

Abstract

Paradigm Shift in Policy Responses to Low Birthrates (I): An Analysis of the Gendered Life Perspective and Policy Validation of Youth

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This study is based on a gender analysis of the life perspective of youth to present a new policy response paradigm for low birthrates corresponding to the youth's perspective. This study is the first half of a two-year research plan that deals with investigative studies and policy diagnoses on the life perspective of youth and their policy perceptions. The primary focus of this study can be summarized as:

First, the Presidential Committee on Aging Society and

Population Policy amended its third basic plan for low birthrates and an aging society by confirming a modified version of the plan in February 2019. An analysis of the discourse shows that the basic plan before its amendment claimed that an inadequate workforce (due to demographic changes) called for an increase in birthrates by individuals getting married and having children, thus achieving a total fertility rate needed for a healthy society. However, this discourse does not include the choices and wishes of women who bear the primary responsibility of giving birth to and raising children. Conversely, the post-amendment basic plan does not envision a simplistic life perspective that assumes employment, marriage, and childbirth, but instead accommodates more diverse life courses and seems to succeed in achieving a certain paradigm shift. There is still a limitation in its inability to escape demographic paradigms as the title of the plan is “Plan for Aging Society and Population.”

Second, through an analysis of social surveys, such as the National Statistics Office’s Population and Housing Census and Economically Active Population Survey, this study explored transformations that youths exhibit in labor market participation and family formation. The results showed that the employment rate of the youth in their 20s and 30s far exceeds the marriage life table among those in the same age group. In other words, while young people in their 20s and 30s may have a normal disposition toward work, there is a rising possibility that this generation’s disposition toward marriage is not normal. Also, the ratio of both young men and women who agree with traditional norms concerning marriage or the gender division of labor is significantly decreasing.

Third, this study conducted focus group interviews with 40 individuals in their 20s and 30s concerning youth. In the lives of

the youth who participated in the interview, “Myself” was the most important unit in employment, work experience, intimacy with partner, and family formation. The life course among this group primarily operated within an individualization framework. However, there were some differences between gender in expecting their own life stories that have “me-centered” perspective through the life stages. Among female participants, those who were preparing for employment said that employment was the most important item in their lives within the next ten years, and female workers exhibited significant interest in “financial independence and wealth formation.” Female participants took individualized work experience as a given and were acutely aware of the fact that existing family norms could be threatening elements to their lives. The majority of females demonstrated a demeanor that prioritized work above marriage, and they found it difficult to think about children even if they were to marry. Furthermore, most females considered themselves non-maritalism. Conversely, males exhibit individualized strategies that leans toward survival in economic life and surviving in a competitive job market. Unlike female participants in the same age group, male university students and graduates preparing for jobs think that it would be natural to get married and raise children following getting a stable job. Males did not have alternatives to the existing marriage and dating culture, and they held an ambiguous expectation that their current situation, in which they “want to date but things aren’t going well,” would improve if they were to succeed in employment and gaining stability in their lives.

Fourth, approximately 6,500 youths in their 20s and 30s were surveyed to verify life perspectives surrounding work and family.

The primary focus of the survey can be summarized as: Female youth, especially females in their 20s, consider a work-oriented life course to be more important than a family-focused life course. However, this life course is not easy to thoroughly realize in Korean society. When entering the labor market, females have low opportunities for career growth and a high chance of ending up with marginal jobs. If they have children, the divide between men and women in work standards will inevitably widen. Accordingly, females think that equal partnership is the important prerequisite for marriage and having children. Males, however, do not have such a proactive life course regarding equal relationships, and thus, the equal partnership females want may be difficult in reality to materialize. Young females feel gender discrimination and misogyny chronic in Korean society and recognize that the family-oriented life course in Korean society can threaten a labor life course. Accordingly, when compared to men of the same age, young females do not want to marry and have children, and this tendency is stronger among women in their 20s than those in their 30s. However, males are overwhelmingly in support of a model in which both males and females work instead of only males work in order to support their family. There is also increased agreement that males should participate in child-rearing and use paternity leave. Thus, before a gender-egalitarian transformation takes place in society at large, there is a significant possibility that females will not easily change their minds around childbirth. One could say that individuals in the new generation have the task of creating equal partnerships. Social policies for this new generation are faced with the task of creating a political, normative foundation on which a labor-oriented life course can be realized.

Based on this discussion, this study presents the following policy

directions in consideration of the quality of life and gender equality. First, there is a need for a transformation from the male breadwinner model to a model in which both males and females work and care for the family. Second, we must reform policy directions on which the simplistic life course of employment leading to marriage and childbirth is based, and allow various partnerships and intimacy to receive equal treatment. Third, we must recognize the danger of policy responses to childbirth that look at female bodies as the belly to produce children. Fourth, there is a need to transform policy directions so that support is given to families when the first child is born, instead of giving support only after a second child is born.