population did not completely disintegrate due to the famine and still experienced growth in the 1990s and 2000s. Another analogy is that, despite the marked differences between the policies and economies of South Korea and North Korea, the patterns of fertility transition and population ageing of the North have followed the path of the South with a 10-15 year lag and have maintained a considerable level of similarity to population changes in South Korea.

Comparing the population on both sides of the peninsula, the relative size of the North Korean population was 54.9% of the South Korean

population at the time of the Korean War in the 1950s. In 1953, after the war ended, this ratio decreased rapidly and was reduced to 44.2% in 1965. After reaching this inflexion point, in the following 10 years, it steadily increased to reach 46.9% in 1975 and 50.6% in 2005. In the early 2000s, the population of the Korean peninsula, including both South Korea and North Korea, exceeded 70 million and it is expected to reach 75 million by the mid-2010s.



2. A Brief History of Policy Responses to Low Fertility and Population Ageing in South Korea

Kim Ik Ki

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Demographic transition in Korea started in the early 1960s, mainly as a result of the interaction between rapid socio-economic development and full-scale implementation of family planning programs (Kim, 2013). Due to these rapid socio-demographic changes, the fertility rate in Korea has consistently dropped and has remained below replacement level since 1985. As a consequence, the growth rate of the Korean population has continuously decreased with a negative growth potential of the total population.

The elderly population aged 60 and over in South Korea has also increased from 1.5 million in 1960 to 3.3 million in 1990, and is projected to increase to 9.9 million by the year 2020. The proportion of those aged 65 and over was 3.3% in 1960 and has consistently increased, up to 9.3% in 2005. The ageing speed of the South Korean population is faster than that of other developed countries and the country is experiencing a tremendous momentum for further population ageing.

Consequences of low fertility and population ageing

The rapid process of fertility decline and population ageing as a result of the rapid demographic transition has substantially affected Korean society. The effects, however, would be even more serious in the future. First of all, low fertility and population ageing have affected the size and proportion of the working age population (15-64 years). Its size has consistently increased up to now but is projected to decrease after 2020.

For the past three decades, the educational attainment of the elderly in Korea has consistently increased. However, improvement in the educational attainment is projected to be greater for the female elderly than for the male elderly. This change will significantly affect the role of the elderly, both in the family and society.

The population of the elderly aged 75 and over has also increased faster than the total population of 65 and over. The significance of the disproportionate increase in the 'old-old' population (as opposed to 'young-old') for long-term care lies in the greater prevalence of functional impairment and chronic disease among the very old. Functional impairment and the need for assistance can have enormous impact on the elderly and their families.

Despite this increase in both absolute number and proportion of the elderly, the share of the welfare services for the elderly has rather decreased in recent years. The role of the government would be even more limited as the number of the elderly population continuously increases. In this situation, the family should continuously take part in the care of the elderly. Most Koreans take it for granted that they will receive support from their own children. However, contrary to their expectations, there are many circumstances under which such support is not available from their children due to the recent socio-economic changes.

In recent years, the proportions of the Korean elderly living alone and living with their spouse only have greatly increased while the proportion of those living with family members has decreased. The elderly living alone suffer from serious financial problems, which indicates that the tradition of strong family support is weakening. In South Korea, this problem is even more severe among the rural elderly because of the massive outmigration of young people from rural areas. The most salient finding here is that more than half of the rural elderly live alone or live only with their spouse.

Policy options to the demographic challenge

The South Korean government launched a full-scale national family planning program in 1962. Since then, it has been very effective

in controlling the record high fertility and has made South Korea one of the most successful countries in adopting a national family planning program. The total fertility rate in Korea reached the replacement level in 1985 and has remained below replacement level ever since.

The low fertility rate has brought about a lot of problems such as population ageing, labor shortages, unbalanced sex ratio, etc. Faced with new population problems, the South Korean government has changed the direction of its policy from a quantitative population control to a qualitative consideration of the population. In 1996, the Korean government officially announced the adoption of 'the new population policy,' which focused on the quality of life and welfare for the South Korean population.

Cho and Byun (1998) identified the goals of the new population policy as follows: 1) to maintain the fertility rate below replacement level as part of the process of achieving sustainable socio-economic development; 2) to enhance family health and welfare; 3) to prevent the imbalance of sex ratios at birth and to reduce the incidence of induced abortions; 4) to tackle the sex-related problems of the youth and adolescents; 5) to empower women by expanding employment opportunities and welfare services for them; 6) to improve work opportunities and provide adequate health care and welfare services for the elderly.

As mentioned above, the actual goals of the new population policy in Korea are related to adaptive mechanisms. Among these mechanisms, improving work opportunities is one of the important goals. The Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare announced the adoption of the general policy for the welfare for the elderly in 1995 and suggested five measures to expand job opportunities for the elderly: 1) to develop and expand appropriate jobs for the elderly; 2) to raise the retirement

age and to abolish age limitations for newly employed workers; 3) to make public the necessity of professional activities for the elderly; 4) to activate the support system for organizations introducing jobs to the elderly; 5) and to establish and expand joint workplaces for the elderly.

The retirement system is also important not only for the stability of the elderly's lives, but also for controlling the problems of labor shortage. The Korean government introduced the compulsory retirement system for government workers in 1963. Under the current system, most government workers are to retire as early as age 60, with the exception of professional government workers like teachers (age 62) and professors (age 65). The situation of workers in the private sector is worse. About 65 percent of employees working in private industries used to retire at the age of 55 in South Korea in the 1990s. Yet, according to a 1994 national survey, most of the Korean elderly (80%) wanted to remain in the workplace as long as possible. A survey conducted from 2000 to 2001 in Japan, the US, Korea, Germany and Sweden showed that Korea was unique in that a much larger proportion of respondents chose around 75 or 80 as the preferable age to retire¹. Then, what would have been the most appropriate retirement age in Korea? According to the same national survey, 25% of the elderly believed that the existing compulsory retirement system should be abolished. The retirement age should then be flexible depending on the health and economic condition and ability of the elderly in general.

Raising the retirement age may therefore be indispensable not only for the welfare of the elderly but also for the supplementing of the

labor shortage resulting from the population decline.

In order to fill up the labor shortage in the future, the Korean government should provide more opportunities for women's participation in the work force. Although the employment of women has increased much faster than the increase of men's employment since 1985, the proportion of women who are currently working is still much less than that of men. According to the Korea National Statistics, in 2013, labor force participation rate for men aged over 15 was 72% but only 50% for women.

To facilitate women's participation in the work force, Korean society should establish better infrastructure and environment for female workers. These should include not only institutional reforms, such as equal opportunities for both sexes but also the provision of hardware such as childcare facilities at work. In South Korea, there has traditionally been serious gender discrimination both in the society and at home. Especially at the workplace, there has been gender discrimination in recruiting new employees, providing benefits and salary, discharging from work, etc. Fighting gender discrimination is key to increasing women's participation in the work force.

Policy options relating to low fertility and population ageing should focus on welfare for the elderly. The elderly have traditionally been taken care of by women, specifically by the wife of the first son. However, the increase in women's participation in the work force has decreased their role in the support of the elderly. An increase in women's participation in the work force in the future would have the indirect effect of seriously affecting the support system for the elderly.

Eventually, long-term care has emerged as a salient issue because of the rapid growth of

¹ In Koichi Hiraoka: "Changing retirement patterns in Japan," in Thomas R Klassen and Yunjeong Yang, 2015, Korea's retirement predicament: The ageing tiger, Routledge, London

a population in need, the dramatic increase in healthcare costs for impaired elderly, and increasingly the reduced ability to pay for long-term care on an individual basis because of rising medical costs. Thus, it is expected that the majority of the elderly will face increasing difficulties to obtain care services at home. A significant policy issue is whether the supply of medical personnel and facilities, and more importantly, expenditures in the future will be sufficient to care for frail elderly and whether alternatives to institutionalization would assist in meeting their needs.

Concluding remarks

South Korea is facing a demographic challenge. Because of this trend, UNPD has predicted that the population of working age in Korea would drastically decrease from 1995 to 2050 (UNPD, 2004). Regarding the drastic decline of the labor force, UNPD has suggested that accepting immigrants would be the only acceptable policy to cope with the labor shortage resulting from the low fertility. A debate has now been opened in the Korean society and has deep ramifications to larger issues, economic, societal and cultural, while the need for a crucial debate on multiculturalism is likely to be further reinforced.



3. Women in Ageing Korea and Gender Ideology Conflicts

YANG YUNJEONG

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The Republic of Korea (Korea hereinafter) is well known for its rapid modernization and industrialization. It is now experiencing another societal shift, a demographic one, developing from an “ageing” society into an “aged” society in about 17 years (from 2000 to 2017), something that France experienced over 100 years.

The ageing of a society occurs through a combination of declining fertility and rising life expectancy, i.e. with an increase of the number of older persons as a proportion of that society. While acknowledging the importance of low fertility in Korea, this paper addresses the upper portion of the demographic pyramid, that is the older section of the population. The share of the older population (65+) will be about a third of Korea’s total population by 2040 and the old age dependency ratio by then will be about 60% – in layman’s terms, 25 years from now, every one out of three persons you will meet in Korea will be aged 65 or older and, other factors remaining the same, fewer than every two “working aged” persons will be responsible for supporting and taking care of one “elderly” person. For the entire society, this means about four times more “burden” than today.

Meanwhile, it is known that women tend to live longer and their likelihood of living in poverty

in old age is also known to be higher than men’s, mostly because of their shorter working and earning periods due to the society’s prevalent gender ideology, i.e. men earning and women caring. While both gender gaps in life expectancy and sex ratio among the older population are likely to narrow in the future, the simple fact that the absolute number of women aged 65 or over will reach about 10 million persons by 2040 to account for about 20% of the total population is eye-catching. As a group, they therefore deserve a closer look.

This article will first describe women’s current stakes in Korean society before examining the social expectations faced by women. Eventually, I will share my recent findings regarding their reactions and then provide a conclusion.

What are women’s stakes in a rapidly ageing Korea?

According to a national survey in 2011, the biggest challenge faced by older persons (60+) was “financial difficulties” (Statistics Korea). Another survey in 2009 revealed that fewer than 40% of older Koreans (65+) believed that they were “prepared for later life” and about 30% mentioned the National Pension (NP)² as a major old age income source. Indeed, the most recent data shows that about a third of today’s older persons benefit from the NP (Table 1).

² The Korean National Pension scheme was introduced in 1988 and all full old age pensions (meeting the 20-year contribution requirement) began payments as late as 2008. Before 1988, those with certain occupations could benefit from the three occupational pension schemes, namely government employees (introduced in 1960), military personnel (since 1963), and private school teachers (since 1975).

Sources	Men	Women
Self or spouse	54.5	40.6
Pension/severance payment	32.3	21.9
Savings/bonds	12.0	9.5
Assets/real estate	4.0	3.7
Paid work	6.2	5.5
Children or relatives	24.8	30.4
Public/social support	20.7	28.5
Others	0.2	0.5

Table 1: Major old age income sources in 2014³

The gender gap, however, is worth mentioning here. While about half of men have a pension from the NP, less than one fifth of older women do. In addition, having a pension per se does not mean that the pensioner is benefiting from a reasonable sum to cover his or her basic needs. According to a recent Economically Active Persons' Survey (May 2015), out of the 41.8% of women aged 55 to 79 who answered that they received any type of pension (including widows), about 70% of them only received a monthly average amount between 100 and 250,000 won (equivalent to \$100–\$250) while the official minimum living cost of Korea was 617,000 won as of 2015. As a result, the proportion of women relying on the Basic Livelihood security benefits is much higher than that of men.

Based on these observations, a social safety net against one of the biggest social risks, ageing, is not well-established⁴ and people cannot expect a reasonable level of pension in old age. This largely explains the longer working life among Korean elderly people. Moreover, women are more vulnerable than men, partly

³ UN World Population Prospects (2015); National Pension Statistics, Economically Active Population Survey, available from KOSIS.

⁴ Korea is also known for its relatively low social expenditure among OECD countries, partly due to the late introduction of the NP.

due to the still clear gender ideology – the prevalence of a 'male breadwinner model' remains true, at least among the current older generation.

In this context, it is not surprising to see that the realistic response of older women to meet their financial needs mainly involves relying on the support of their adult children or other relatives. Relying on the support of adult children, however, could also be understood as a cultural trait of a family-centered society, an issue that is addressed in the next section.

Table 2: Main sources of income to meet living expenses in old age in 2013⁵

	Persons	Total (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)
Aged pop (65+)	6,385,559	100.0	41.8	58.2
National Pension	1,981,184	30.9	50.9	17.3
Basic livelihood	379,048	6.0	4.4	7.1
Paid work	2,045,000	31.9	43.0	23.9

What is a good life in old age for women in a family-centered culture?⁶

Family care-giving can be understood as an experience of a socially constructed obligation, structured by the gendered division of labor and the devaluing of unpaid (care) work in most capitalist societies. However, this is of particular note in so-called 'family-centered' cultures in Asia and this social norm has an unavoidable influence on later life. Women's role in the Confucian tradition in general involves being a "wise mother and good wife." In this culture, family is considered as the basic institution for personal care and the social costs of reproduction are borne by women. The use of a maternalist policy throughout the Korean periods of economic growth has also

⁵ Korean Retirement & Income Study, available from KOSIS.

⁶ This section and the next one are heavily drawn from Yang (2015).

contributed to persistent gender inequalities and “a strengthening of the division between the public and private and between production and reproduction.”

Paik and Choi highlight the cross-culturally distinctive gap in understanding the concept of “successful ageing” as well as its components: many Western studies find that activity, productivity and participation - both economic and social - turn out to be important in so-called “successful later life,” while the Korean elderly consider relational components such as securing social support, close family relations and positive relations with other people, etc., to be more important. They also underline that today’s elderly went through a particular period in the modern history of Korea, such as the colonization under Japanese rule, the Korean War, the restructuring of the nation and the modernization of the economy under a military authoritarian regime, resulting in a strong nationalistic, authoritarian collectivism as well as traditional Confucianism-driven family-centered value orientations. “Becoming no burden to others, particularly to adult children”; “completing [parents’/adults’] roles”; “dying well [without complications]”; “self-control” were among other new components revealed in their study, which have never been mentioned in Western studies. The importance of getting along with family, particularly with adult children, and fulfilling parents duties are repeatedly emphasized in domestic surveys regarding successful ageing. Subjective well-being for the Korean elderly is known to be positively associated with satisfying relationships, particularly with their children.

While good family relations remain a priority in the Korean concept of “successful ageing,” a subtle gender gap is worth noting. Paik and Choi’s study found that ostentatious factors such as children’s education and career advancement were effective in predicting successful ageing for men, while for women,

securing social support had a high predictability power. In other words, an old man believes that he has lived well if he has been capable of supporting his children’s education and career advancement. In contrast, a woman would feel happy and satisfied in her later life if her adult children could provide her with the necessary support, financially and emotionally. In summary, social activity and economic success are part of social recognition for men, while for women, whose roles have mostly involved raising children, children symbolize their accomplishment of mother duties and thereby mean that their children need to prove that they don’t require any more help, or care services, from their mother.

Care here becomes an important juncture where gender and ageing meet. But the reality is not that simple. A report by the Korean Women’s Development Institute, a major think tank for women’s policies in Korea, reveals that elderly women continue to be the main care providers into their later life, not only for their spouses, but also for adult children and grandchildren and that these care requirements usually impose a physical and psychological burden on older women.

Women's ageing in the context of the gender/family norm flux

Deeply cultural tradition may have an influence, but it should not be over-emphasized since diversity within the culture remains hidden, particularly in the context of changing gender/family norms in society.

This is supported by the results of my qualitative research, based on in-depth interviews with Korean women aged between the late 50s and the 60s. Unlike most women who seem to accept the prevalent gender ideology of the male breadwinner and female caregiver as natural and as their destiny,

I noticed that some other women had distinctive expressions, questioning why it should be that way, or some did (though individually) oppose what the tradition required them to be. These women turned out to be “work-oriented” partly because of their unusual family environment and partly because of their long professional experiences, which must have required them to act and become “like a man” in their workplaces.

It should be noted that women conforming to the gender ideology do not question their main duty of caring and do their best to fulfill this duty while earning money at the same time. In contrast, many professional women refusing the gender ideology appear to suffer from loose family relationships, mostly with adult children. This is partly related to the fact that these women were mostly absent when their children (and now grandchildren) needed “mums” (and “grannies”) the most, in terms of care. In the same manner, older women unable to provide care support for grandchildren were less welcomed by their adult children, and could therefore not enjoy inter-generational warmth with frequent visits, let alone living together. This, however, does not mean that every “work-oriented” woman has refused the woman’s role as a care provider. Among those who have worked for their entire lives, there were some who also took on a caring duty (mostly for grandchildren) naturally, if not more willingly.

In summary, the degree of acceptance of caring work as their own duty and the nature of family relationships in later life appears to some extent to depend on the degree of compliance with the gender ideology, rather than on these women’s socio-economic backgrounds. This finding from “deviant” cases from women of the current generation with certain gender role expectations can be more meaningful for future projections as this is closer to the younger generation, that is women who are

educated and have a career. We can also easily imagine that in the future, there will be more, not fewer, women “refusing” the current gender ideology.

My findings are not intended to blame women for any family breakdowns but suggest that their future is not bright if the current gender ideology remains intact. With an increasing number of women involved in paid work, society and gender roles must be remodeled in a way that allows balance between work and care over women’s lifetime and also between genders so that working women do not have to face individual struggles to balance family and work during their working lives. Only in this way can women as well as men enjoy peaceful family relationships throughout their lives.

The very fact that grandmothers remain the main care providers reflects a certain type of welfare society that is defined by a lack of public care support and, more importantly, the lack of a culture of work-family balance and gender equality in care, which in turn contributes to reproducing a dominant and unequal gender ideology and institutions over generations. What is required for a society with a growing number of elderly persons, in particular elderly women, appears to be a paradigm shift from a “male breadwinner model” toward a “universal caregiver model,” or “dual earner-carer model,” along with substantial advances in public old age social security, including individual rights to a reasonable pension and reliable and affordable public care services.



4. Financial Welfare of the Ageing Population: Can Koreans Rely on the National Pension Scheme?⁷

ANNA CHUNG

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⁷ In this article, Korea refers to the Republic of Korea.

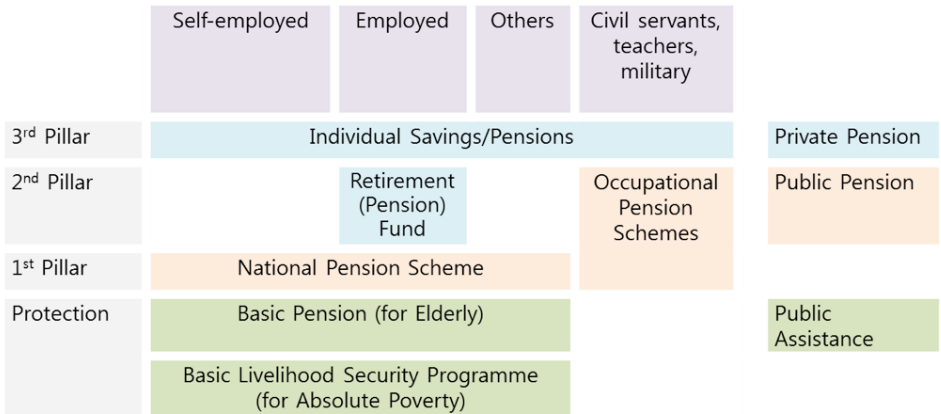


Figure 1 : Multi-Pillar Income Support Mechanisms

Korea is the fastest ageing country in the world, and yet, welfare for the elderly is rather low according to the Global Age Watch Index as Korea ranks 60th out of 96 countries. The ratio of elderly in poverty - four times the OECD average - is worrisome. Public pensions are important in providing income security to the elderly.

This article addresses some key developments in pension policy. The first section starts with a brief survey of the income support mechanisms after retirement. It is followed by a summary on the development of public pensions in Korea and challenges faced by the National Pension Scheme (NPS). It concludes with an exploration of their policy implications.

The income support mechanisms

During the last decades, Korea introduced systems to support the general public after one's retirement. Several laws and regulations were adopted, including the NPS (1988), individual private pensions (1994) and mandatory corporate retirement fund (2005).

The zero-pillar (or public assistance) of the multi-pillar income support system comprises the Basic Old Age Pension (BOAP) and the Basic Livelihood Security Programme (BLSP). The Basic Old Age Pension changed its name to Basic Pension in 2014 to support the elderly with few assets and income, up to KRW 202,600 (about \$200) a month. BLSP is a general public assistance program which aims to provide minimum living expenses that consists of 40% of the median income.

The 1st pillar is designed to provide basic means to every citizen as a social security. Its development and design will be discussed later in this article. Corporate retirement pension fund should be managed outside the company so as to guarantee payment, even in case of corporate bankruptcies. Occupational Pension Schemes exist for civil servants and teachers in private schools as well as for military officials. They combine the 1st and 2nd pillars, and these funds are also government-supported with a generous pay-out. The 3rd pillar is geared for the individuals preparing a well-off life for themselves, and there exist tax breaks and exemptions for the investments in this category.

Despite the multi-polar mechanisms to support the elderly population financially, the poverty rate among the elderly is extremely high at 48%. It is partly due to the fact that those who were 60 or older when the NPS was introduced were excluded from participating in the system. The poverty rate will therefore eventually diminish.

However, key problems will prevail. The requirements for receiving the Basic Livelihood Security Program are strict: a person is not entitled to the BLS if he is a real-estate owner or has surviving parents and/or offspring who are financially active⁸. The Basic Pension for the elderly varies from KRW 0 to KRW 202,600 in accordance with the person's income and assets, falling short by far of the minimum cost of living. Furthermore, elderly employees are often pressured to retire early. As of 2013, the average retirement age was 52.79 for all workplaces and 55.44 for workplaces with more than 300 employees. After retiring from the workplace, people work mostly as part-time or irregular workers to make ends meet.

Development of the National Pension System

The NPS is a partially-funded, defined benefit public pension system. It is at the core of the provision of income support for the general public. The system being in an immature state, contributions have outweighed payments and it has been accumulating capital. The NPS is expected to grow until its peak around 2043 and it will then reduce sharply thereafter. A survey has shown that for 55.1% of households, the NPS was considered as the main instrument to prepare themselves for their post-retirement finances.

⁸ There is a rule on mandatory family support and a cap on asset ownership. If a person's parent or offspring (or their partners) have an income above the median plus minimum living expenses, the person is not eligible for BLSP. A percentage (up to 4.17%) of a person's assets (including real estate assets) is regarded as income.

Plans (72.6%)		No Plans (27.4%)	
Methods	NPS 55.1	Why not?	Have not thought about it 10.1
	Other public pension 8.5		Will prepare later 25.7
	Private pension 9.0		Lack of capacity 49.9
	Corporate retirement benefit 3.9		Rely on offspring 14.4
	Personal saving 17.7		
	Real estate 5.2		
	Others 0.6		

Figure 2: How are you financially preparing for retirement?⁹

As it was introduced in 1988 for companies with 10 employees and more, the NPS has a short history. Its coverage has gradually expanded to include every person in 1999, while on the other hand, two reforms (in 1997 and 2007) reduced its benefits. The income replacement ratio, which stood at 70% for a person with 40 years of full payment at the outset of the NPS, will eventually fall to 40% by 2028.

Figure 3: Development of the National Pension Scheme

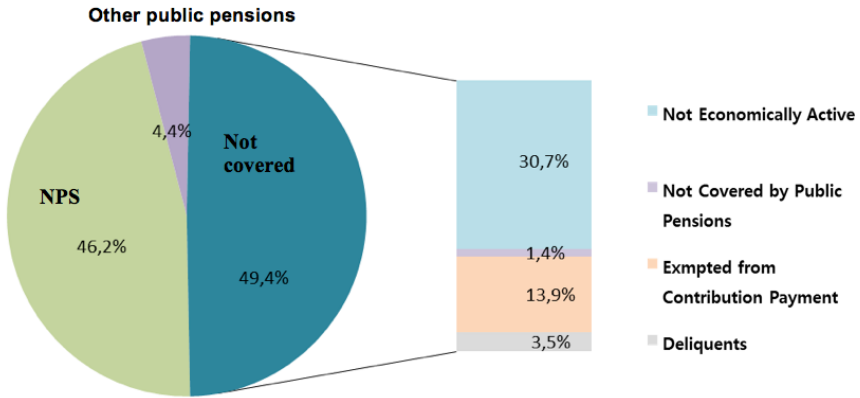
Year	Type	Development
1986	Legislation	Legislation of the National Pension Act
1988	Implementation	Implementation of NPS in workplaces with 10 or more employees
1992	Coverage extension	Extension of compulsory coverage to those employed in workplaces with 5 or more employees
1995	Coverage extension	Extension of compulsory coverage to individuals in rural areas
1997	Reform	Reduction of income replacement rate. The pensionable age, which was initially set at 60, would be increased by one year every 5 years from 2013 to 65 in 2033.
1999	Coverage extension	Extension of compulsory coverage to every person in Korea
2007	Reform	Another reduction of the NPS replacement to fall eventually to 40% by 2028; introduction of the Basic Old-Age Pension.
2008	Implementation	Beginning of payment of full old-age pension
2014	Implementation	Basic Old-Age Pension is replaced with Basic Pension

Main issues for the NPS

The role of the NPS as a core part of the income support mechanisms after retirement has been criticised due to its low coverage and low income replacement rate. In addition, its long-term sustainability as well as its efficiency in terms of redistribution have been debated.

⁹ Statistics Korea, Social Survey 2015

Figure 4: Percentage of Persons Covered/Uncovered by Public Pensions



Source: National Pension Service

The current scheme takes into consideration those who have paid contributions for more than 10 years by the age of 60 (which will be increased to 65 by 2033) to allow them to benefit from the scheme. Such requirement inevitably neglects the vulnerable groups of a society with low income and no economic activities. Subscribers to the public pensions accounts for only 50.6% of the population. Among those who should contribute to the NPS, 27.2% are either exempted from the payment of contributions or are delaying their payments, and will therefore enjoy either limited or no benefits in the future.

Furthermore, the disabled, students, housewives and those who have stopped looking for jobs are categorized as a not economically active population although they may be more in need of public pension support (Kwon 2015). For instance, benefits for women are very limited as public and corporate pensions are mainly centred on workplaces. Despite the fact that their level of education and

economic participation have rapidly increased in the last few decades, a large percentage of women are being registered as dependents and do not subscribe to public pensions. Only 20.3% of elderly women are recipients of the NPS, a percentage which is less than half of men's rate at 45.5%. This bias causes serious economic difficulties in the case of a change (divorce or death of the spouse) in the family structure. As of 2012, the poverty rate among elderly women was 5% higher than for men (45.9%) (Jang 2013).

For those covered by the NPS, the average payment is not substantial. The average payment of Old Age Pension was KRW 334,000 per month as of the end of 2014, a little over half the minimum cost of living. It will not increase significantly in the coming years as the average period of contributions will not increase as fast as anticipated: it will be over 20 years on average in 2049 and 21.3 years by 2060.

The design of the NPS challenges long-term sustainability. The NPS fund will be exhausted by 2060 according to government figures while it would be difficult for a pay-as-you-go pension scheme to be implemented given the population structure. According to Jung and Kim, it is more desirable in the long-term to accumulate a fund partially and the contribution rate needs to be raised to 12.9% from the current 9% in order to maintain the current structure.

The intended income redistribution and social transfers of the NPS have been less efficient than anticipated. While it is true that the benefit-contribution ratio is higher for the lower-income group, all participants to the NPS receive more than they contribute. This formula has resulted in the absolute amount of transferred income for the higher-income group to be larger than for the lower-income group.

The upper ceiling of KRW 4.8 million per month also weakens the structure of the NPS and diminishes the value of its redistribution. This becomes evident when it is compared to other public insurance: the upper ceiling of income stands at 7.81 million for health insurance and 8.05 million for occupational pensions, while there is no upper ceiling for employment insurance. The rather low level of upper ceiling for the NPS pulls down the average amount of contribution, thus weakening the financial stability of the scheme.

There is also a problem of inter-generational injustice. As of 2000, the benefit-contribution ratio was 2.19 for the 50-55 age group while the same ratio will go down to 1.12 for the 25-29 age group.

Challenges in NPS reform

The two previous reforms of the NPS focused on the issue of the NPS' financial sustainability by controlling the payout. The results were a

reduced income replacement rate from 70% eventually to 40% for those who would have contributed for 40 years; old age pension benefits would be delayed from 60 to 65. These efforts will not be sufficient to strengthen the NPS and will be exhausted by 2060 according to government figures, when there will be more elderly persons than the working population. What is more worrying is that the lowered ambition of the NPS will worsen the already serious issue of financial instability for the elderly.

There are obstacles to increasing contributions. The market economy in Korea is not sufficiently transparent to ensure fair collection. There is room for improvement in the monitoring of the employment and income of those subscribers covered in local areas (i.e. self-employed, temporary or atypical workers, etc) and the NPS relies on subscribers covered in workplaces. This fact would denote that an increased contribution may overburden those with transparent income in the workplace.

The argument that the current middle-agers do not have extra capacity to contribute more for the future cannot be dismissed. The traditional point of view regarding family as a core unit of welfare provision is changing as more people are stressing the role of society and government¹⁰. It is taken for granted by the transitory generation of people in their 40s and 50s that they should still be responsible for taking care of their own parents while the prospect of their children providing financial support in the future is slim. Still, they are prepared to spend large sums of money on their children to complete higher education.

¹⁰ In 2012, 54% of Seoulites deemed the provision of welfare for the elderly to be a joint responsibility of family, government and society (22% in 2002), while 29% believed that family should be solely responsible for taking care of the elderly (65% in 2002). Statistics retrieved from <http://stat.seoul.go.kr>.

66.5% of people in their 50s responded that they would invest in the education of their children even if this meant sacrificing their own future. Furthermore, 67.8% of household assets are tied in real estate, thus there is little cash to contribute towards pensions.

The suggestion to raise the start of pension payout from 65 to 70 in order to strengthen the NPS' long-term financial sustainability is not realistic as it would increase the poverty rate between 65 and 69 by 14%.

Any attempt to reform the NPS has to overcome the general attitude of a lack of trust in the government and its politics. The design of the NPS at the time of its inception was already quite optimistic with regard to the fund's growth and changes in birth rates. It claimed to give out 70% of income as pensions upon receiving 7% of income during the working years. As reality is far from the promises, the rosy picture painted by the government - balanced budget and NPS fund stability - has created a lot of disappointment among citizens. An increase of the Basic Old Age Pension was one of the election pledges of President Park, with her campaign on the "provision of welfare without additional taxation." This promise hit a wall when it was translated into a policy as its financing was based on optimistic assumptions regarding the economy and tax collections on which the government has little control.

If the public avoids participating and contributing to the NPS because of insufficient information on income as well as mistrust of the system, a large proportion of the elderly will be left with few or no pensions.

Policy implications

Adjusting the upper income ceiling for pension contributions as well as encouraging more corporate pensions to be annuities rather

than a lump sum payment, as suggested by Kim and Won, could be quick fixes; however, these measures would not change the fundamentals of the system nor solve the problem of financial insecurity among the elderly. The imminence and gravity of the topic require a society wide consensus-building process on social contributions and welfare. Yet, it is disappointing that the Social Counsel for Public Pensions and Poverty in Elderly established in the National Assembly has been dismissed without any tangible outcome.

Public expenditure on pensions will inevitably rise sharply. OECD projects that the expenditure will increase from 0.9% in 2010 to 6.5% in 2060. This sharp increase is due to the fact that the current level is relatively low compared to other countries. OECD statistics show that the tax revenue, including social contributions, as a percentage of GDP is low in Korea (24.6%) as compared to an OECD average of 71% and less than half that of the highest country (Denmark at 50.9%)¹¹. Should there be a public consensus, social contributions could possibly be expanded.

A recent report by the Ministry of Strategy and Finance on long-term financial planning represents a first attempt to elaborate a long-term "as is" scenario and it is a starting point for a discussion on welfare and fiscal policies. Its content is alarming as it indicates that the national debt will rise to 60% of the GDP by 2060 and it concludes that it is unlikely that the current social protection mechanisms can be maintained. Yet, this could be considered an honest analysis of the current situation, which social actors should examine and commit to improve.

¹¹ <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=REV>

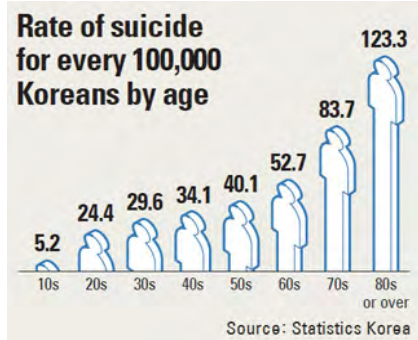


5. L'inquiétant taux de suicide des personnes âgées en Corée du Sud

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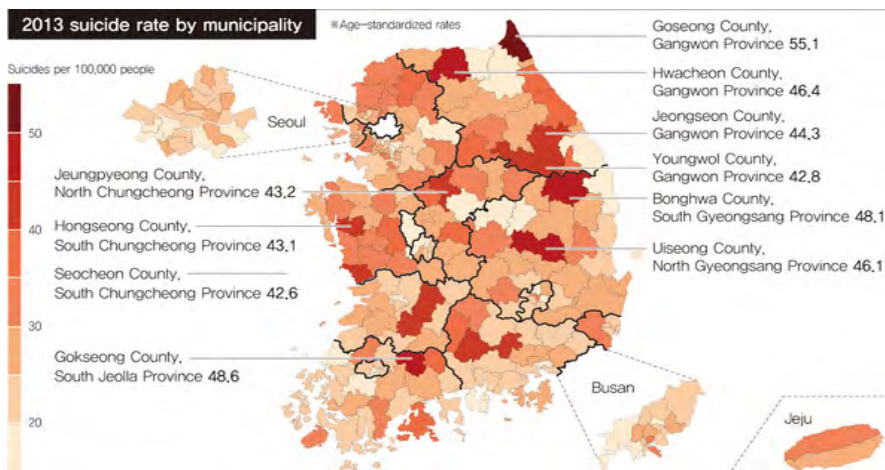
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South Korea has the highest suicide rate among OECD countries and the second highest in the world. In 2012, 29.1 in 100,000 Koreans ended their own lives. This sad record features regularly in the Korean and foreign press. In its issue of 7 May 2015, the Korea Herald pointed out that while the media frequently discuss the alarming suicide rates among teenagers facing untenable academic pressure, they take only little interest in the fact that the elderly are those most affected by suicide. In an editorial in the Journal of Korean Medical Science, Kim Sung-Wan and Yoon Jin-Sang noticed that in 2011, that rate was 84.4 in 100,000 elderly aged 61 to 70 and 116.9 in 100,000 elderly aged 71 to 80. In 1990, it was only 14 per 100,000 according to the Research Institute on Aging at Hallym University.

This trend has been a cause for concern for the Korean media for several years. In March 2011, an article of the Korea Herald, entitled "Elderly Suicides on Rise in South Korea," recalled that the last two decades have seen an exponential growth in the number of suicides among elderly struggling economically. In contrast, the number of suicides among the young has decreased significantly, from 23 in 100,000 aged 15 to 34 in 1990 to 9 in 100,000 in 2009.



According to a study of the Korean Institute of Criminology, more elderly men commit suicide than women of the same age. In 2013, 38.9 in 100,000 men ended their own lives, against 17.3 in 100,000 women. The most vulnerable group is that of elders aged 80 or over, with 168.9 suicides in 100,000 (against 110.4 for those aged 60 or over). The polarisation of suicides also follows geographic criteria, with rural areas being the most affected ones. The highest suicide rates are concentrated in the provinces of Gangwon (55.1), South Chungcheong (43.1) and North Chungcheong (43.2). The lowest rates are in Seoul (22.6) and Ulsan (23.6). The municipalities most affected are those where the population is declining and seniors are forced to work in order to survive. The Korea JoongAng Daily also points out that elderly farmers constitute the group most likely to commit suicide. In their overwhelming majority, they end their own lives by swallowing a herbicide, Gramoxone. This herbicide was responsible for 80% of suicides in rural areas and 56% across the country and it was withdrawn from the market in November 2012.

While Korean society has aged at one of the fastest pace in the world, the demographic

factor may provide an explanation for this sad trend. In its subheading, an article of the Chosun Ilbo of 30 January 2015 considers how as society is aging, “an increasing number of elders in their sixties are taking care of 80 or 90 year-old relatives.” Furthermore, many of the elderly who choose to end their own lives are suffering from chronic diseases. According to the Journal of Korean Medical Science, alcoholism contributes to suicidal behaviors and 69% of the elderly committing suicide would be alcoholics. However, demographics alone fail to explain the magnitude of the issue, which above all else brings to light the deep malaise affecting Korean society, a society in which the elderly are the most vulnerable people. While many elders have no access to an efficient pension and social security system, the poverty rate of those aged 65 or over (48.5%) is the highest among OECD countries.

A Statistics Korea poll in 2012 shows that economic hardship is the main reason given by men aged 60 or over to explain their suicidal thoughts (37.4% against 36.3% for illness/disability). According to the Chosun Ilbo of 30 November 2013, “the majority of Korean people have been so busy working to finance the education of their children and their

marriage as well as to become landlords” that they have been unable to save enough for their old days. The author of a study on this issue, Professor Kim Dong-Hyun, told the Korea Herald that while “our society has become polarized since the 2000s, the elderly who have lost their economic power are struggling to stay standing. I believe that sick and isolated elders who have no regular income are making radical decisions in order to avoid becoming a burden for their children in this nuclear and aging society.”

The conservative daily explains that economic woes are compounded by social and cultural transformations that are destabilising for the elderly. The Journal of Korean Medical Science points to the increase in divorce rates and more generally the collapse of the traditional extended family system. Lee Dong-Woo underscores the growing social ostracism felt by the elderly as well as the loss of respect from young people. The Korea Herald of 7 May 2015 recalls that the inability to face these transformations is felt particularly strongly by men who suffer from the vanishing of the patriarchal culture. The journalist describes a “frustration mixed with the sanguine character of these men, who believe they are being treated unfairly.” Park Hyung-Min of the Korean Institute of Criminology believes that when men “get older, fall ill and lose their control of family assets,” they become more vulnerable, which can lead them to suicide. In a highly competitive and increasingly divided society, economic woes increase the feelings of shame and guilt, which represent risk factors for suicidal behaviors.

The weaknesses of the social security system – in particular its ill-adapted nature and lack of access to it – account for the prevalence of suicide among the elderly in rural areas. Professor Park Ji-Young, an expert on social systems at Sangji university, explains that “the elderly in rural areas don’t know

they can receive government support even when they suffer from mental illness or deep poverty.” In addition, seeking psychological support remains taboo in Korea, where suicide is seen as an individual issue. This is all the more problematic since, as noted by Professor Hong Sei-Yong from the university of Soonchunhyang, “people say that elderly suicides are intentional and carefully planned, but based on my experience, such decisions are made abruptly and after a failed attempt, they all regret it.”

An article of the Hankyoreh on 9 August 2012 draws attention to the suicide of an elderly woman to highlight the absurdity of the Korean social system. It decries the transfer of social responsibility from the State to the family since relatives have to contribute to elderly people’s expenses. This is illustrated with the case of a woman who lost her entitlement to monthly benefits together with her housing benefits and health coverage because her son-in-law’s salary had increased very slightly and as a result, the allowance he had to provide her on a monthly basis had increased by a few won. According to Park Gyoeng-Seok, who leads a coalition of citizens demanding the abolition of this mandatory family support, “many citizens are now in agreement that social welfare must be the responsibility of the State, not families. We must abolish this obsolete system that has led several people to commit suicide and we must stop treating the victims of these anachronistic standards as criminals.” In a rather similar stance, the Hankyoreh editorial on 3 November 2014 excoriates the State for failing its duties towards an economically vulnerable population. “The calls for a reform of the social security system continue to be ignored. [...] The reason for elderly poverty is a near total lack of secure pensions. Pension benefits are cruelly lacking. [...] This explains why more and more elderly are forced to keep working to earn an income. And yet, six out of ten seniors with a professional activity earn

less than minimum wage. This is a situation that the government can no longer ignore.”

Various solutions are being offered in the Korean press. The editorial writers of the Journal of Korean Medical Science suggest that physicians and other “safeguards” (clergy, pharmacists, caregivers, etc) be trained to identify subjects presenting risks and suffering from psychological disorders in order to direct them towards suitable structures to establish a diagnosis and offer appropriate treatment. Across the whole political spectrum, analysts are in agreement. The Korea Herald of 9 March 2011 suggests that the government “introduces changes to the current social security system for seniors and prepares real measures to support elderly people suffering from depression and suicidal tendencies.” The conservative daily Chosun Ilbo shares this position and believes that “more government action is needed to stem the suicide epidemic,” such as the Centre for Elder Suicide Prevention in Seoul that was created in 2010. The editorial notes that emergency assistance should also be made available for desperate individuals and highlights the example of Finland, which used to have the highest suicide rate in Europe in 1986 (30.3 per 100,000) and where the implementation of a suicide prevention programme helped bring this rate down to 17.3 per 100,000 in 2012. Finally, the Hankyoreh suggests including private actors in the prevention of elderly suicide based on the model of a programme created by the Seoul city hall.

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