

**INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY**  
**Falling Birthrates in South Korea**

**Indiana University Sponsoring Center: East Asian Studies Center**

**Developed by:**

**Dakotah Meadows, Graduate Assistant**

**Learning outcomes:**

- A. To expand teachers' and students' knowledge about falling birthrates in South Korea.
- B. To identify multiple perspectives on the issue

**What is the disputed issue?**

Low birthrates among citizens

**In what world region and/or country is the disputed issue located?**

Republic of South Korea

**What is the essential question that frames the disputed issue?**

How should countries combat falling birth rates?

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**A. What visual resource might ignite the conversation and/or frame the disputed issue?**

**Figure 1. *Low Birth Rates Giving Storks a Break***



Granlund, D. (2021, May 31). *Low Birth Rates Giving Storks a Break* [Cartoon]. Panama City News Herald. <https://www.newsherald.com/story/opinion/cartoons/2021/05/13/thursday-cartoon-low-birth-rates-giving-storks-break/5060909001/>

**Note:** This is a cartoon that was featured in a Florida newspaper. The cartoon portrays two storks, each carrying a bag labelled with the names of popular apps used for ordering take out or groceries online. Within popular culture, storks are traditionally depicted delivering babies to their new parents. However, the cartoon's punch line is that because there have been fewer births in recent years, the storks must find work elsewhere.

Figure 2. *Baboycott*



Rodrigo. (2022, June 9). *Baboycott* [Cartoon]. Toonpool.  
[https://www.toonpool.com/cartoons/Baboycott\\_407427](https://www.toonpool.com/cartoons/Baboycott_407427)

**Note:** This cartoon was drawn by a Portuguese cartoonist who goes by the name Rodrigo. Like Figure 1, this cartoon also depicts a stork. This time the stork is carrying a baby, as is traditional. However, the stork cannot find a place to land since there are protestors holding signs showing their rejection of the baby, indicating the growing number of people who are choosing to remain childless.

## B. What are the key vocabulary terms that students must know in order to understand the disputed issue?

**Birthrate:** The ratio between births and individuals in a specified population and time. Typically defined as the number of babies born per year, per 1000 people. “The country’s birthrate is one of the lowest in the world.”

**Colonization:** The act of establishing control over a native population, often by force. “The British Empire was created by its extensive colonization.”

**Democratic:** Relating to democracy in some way. “The US is a democratic country.”

**Developed:** A country or region that has advanced economically and/or socially. “The US is among the most developed nations in the world.”

**Dictatorship:** A form of government in which one person, or a group of people, has complete control with very few or no limitations.

**Fulfillment:** Satisfaction at achieving the skills and dreams that lead to one's happiness. "She did not believe that marriage would lead to the fulfillment she wanted."

**Industrialization:** The development of a country's various industries on a massive scale. "For the country to be developed, it must undergo industrialization."

**Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD):** A collection of developed countries who collaborate to create economic policies. "The US was a founding member of the OECD."

**Reproductive:** Relating to reproduction, the biological process of creating offspring. "The model of the male and female reproductive systems."

**Selfhood:** Being an individual person, separate from everyone else. "Through living on his own, he was able to recognize his own selfhood."

**State:** A country or area that is organized by a single government. "Germany and France are European states."

(All definitions from Merriam-Webster)

### C. What are the general descriptions and context of the disputed issue?

South Korea is one of the most **developed** countries in the world and is by far the most digitally connected. However, this successful country faces two major problems: firstly, the population is rapidly aging, and secondly there are not enough babies being born to replace the older generation. The country has a population of 51 million people; to maintain this, there should be an average fertility rate of 2.1 children for each woman. However, the reality is far below this needed *rate*—with South Korea recording a record low .72 children per woman in 2022 — and is projected to get even lower. Should this trend continue, the country's population will have halved by the end of this century. This would have dire economic consequences, with insufficient workers to fill jobs and to pay into government funds used to support the retired population, a system structured much like the US's Social Security program.

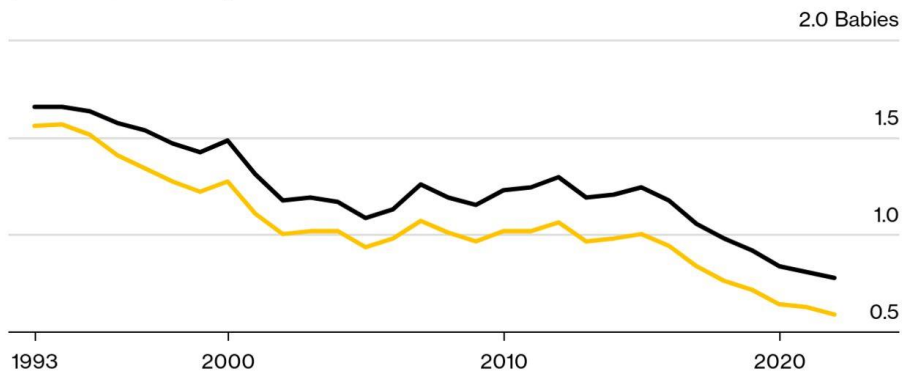
Younger generations of men and women are increasingly embracing the single life and finding **fulfillment** through personal **selfhood**. The government has been criticized for throwing money at the problem without addressing the major issues cited by those not having children, such as the high cost of living and childcare costs. On the other hand, both the government and South Korean companies have made efforts to alleviate the economic burdens of raising children while attempting to address the harder-to-tackle issues through housing subsidies and financial rewards.

**Figure 3. Falling Fertility Rate**

**Falling Fertility Rate**

South Koreans' willingness to have a baby continues to get weaker

— Nation — Seoul only



Source: Statistics Korea

\* Fertility rate refers to the number of babies expected per woman

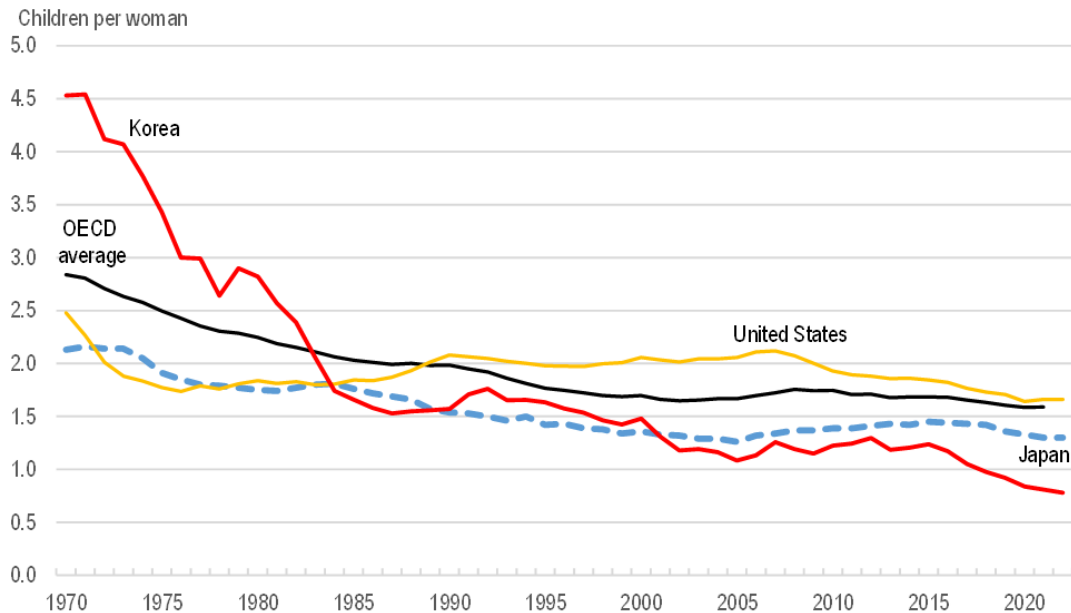
**Bloomberg**

Bloomberg. (2022).

**Note:** This graph shows the falling **birthrate** in South Korea from the mid-1990s to the 2020s

**Figure 4. Comparison of South Korea's Fertility Rate to OECD Countries**

**Korea's total fertility rate is the lowest among OECD countries**



Source: OECD Family Database.

Korean Economic Institute. (2023).

**Note:** This graph shows South Korea's fertility rate compared to other OECD countries, from the 1970s to the present day.

#### **D. What are the names of the unique multiple perspectives involved in the disputed issue?**

**Perspective One:** South Korean Governmental System  
**Perspective Two:** Young, Urban South Korean Males  
**Perspective Three:** Young, Urban South Korean Females

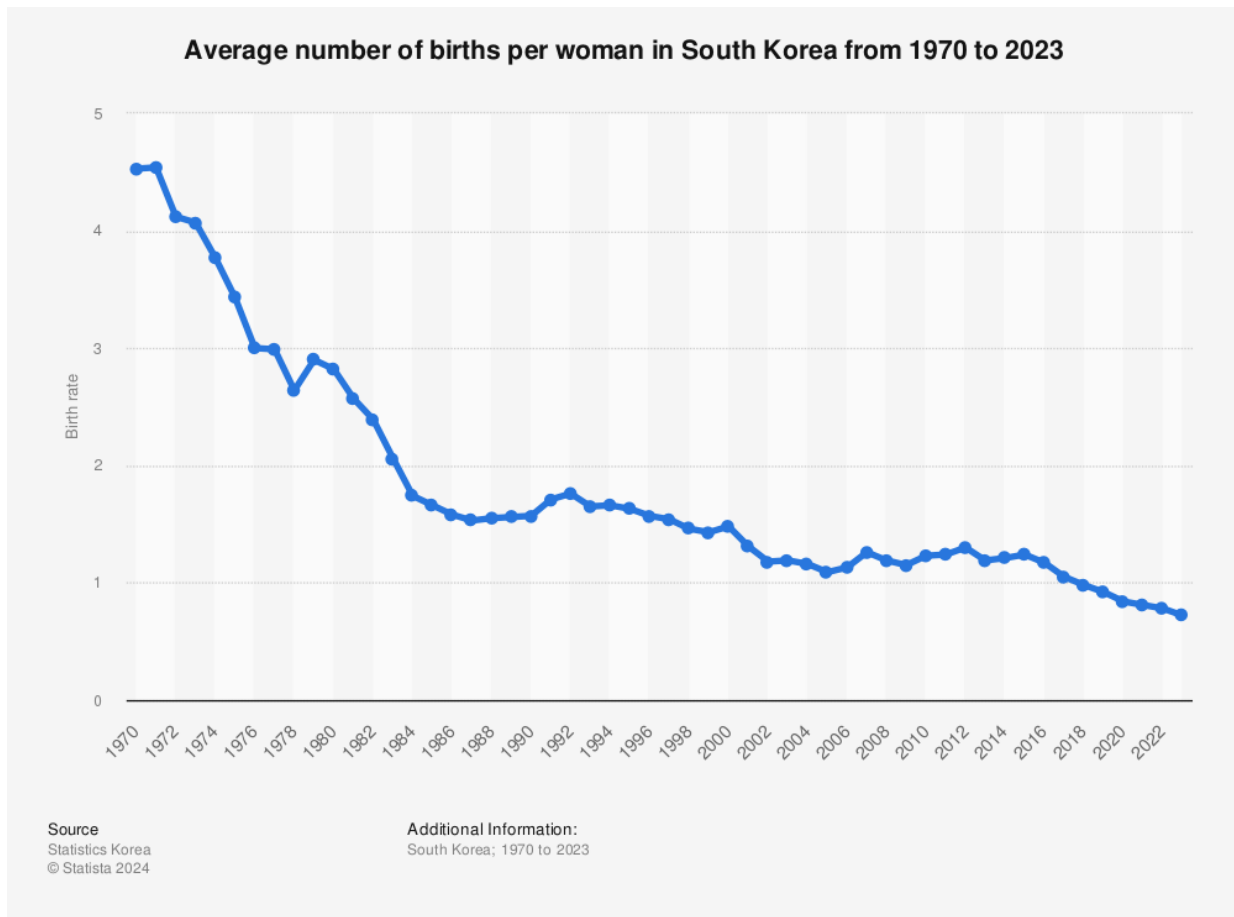
## E. Why does the disputed issue matter?

### Historical Background

South Korea was founded in 1948 after 30 years of Japanese **colonization** and US military occupation following the end of World War II. The country was already quite poor but the Korean War (1950-1953) left the country destitute. Largely rural, South Koreans were known to have large families due to high infant mortality rates and the need for laborers on family farms. However, South Korea underwent a period of **industrialization** between the 1960s and 1980s, under a series of military **dictatorships**. This period of industrialization was focused on boosting the nation's economy. A central part of this economic plan concerned population reduction. Rather than having many children, citizens were encouraged to minimize the size of their families, an ideology reinforced by popular slogans such as: "Sons or daughters, let's have two children and raise them well." Since the 1970s, South Koreans have had smaller families, often with only one or two children. The focus on smaller families has not changed even since the country entered the **Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD)** in 1997, with the birthrate dropping further since the early 2000s.



**Figure 5. Average Number of Births in South Korea from 1970 to 2023**



Statistics Korea. (2024).

### **Economic Background**

The aftermath of the Korean War left South Korea destitute as it was a primarily agricultural country with very little industry. The country recorded a mere USD 2.7 billion GDP in 1962. Successive military dictatorships focused on building the national economy and revolutionized the country's exports by focusing on the development of heavy industries such as steel production, ship building, and construction. Because of this development, the GDP rose to USD 230 billion in 1989. South Korea joined the OECD, cementing its place as a developed country. However, because its now-thriving economy, South Korea has become one of the most expensive countries to live in and raise children. For example, according to the OECD "Korea spends USD 14,113 annually per full-time equivalent student" across all levels of elementary to high school. This is higher than the OECD average of \$12,647, and "In 2022, Korea spent \$13,341 per student at primary and \$17,078 per student at secondary, compared to the OECD average of \$9,923 and \$11,400, respectively" (Source: OECD. *Korea: Education at a Glance*.

OECD iLibrary). For the past two decades, the increasing cost of housing and education has become a bigger and bigger concern among South Koreans, correlating to a shrinking birthrate. The South Korean government has been attempting to combat low birthrates since 2006, having spent around USD 270 billion on initiative to raise fertility rates to no avail. Things reached a dire low in 2018, when South Korea was the only OECD country with a birthrate below 1, a position they still hold. Despite the large amount of money that the government has spent trying to fix the problem, many view their approach as a negative solution, positing that spending large amounts of money on subsidies and other incentives is not a sustainable long-term solution. They also argue that these money-based solutions seem as if the government is simply “throwing money at the problem” without truly looking into the issues young people cite regarding their decision not to have children.

### **Social Background**

Traditionally, gender roles have been strongly delineated in South Korea. Women were only seen as wives and mothers while men were the primary breadwinners of the household. Men between the ages of 18 and 35 are required to serve a mandatory military service—varying in length between 18 and 21 months—adding stress to an already busy time of life for young men, when many are graduating college and becoming independent workers. Men are still seen as the heads of household and responsible for making money for their families once their wives quit their jobs to raise the children. From the 1960s onwards, education started to become more equal, with women increasingly attending college. However, a women’s education was thought only to shape them into wives and mothers who were more informed and capable, not to make them viable workers in the economy. In more recent decades, even though more women took jobs after college, their positions were largely considered temporary, and they were expected to leave their jobs and be married by sometime in their early 30s.

There has also been history of preference for male over female children. In traditional Confucianism, the primary religious philosophy followed in Korea during its pre-modern and early modern history, the family line continues through the male descendants, making male offspring more desirable. This led to many women acquiring sex-selective abortions and the country therefore facing a huge gender imbalance. For example, Statistics Korea, a government division responsible for recording census and statistical data about the population, recorded that there were 116.6 baby boys born for every 100 girls born in 1990. This was well above the natural, worldwide average of 105 boys to every 100 girls. The preference for boys over girls has faded in South Korea, and today’s birthrates have returned to normal, with 104.9 boys to 100 girls recorded in 2020. But the effects are still felt, as there are currently more adult men than women active in South Korea’s economy.

## F. What is the timeline of significant events that are related to the disputed issue or that describe its stages?

Figure 5. Timeline of Relevant Events in Modern South Korean History

1910-1945	Japanese colonization of the Korean Peninsula
1945-1948	The Korean peninsula is occupied by US and USSR forces, split at the 38 <sup>th</sup> parallel. North and South Korea are founded as separate <b>states</b>
1950-1953	Korean War between North and South Korea; a ceasefire is called but a treaty is not signed
1957	South Korea institutes a mandatory military conscription for males aged 18-35
1961-1987	South Korea is ruled under a series of military <b>dictators</b>
1987	South Korea holds its first <b>democratic</b> election
1953/1961-1997	South Korea undergoes “The Miracle on the Han River,” a period of rapid industrialization which transformed it from one of the poorest countries into one of the most developed countries in the world; the start date of this “miracle” is disputed
1997	South Korea joins the OECD, marking it as a highly developed nation.
1997-1999	South Korea experiences economic decline as a part of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, in which the Won (South Korean currency dropped sharply in value)
2006	The South Korean government begins efforts to curb declining birthrates.
2013	South Korea records the lowest birthrate in the world: 1.19 children per woman
2018-present	South Korea consistently records a below 1% birthrate, the only OECD country to do so and currently holds the spot of the world’s lowest birthrate, .78 in 2022.

Meadows, D. (2024).

**G. What short (6-to-10-minute) video can provide an overall understanding of the disputed issue?**

Video Title: South Korea's Crisis: It needs babies  
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6C9fHN-2dx4>  
Alternative Search: On YouTube, type in "South Korea crisis babies"  
Author(s): UPTIN  
Year: 2023  
Length: 8:08 minutes



**Note:** This video shows the creator interviewing many people, from both the younger and older generations, on the issue of falling birthrates. Members of the younger generation share their thoughts on marriage and raising children, talking about the reasons they probably won't have children. Members of the older generation talk about their concerns about the falling population and their opinions of the younger generation's refusal to have children. The video also makes comparisons between South Korea's current birthrate and the birthrates of other developed nations, such as the US, Japan, UK, and other European countries.

## H. What additional deliberations questions complement the essential question?

1. Are **reproductive** rights always personal or can they be concerns of the collective? Why?
2. Under what circumstances does the government have the right to intervene with individuals' reproductive rights if it pertains to the future of the country?
3. What happens if people start viewing reproduction purely as work to benefit the economy?
4. If the government views reproduction as work to benefit the economy, should the effort and work of parents be measured in comparison to regular workers? If so, how could parents' reproductive work be valued?

## I. What optional and supplementary resources might shape an understanding of the disputed issue?

### Parallel US example of the disputed issue:

- Google "American low birthrate"  
"In the US, the birth rate has been falling since the Great Recession, dropping almost 23% between 2007 and 2022. Today, the average American woman has about 1.6 children, down from three in 1950, and significantly below the "replacement rate" of 2.1 children needed to sustain a stable population." (Source: Population Connection.  
<https://populationconnection.org/article/you-cant-even-pay-people-to-have-more-kids/#:~:text=In%20the%20U.S.%2C%20the%20birth,to%20sustain%20a%20stable%20population>)

### Novels, short stories, poetry, documentaries, videos, etc.:

- Cho Nam-joo, *Kim Jiyoung, Born 1982* (2016; English translation by Jamie Chang)
- *Birthgap – Childless World PART 1* (2022). Available on YouTube.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6s8QlIGanA>. This documentary covers not just South Korea but the declining birthrates in 24 different countries, exploring the reasons people have for having fewer children and the global issues that accompany low birthrates.

### Websites that cover the disputed issue as a whole, with good reliability and validity:

- *South Korea has the lowest fertility rate in the world and that doesn't bode well for its economy.* Texas A&M College of Arts & Sciences. (2023).  
<https://artsci.tamu.edu/news/2023/06/south-korea-has-the-lowest-fertility-rate-in-the-world-and-that-doesnt-bode-well-for-its-economy.html>



- *In South Korea, world's lowest fertility rate plunges again in 2023.* Reuters. (2024). <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-fertility-rate-dropped-fresh-record-low-2023-2024-02-28/>

## J. What are some ways in which students might safely civically engage in response to this case study?

Find suggestions at:

- **Better World Info**—many different topics and ways to take action: <https://www.betterworld.info>
- **DoSomething**—has campaigns to join and challenges to take action: <https://www.dosomething.org/us>
- **Global Citizen**—offers petitions to sign on various global issues: <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/take-action/>
- **The Global Goals**—suggests ways to take action on the 17 UN Sustainability Goals: <https://www.globalgoals.org/take-action/>
- **United Nations: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**—"The Lazy Person's Guide to Saving the World": <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/takeaction/>

**MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES HANDOUTS FOLLOW ON NEXT PAGES\***

**\*THE FOLLOWING HANDOUTS ARE ONLY FOR STUDENT SMALL GROUP PRESENTATIONS\***

**\*NOTE: These are not to be handed out to the whole class, but to small groups after the class has learned about the case content.**

**INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY**  
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**PERSPECTIVE ONE\*:**

**South Korean Governmental System**

**\*This perspective description is being handed out to your team only.**

**NOTE:** This description is written from the perspective of the South Korean Governmental System.

**General Description:** The South Korean Governmental System encompasses the different levels of the government at the city, province, and national levels. At all levels, the governmental system is committed to providing strong leadership to its citizens and presenting a positive view of South Korea to the world. Having only recently instituted fair democratic elections in the early 1990s, transparency is paramount within the government, while corruption and perceived moral shortcomings are dealt with swiftly. Due to the devastating economic effects of the Korean War, the country has been focused on building and maintaining its economy, seeing rapid growth in the late twentieth century, with the country's GDP growing from USD 2.7 billion in 1962 to USD 230 billion in 1989. A currency crisis in the late 1990s further transformed the economy from a centralized, government-orientated model to what is now one of the largest market economies in the world. With these past hardships in mind, the various levels of South Korea's government are determined to ensure the economy's future stability and will do anything to encourage young people to create the next generation of workers and citizens.

**Values:** Equality, Stability, Results-Orientated

**Comments and Resources Supporting this Perspective:**

- Free matching making services for young singles: Since people complain that it is too hard to date or find a suitable partner for dating and marriage, certain local city governments have set up mass blind-dating events for people to find partners and raise positive views of marriage. They are well-attended and many people leave as "couples," pointing to the events' success.

**Resource:** *South Korean city turns to matchmaking to boost low birth rates.* Reuters. (2023). <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korean-city-turns-matchmaking-boost-low-birth-rates-2023-11-27/>





- Cutting commute times to free up extra time outside of work: Housing in Seoul is so expensive but the commute time from outlying cities is upwards of an hour via bus, as there are no major train routes into the city. When so much time is spent commuting, people feel as if they do not have time for dating, marriage, and childrearing. To combat this, the central government has instituted six new train lines to link Seoul and outlying cities by 2035, cutting commute time from 80 minutes via bus to 19 minutes via train, leaving people with more free time that can be devoted to creating marriages and raising children.

**Resource:** *South Korea launches high-speed train–To help improve country’s birth rate by cutting commute times.* Sky News. (2024). <https://news.sky.com/story/south-korea-launches-high-speed-train-to-help-improve-countrys-birth-rate-by-cutting-commuting-times-13103706>

- Cash payouts in relation to procreation and child rearing: Several regional and city governments have started offering cash payouts to citizens for various elements of the childbearing process. These measures involve giving monetary payouts at various stages of the child's life, giving full subsidies for a child's college education, and even paying for all or most of the cost of sterilization reversal surgeries for residents of the city or region.

**Resource:** *Regional governments roll out measures to boost birth rate.* The Korea Herald. (2023). <https://m.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20231220000834>

#### Comments and Resources Opposing this Perspective:

- High housing costs: Housing costs are extremely high in the country’s capital city Seoul, which is home to over half of the population. Many people are forced to rent due to their inability to purchase their own homes. This high cost of housing is often cited by young people as the reason they are foregoing marriage and children; yet, rather than find solutions to alleviate this major economic burden, the government has largely ignored it.

**Resource:** *Buying a home in Seoul costs a decade’s salary, and then some.* The Korea Herald. (2023). <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20231222000484>

- Short-term financial help: While the government has not been stingy in providing monetary assistance to citizens who have children, the focus has primarily been on "birth" rather than being comprehensive about the long-term cycle of raising a child. These payouts are only given to families for a short time while their children remain under a certain age, usually two years old, and are not available for children past that age.



**Resource:** *Paying for birth: Is it worth it?* Asia Society. (2023).

(<https://asiasociety.org/korea/kotex-issue-no6-paying-birth-it-worth-it>)

- High education costs: Parents in South Korea face some of the highest education costs in the world. The education industry is fueled mostly by the private sector, wherein students attend various “after school academies” for extra tutoring in subjects like math, English, and music. Rather than enacting policies to cut down on the reliance of private education, the government has announced an increase in college freshman quotas. This announcement has prompted more families to seek out and pay for private education services in an effort to boost their children’s resumes.

**Resource:** *Private education spending in S. Korea hits new record high.* The Korea Economic Daily. (2024).

<https://www.kedglobal.com/economy/newsView/ked202403150009>

**Primary Outcomes of Perspective:** While the younger generation cites many reasons for not having children, the governmental system at all levels is determined to do what it can to alleviate some of the worries and pressures they face. The government has shown that it is committed to standing beside its young people at every step of their journey into marriage and family. The government has also shown that it is not just willing to help monetarily but that it can and will help with other issues. Thus, the South Korean government hopes to see birthrates make a steady trend upwards due to their various programs.

**Secondary Consequences:** While the government in South Korea is enacting programs and reforms aimed at fixing the problem of low birthrates, many feel that their policies largely ignore the central issues that are cited for not having children. This shows that the government is not really listening to its citizens and is attempting to fix the issue their way. Events like mass blind dating have been seen as a waste of taxpayer money and the cash payouts for having children are criticized as simply “throwing money at the problem” that are not long-term sustainable solutions.

INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY  
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PERSPECTIVE TWO\*:

Young, Urban South Korean Males

**\*This perspective description is being handed out to your team only.**

**NOTE:** This description is written from the perspective of young, urban South Korean males.

**General Description:** This perspective represents a portion of the South Korean male population between the ages of 18 and 35. This range was chosen because the trend to forego marriage and children is dominant among those in their 20s and 30s, but also these are the years when men must complete their compulsory military service. From 1950 to 1953, the Korean peninsula was embroiled in civil war between North and South Korea. Although a ceasefire was announced in 1953, ending active fighting, no treaty was signed and the two countries are technically still at war more than 70 years later. Because of this, in 1957 the government ruled that every South Korean male between 18 and 35 must complete a compulsory military service for a period of roughly 18 months to 2 years. While compulsory, this service is increasingly viewed as disruptive to men during a period when they are navigating serious life changes such as graduating high school and college and entering the job market. The men represented by Perspective Two live in urban centers; indeed, most of the country's population is concentrated in the urban centers, where most of the jobs are. The South Korean job market is also very competitive and the drive to build competitive resumes begins in high school. Men are under extreme pressure as they have traditionally been the sole breadwinner for their families and face expectations to continue the family bloodline in accordance with traditional values.

**Values:** Self-reliance, Hard Work, Security

**Comments and Resources Supporting this Perspective:**

- High cost of childbearing: South Korea is one of the most expensive nations in which raise a family and most women quit their jobs after having a child, meaning that the financial burden falls to the men, which puts an additional strain on these employees. So, many men choose not to get married or have children to avoid this burden.

**Resource:** Korea is most expensive country to raise child: Study. *The Korea Times*.



(2023). [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/02/113\\_350152.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/02/113_350152.html)

- Poor marriage prospects: Due to a preference for boys over girls in previous decades, even up to the early years of this century, South Korea has a gender imbalance. As these imbalanced generations come of age, there are fewer women for of-age men to marry and thus, many cite this lack of women as a reason to forgo marriage and children.

**Resource:** *South Korea's gender imbalance is bad news for men—Outnumbering women, many face bleak marriage prospects.* The Conversation. (2024).

<https://theconversation.com/south-koreas-gender-imbalance-is-bad-news-for-men-outnumbering-women-many-face-bleak-marriage-prospects-217661>

- Single living is becoming more popular: Many in the younger generation are embracing single life, even into their 30s and 40s, when prior generations were married and raising families. Many big companies are increasingly accepting the younger generation's decision to forgo marriage and childbirth, contributing to a sense of broader societal acceptance.

**Resource:** *South Koreans' choice of staying single gains wider acceptance.* Nikkei Asia.

(2023). <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Society/South-Koreans-choice-of-staying-single-gains-wider-acceptance>

#### Comments and Resources Opposing this Perspective:

- Potential exemption from military service based on family size: Every male citizen must serve in the military, and many see this as an interruption to their normal lives. However, the government is considering a policy to exempt young men from military service should they get married and have three children before 30 years of age.

**Resource:** *South Korea muses a new military exemption: Serve your country by having more kids.* Time. (2023). <https://time.com/6265842/south-korea-birth-rate-military-service-exemption/>

- Company benefits for having children: In combination with the government's efforts, many South Korean companies are now offering bonuses to employees for each child they have, some valued at USD 75,000. Many of these companies are within male-dominated industries and corporations, thereby encouraging men to express their desires for children as much as women.

**Resource:** *South Korea's birth rate is so low, one company offers staff a \$75,000 incentive to have children.* CBS News. (2024). <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/south-korea-birth-rate-so-low-company-offers-75000-parenthood-incentive/>



- Marriage partners are available from outside Korea: While the pool of potential marriage partners inside South Korea is relatively low, there is an increasing number of foreign brides being brought to the country from Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam. This is an alternative solution for many men who cannot find partners within South Korea.

**Resource:** *For better or for worse? South Korean men seek brides in Vietnam.* France 24. (2024). <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/reporters/20240126-for-better-or-for-worse-south-korean-men-seek-brides-in-vietnam>

**Primary Outcomes of Perspectives:** The traditional roles of breadwinner and patriarch are becoming far less appealing to younger generations of South Korean men. While in past decades a man's joy was supposed to be derived from a stable job, economic security, and a family, the men of recent generations face pressure from a competitive society with high living costs. Combined with an imbalanced ratio of females-to-males due to the gender preference of previous decades, today's young men find fulfillment through living their own lives and enjoying the freedom of having no dependents or attachments.

**Secondary Consequences:** Due to the alarming decrease in children being born, both the government and cooperations have started to give out bonuses to employees who have children. These bonuses include monetary incentives and longer parental leave, so there is very little reason why men should not take advantage of the programs available to them. Further, despite the gender imbalance in South Korea among the native population, there is a steady trend of men taking foreign brides from Southeast Asia, who are both willing to marry and to have children. Thus, there are other avenues for men in South Korea seeking a suitable partner. Perhaps most importantly, the government has considered waiving military service for men under 30 who have three children, potentially ending this very disruptive time in a man's life.

## INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDY

### Falling Birthrates in South Korea

#### PERSPECTIVE THREE\*:

##### Young, Urban South Korean Females

**\*This perspective description is being handed out to your team only.**

**NOTE:** This description is written from the perspective of young, urban South Korean females.

**General Description:** This perspective represents a portion of the South Korean female population. These are women in their 20s and 30s, which are considered the prime decades for marriage. Yet, these women are increasingly rejecting marriage and childbirth. Historically, a woman was expected to be married by 30 and, soon after, become a full-time mother, giving up her previous job. However, many young women, much like their male counterparts, are finding their fulfillment in other major life milestones, such as furthering their education and entering the job market. Like men, women must also survive this hyper-competitive job market, yet they are often viewed as temporary workers—with the expectation that they will eventually quit their jobs to become mothers and wives. Because women have been viewed only as temporary workers, the wage gap between men and women has been quite high for the last several decades. Yet, professional women have been striving to call attention to this issue and change how they are treated within the workplace. This perspective is also limited to women who live in major cities within South Korea since this is where most of the population and major career opportunities are concentrated.

**Values:** Independence, Professionalism, Equality

#### Comments and Resources Supporting this Perspective:

- Career fulfillment: Many women are turning towards their careers to give them a sense of fulfillment, rather than marriage and a family. There is an increasing movement of women choosing to remain single and live alone in their 20s and 30s, a lifestyle that was in previous decades considered only a temporary situation before marriage. These women find their own self-fulfillment outside of traditional roles, leading to fewer women who bear children.

**Resource:** *Why South Korean women aren't having babies.* BBC News. (2024).



<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68402139>

- Women finding wider acceptance of the single life: Traditionally, women were expected to quit their jobs as they got married and became mothers around their early 30s. However, more and more South Korean women are forgoing marriage and embracing the single lifestyle during their 30s and 40s, periods that would have traditionally been marked as the peak of motherhood. This refusal to marry contributes to the now widely accepted trend that marriage is unnecessary.

**Resource:** *Happy alone: The young South Koreans embracing single life.* The Guardian. 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/05/happy-alone-the-young-south-koreans-embracing-single-life>

- Gender equality progressed compared to past decades: South Korea has been, and still is, one of the lowest-ranking OECD countries for gender equality. Traditionally, women were not encouraged to pursue education beyond high school, as they were expected to become mothers and wives. In recent decades, there has been great progress in equality regarding education and work. While South Korea's workplace equality is still severely lacking, there has been progress. If young women are to prioritize these traditional roles again, this progress might be challenged.

**Resource:** *Gender equality: Korea has come a long way, but there is still more work to do.* OECD. (2021). <https://www.oecd.org/country/korea/thematic-focus/gender-equality-korea-has-come-a-long-way-but-there-is-more-work-to-do-8bb81613/>

#### Comments and Resources Opposing this Perspective:

- Cash bonuses from companies for having children: Many South Korean companies are offering cash bonuses to their employees for each child they have. Although these companies tend to be in male-dominated industries and workplaces, these cash payouts are available for female employees at the same rate as the male employees.

**Resource:** *How much is a baby worth? A \$75,00 bonus, this Korean firm says.* The Washington Post. (2024). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/16/south-korea-birth-rate-fertility/>

- Government subsidies and housing benefits: The South Korean government is awarding cash payments to those who have children, as well as providing lower interest rates to parents of newborns who are looking to buy a home. However, the biggest change is the increased maximum rate of financial support for parents taking parental leave. While this assistance is available to both men and women, it could be seen as primarily aimed at women, who must take parental leave following the birth of their child. By



comparison, men do not take advantage of parental leave as frequently.

**Resource:** *Korea to expand baby bonuses, housing support to fight world's lowest fertility rate.* The Korea Times. (2024).

[https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/03/113\\_366067.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/03/113_366067.html)

**Primary Outcomes of Perspectives:** Once confined to the roles of wife and mother, today's South Korean woman is finding liberation and fulfillment through her rejection of traditional roles and in an embrace of the single, career-focused life. The career woman is gratified through her work and a social life with friends, rather than a family. The single women of this new generation are also using their position to call attention to the long-standing social inequalities between the sexes in South Korea, creating a better place to live and work.

**Secondary Consequences:** Traditionally, though with some exceptions, men have been the sole breadwinners after women quit their jobs to take care of children. This has created much stress on many families due to the high cost of living (including rent, groceries, and education) and the loss of the woman's income. However, thanks to many efforts by the government and companies, women are being rewarded financially for having children. This lessens the stress on many families and provides a way that a woman can still contribute financially to her family, giving her domestic labor meaning.