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Strategies for Responding to Low Fertility from the Perspective of Gender Equality: A Comparative Analysis of South Korea and Japan

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I . Research background and purpose

- While a number of previous studies designed to identify causes of low national fertility rates have noted the trend toward delayed marriage or non-marriage, insufficient attention has been paid to the recent changes in family structures also underlying this trend.
- Recent related studies are increasingly pointing to gender roles and gender relations, highlighting how the rebounding birthrates in many Western countries have a positive association with greater gender equality in the labor market and family. They point out that social equilibrium can collapse if the family system, family relations, and other social systems fail to evolve in accordance with shifting perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors among women. According to the diffusion theory applied in these studies, more pervasive gender egalitarianism means a greater number of individuals embracing

gender equality, which can affect attitudes toward childbirth (McDonald, 2000; Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015; Arpino, Esping-Andersen & Pessin, 2015). Likewise, in a study on fertility intentions among men, Billingsley and Ferrarini (2014) suggest that men's fertility intentions are influenced by the correlations and combined effects of earner role, cost, harmony, and caregiver role.

- Gender issues in the labor market, including the gender gap and gender wage gap, limit women's status in the labor market and compound career disruption among women. Facing this reality, many women choose work over marriage and family, leading in turn to low fertility.
- The purpose of this research is to compare attitudes and policy responses toward family, work, and low fertility in South Korea and Japan in order to suggest from the perspective of gender equality a direction for response strategies for low fertility and a pertinent policy agenda. Relative to South Korea, Japan manifests both similar and distinctive characteristics in terms of low fertility, gender issues, and familial changes, and has implemented a wide range of low-fertility policy responses since the 1990s.
- In this study, we have conducted a comparison of relevant institutions between the two countries; a survey of perspectives on family, work, and life among Koreans and Japanese in their 20s through 40s; focus group interviews with Koreans and Japanese in their 30s; and an analysis of secondary statistical data.

II . Comparison of Korean and Japanese institutions

- South Korea has established five-year Basic Plans on Low Fertility and an Aging Society since 2005, with the third set of basic plans currently under implementation. Aiming for a target birthrate of 1.8 births per woman, Japan has released its Plan for Dynamic Engagement of All Citizens (2016) and prioritized the country's declining birthrate as a key point on the national agenda. This chapter reviews relevant policies implemented in both countries and discusses issues and necessary changes from the perspective of gender equality.
- For their responses to their low birth rates, both countries started from childcare policy. The policies implemented to date have been primarily focused on support for childcare: South Korea has worked to expand its childcare subsidy programs and Japan has pursued a project to shorten waiting lists for nursery admission, known as the Zero-child Waiting List project.
- Regarding changing families, however, the scope and content of change embraced by the two governments show stark differences. While it could be argued that the South Korean government has stopped at simply being declarative, it did proactively embrace diverse family types in its third Basic Plan on Low Fertility and an Aging Society and included in its policy agenda the issues of unmarried single mothers, cohabitation without marriage, and unmarried parents. In contrast, Japan has yet to start a discussion on familial changes and diverse lifestyles.

- Regarding women's employment, each country lacks awareness, let alone policies, in relation to women's roles as economic actors. In its first through third Basic Plans on Low Fertility and Aging Society, South Korea approached women's labor as a means to tap into a latent labor force, but failed to provide support for women's sustained employment and career continuity. Furthermore, women's employment policies were limited to support for their re-entry into the labor market after experiencing career disruptions. In the case of Japan, the women's employment rate rose with the positive economy driven by so-called "Abenomics." The quality of women's employment remained low, however, with a great number of women working in part-time and/or irregular jobs. It has been argued that women were simply mobilized as part of the government's push for economic growth (Osawa, 2014: 52-53; Shin, 2017). Japan's social security and tax systems limit active economic participation by women since they are based on the male breadwinner model and assume women to be supplementary income earners.
- Japan has long emphasized improving the work environment as a major policy issue and engaged in active promotional efforts through the media and in other campaigns. Although there have been efforts to encourage men's participation in childcare, such as through the Ikumen Project of the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, changes in the workplace have been slow to follow.
- Gender role division of care duties has not been considered an important policy area in either country. Korean and Japanese men respectively spend roughly one-fifth and one-sixth of the time on care duties compared to their female counterparts. Rather than aiming for changes in gender relations within the family, Japan

appears to be returning to the traditional familism-based care by stressing support for three-generation cohabitation.

III. Survey on family, work, and perspective on life among those in their 20s through 40s (1): Findings

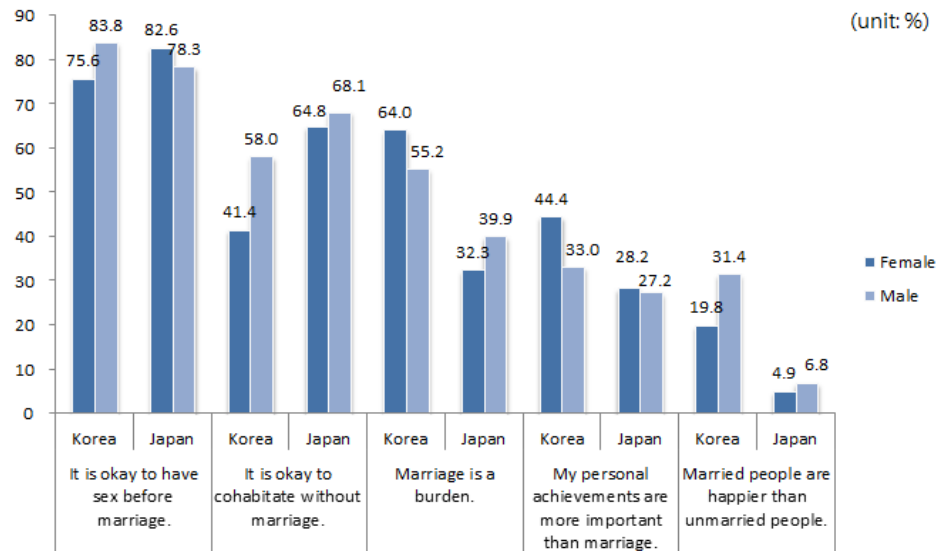
- A survey of men and women in the 25-44 age bracket living in Seoul(N=1,000) and Tokyo (N=1,000)¹⁾ was conducted in order to illuminate their perceptions on family values and gender roles, attitudes toward work and life, and beliefs about work-life balance and parenting, as well as to draw related policy implications. Major findings of the survey are as follows.

1. Perceptions on family values and gender roles

- (Marriage and parenting) A greater number of Koreans showed disagreement with conventional marriage compared to their Japanese peers, with 52.6% of Korean respondents considering marriage to be optional compared to 55.4% among Japanese respondents. As to becoming a parent, the Koreans were more positive than were the Japanese (the proportion of those who considered having a child not to be optional was 19.9% among Koreans and 7.4% among the Japanese, while that of those who believed it to be optional was 41.1% and 45.3%, respectively).

1) A multi-layer proportional allocation sampling by gender, age, and marital status was used for the selection of the survey sample. Thus, the work status of our sample may not be representative of the population and results should be interpreted with appropriate caution.

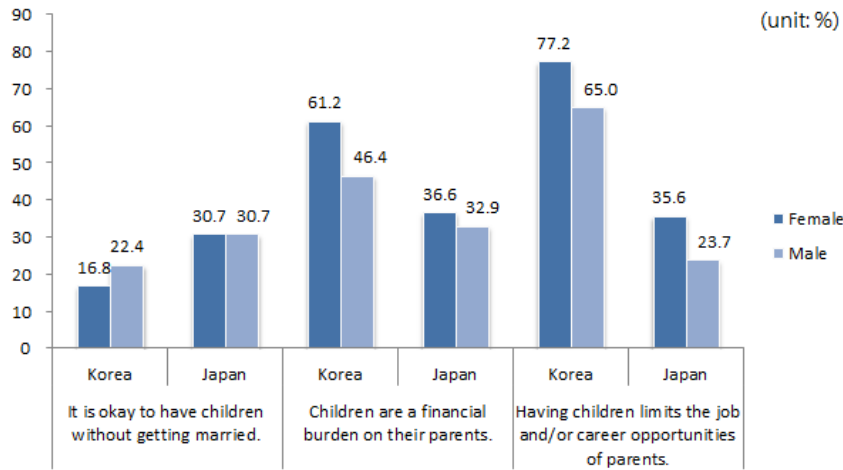
- (Marriage intention among unmarried respondents) The proportion of Korean respondents who plan to eventually marry was significantly greater than was that of their Japanese counterparts: among the unmarried Koreans, 44.2% (16.0% for the Japanese) were planning to someday marry while 17.0% (35.9% for the Japanese) had no such plan. The proportion was lower among the unemployed, temporary workers, and day laborers compared to among regular workers and self-employed/unpaid workers.
- (Marriage) For the statements “Marriage is a burden,” “Personal achievement is more important than marriage,” and “Married people are happier than unmarried people,” the level of agreement (Strongly agree and Agree) was greater among the Koreans than among the Japanese. In particular, women more than men in South Korea but men more than women in Japan tended to agree to the statement that marriage is a burden. The statement “I want to be a full-time housewife” was agreed with less among Korean women (18.8%) than among their Japanese peers (27.4%).



Note: The figures represent the combined values of “Agree” and “Strongly agree”.

[Figure 1] Perceptions of marriage: Cross-national and gender comparisons

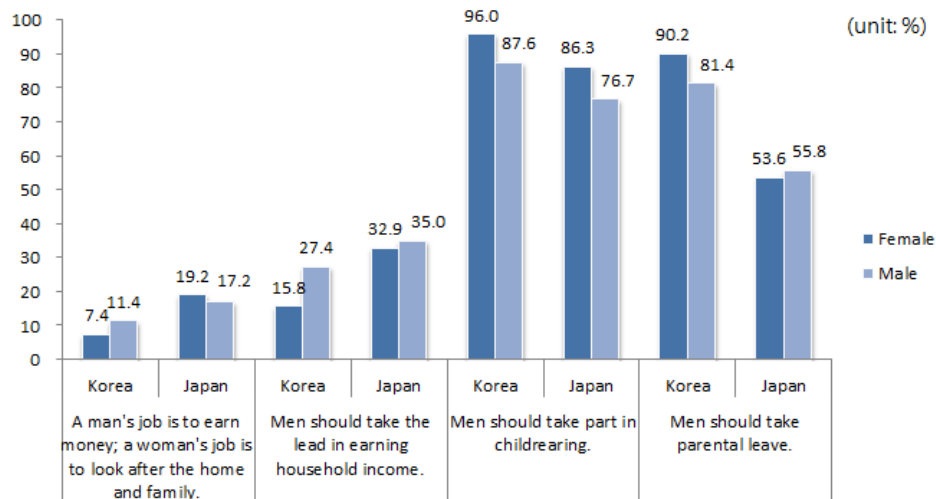
- (Parenting) As to the statements “Children are a financial burden to their parents” and “Having children limits the career opportunities of parents,” the level of agreement was significantly greater among Korean and all female respondents compared to their respective counterparts. Despite the ongoing expansion of childcare support policies in both countries, this response indicates that childcare support is insufficient, calling for a need to properly align and coordinate various childcare support policies.



Note: The figures represent the combined values of “Agree” and “Strongly agree”.

[Figure 2] Perceptions of parenting: Cross-national and gender comparisons

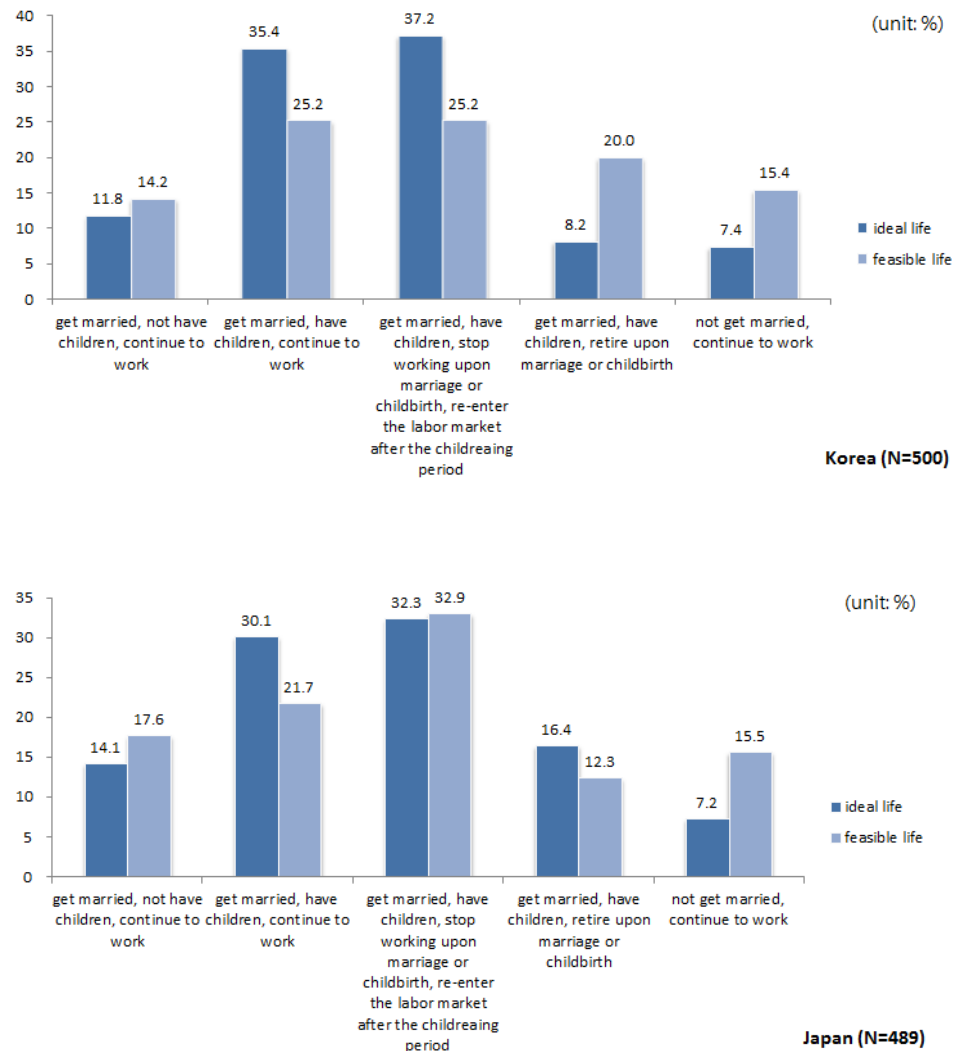
- (The male breadwinner model and men’s participation in childcare)
The level of agreement with the male breadwinner model was significantly lower among the Koreans than among the Japanese. Regarding the need for men to participate in childcare, Korean respondents agreed more than did their Japanese peers. In both countries, the level of agreement was significantly greater among women than among men.



Note: The figures represent the combined values of “Agree” and “Strongly agree”.

[Figure 3] Attitudes toward gender roles: Cross-national and gender comparisons

- (Marriage, parenting, and work) For this category, we asked female respondents about their ideal and their actual lifestyles. In both countries, women preferred either “Have children after marriage, stop working upon marriage or childbirth to raise children, and then re-enter the labor market” or “Have children and continue working after marriage.” When asked about a realistically plausible life course, a significant number of Korean women pointed to “Have children after marriage and quit working permanently upon marriage or childbirth” or “Continue working without getting married.” These responses indicate the gap between the ideal and reality in Korean women’s perceptions of work and family life.



[Figure 4] Women's work and marriage: Ideal vs. feasible life

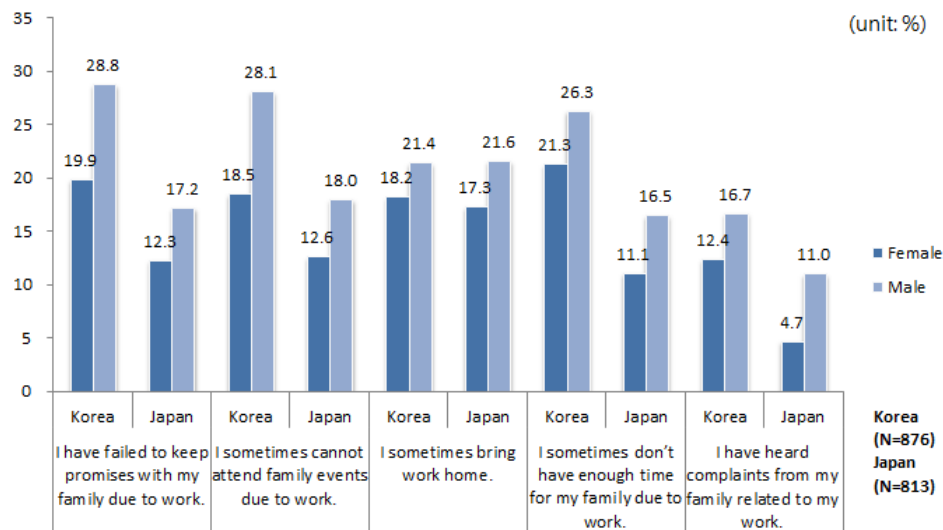
- Asked about what they want from a current or future spouse/partner in terms of marriage and work, male respondents in both countries preferred their spouses or partners to participate in economic activities: 42.0% of Korean men and 39.9% of Japanese men chose “Have children after marriage and continue working” while 38.2%

of Korean men and 36.8% of Japanese men wanted their partners to “have children after marriage, stop working upon marriage or childbirth to raise children, and then return to work”.

2. Attitudes toward work and life

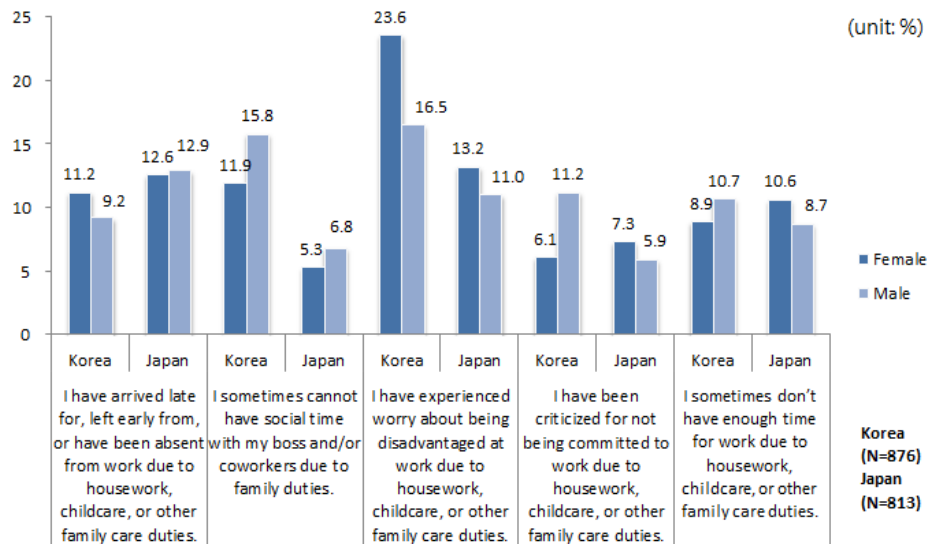
- (Economic activities) With respect to work status, men compared to women and respondents with higher monthly income were more likely to report being regular employees. In terms of work hours, 45.8% of the Koreans and 31.8% of the Japanese reported working over 40 hours per week. In both countries, more men than women stated that they were working over 40 hours.
- (Satisfaction with work) The overall level of satisfaction with work was measured among those who were engaged in economic activities at the time of the survey. In both countries, “Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied” was the most common answer. The level of dissatisfaction (Very unsatisfied and Unsatisfied) was greater among the Japanese (26.9%) than among the Koreans (16.7%). Japanese respondents were also less satisfied with their wages and the content of their work compared to their Korean counterparts.
- (Conflict between work and family life) On eight out of ten related statements, a greater proportion of Korean respondents than Japanese answered that they had experienced work-family life conflict (Strongly agree and Agree). The two other statements were “I am sometimes late for, leave early from, or miss work due to housework, childcare, and/or other family care duties” and “I sometimes bring work home.” In both countries, the number of those who experienced family conflict due to their work life was greater

among men than among women (Strongly agree and Agree). Meanwhile, the experience of being late for/leaving early from/being absent from work or feeling worried about being disadvantaged at work due to childcare or other familial care duties was more common among women (Strongly agree and Agree). All in all, both male and female respondents experienced a significant level of conflict between their work life and family life. This underlines the need to provide measures that guarantee people's rights to both a family life and economic participation by expanding policies on work-life balance and promoting an equal division of roles within the family.



Note: The numbers represent the combined values of “Agree” and “Strongly agree.”

[Figure 5] Experience of conflict between work and family life (work → family life): Cross-national and gender comparisons

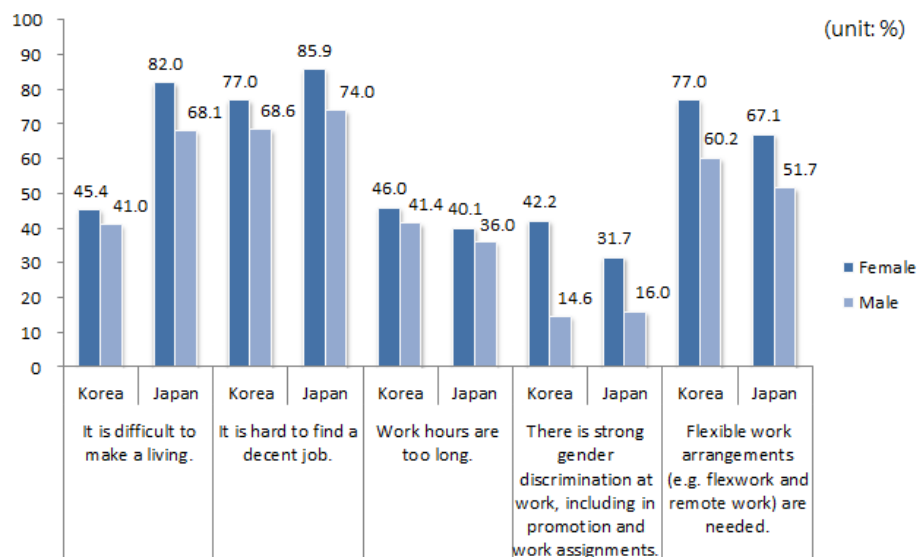


Note: The figures represent the combined values of “Agree” and “Strongly agree.”

[Figure 6] Experience of conflict between work and family life (family life → work): Cross-national and gender comparisons

- (Prioritizing between work and personal life) While the response “Work and family life are about the same priority” was more common among the Koreans (47.4%), 44.1% of the Japanese said that they prioritize their personal life. In both countries, the proportion of those who prioritize work (Mostly and Generally) was greater among men than among women.
- (Overall view of present life) The level of agreement to the statements “It is difficult to make a living” and “It is hard to find a decent job” (Strongly agree and Agree) was greater among the Japanese than among the Koreans. Meanwhile, the Koreans tended to agree more to the statements “Work hours are too long,” “There is strong gender discrimination at work, including in promotion and

work assignments,” and “Flexible work arrangements are needed.” In both countries, agreement to the statements “It is difficult to make a living” and “It is hard to find a decent job” (Strongly agree and Agree) was greater among women and non-regular workers compared to their respective counterparts. Furthermore, agreement to the statements “There is strong gender discrimination at work, including in promotion and work assignments” and “Flexible work arrangements are needed” (Strongly agree and Agree) was greater in both countries among women than among men.



Note: The figures represent the combined values of “Agree” and “Strongly agree”.

[Figure 7] Overall view of present life: Cross-national and gender comparisons

○ (Anxiety about the future) In both countries, about half of the respondents expressed anxiety about their financial situation,

especially in relation to life after retirement (e.g., insufficient preparation for retirement, lack of care provision in old age, and care responsibilities for aged parents). In both South Korea and Japan, women expressed greater anxiety than did men about the potential for unemployment and the ensuing financial difficulties, their post-retirement financial situation, lack of care in old age, possible familial burden due to personal geriatric illnesses, and care responsibilities for aged parents.

- (Childcare and child education) The level of concern about the increasing burden of childcare and the cost of private education for teenage children was greater among the Koreans than among the Japanese (Very concerned and Concerned). In terms of gender, the concern was greater among women in both countries. This finding shows that South Koreans in their 20s through 40s, especially women, feel a significant burden in multiple regards ranging from the formation and maintenance of a family to their financial situations, familial care duties, and post-retirement life.

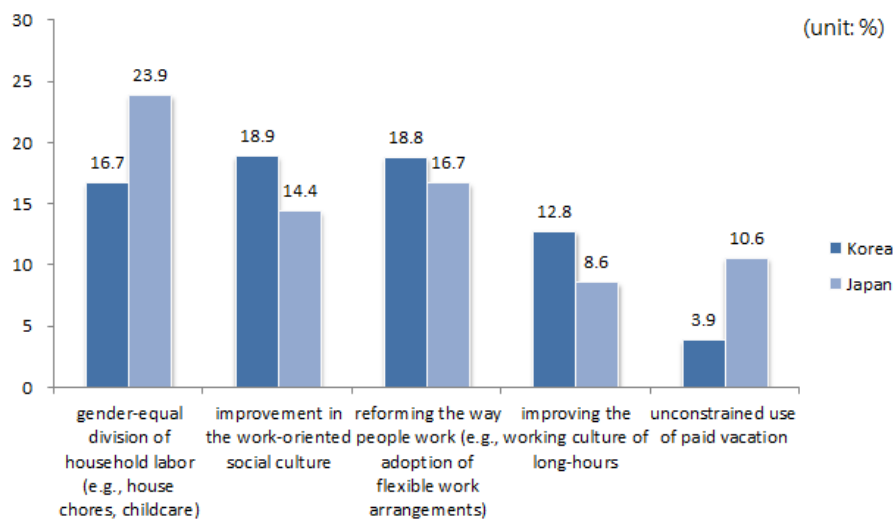
3. Work-life balance and low fertility

- (Satisfaction with family life and personal time) Japanese respondents were less satisfied with their family life compared to their Korean peers (Koreans: 10.5%; Japanese: 15.8%); and the Koreans were less satisfied with their amount of personal time than were the Japanese (Koreans: 37.2%; Japanese: 25.6%).
- (Satisfaction with work) “Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied” was the most common answer in both countries. The proportion of those unsatisfied (Very unsatisfied and Unsatisfied) was 17.2% in South

Korea and 20.4% in Japan. As to the reason for their dissatisfaction, “Low wages” (Koreans: 22.1%; Japanese: 39.8%) was the most common response in both countries. Among other major reasons were “Long work hours” (24.7%) and “Heavy workload” (18.2%) for Koreans and “Not interested in work” (18.3%) and “Difficult interpersonal relations at work” (10.8%) for the Japanese.

- (Satisfaction with family life) Regarding why they are unsatisfied with family life, respondents in both countries pointed to “Lack of time to get together as a family” (Koreans: 25.5%; Japanese: 23.6%) and “Financial instability” (Koreans: 27.7%; Japanese: 22.2%). Other major responses included “Different interests and values among family members” among Koreans (23.4%) and “Because it restricts personal freedom” among the Japanese (16.7%).
- (Satisfaction with personal time) In the case of Japan, male respondents were more unsatisfied with their amount of personal time than were their female counterparts (Very unsatisfied and Unsatisfied). Common reasons for dissatisfaction in the two countries included “Familial care duties” (Koreans: 33.1%; Japanese: 22.2%) and “Lack of money” (Koreans: 21.7%; Japanese: 30.8%). Suggesting the need to address the problem of long work hours, the responses “Long work hours” and “Too much work” were respectively significant among the Koreans (24.7%) and the Japanese (17.9%).
- (Work-family life balance) The proportion of those who reported poor work-life balance (Very poor and Poor) was 21.7% among the Koreans and 10.2% among the Japanese. When asked what was most needed for achieving work-life balance, people in both countries selected gender equality-based division of roles within the family (South Koreans: 16.7%; Japanese: 23.9%), changing the

work-oriented culture in the society (South Koreans: 18.9%; Japanese: 14.4%), and reforming the work culture (South Koreans: 18.8%; Japanese: 16.7%).

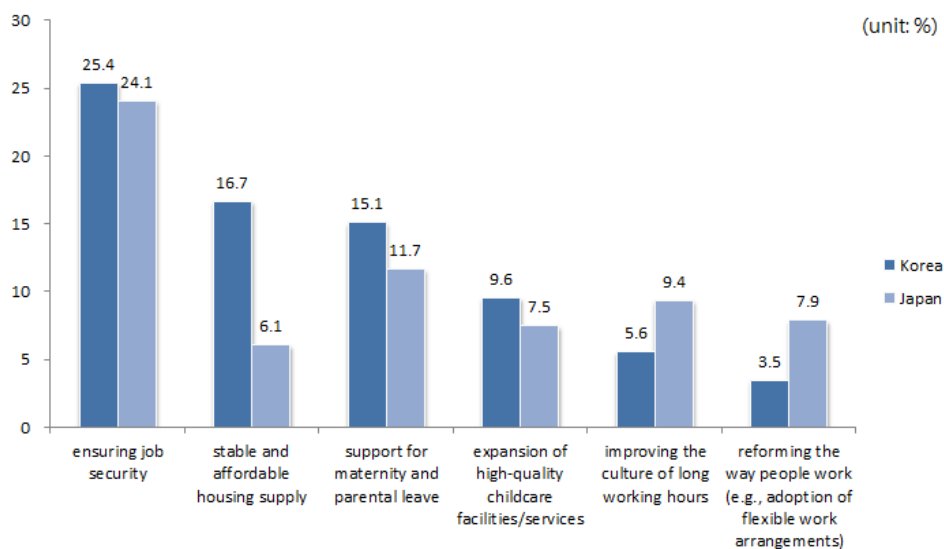


[Figure 8] Measure to support work-life balance (1st rank, top 5 responses)

- (Perception of the gravity of the country's low fertility) Eighty-four point eight percent of the Koreans and 78.7% of the Japanese believed low fertility to be a serious issue (Very serious and Somewhat serious). Regarding the relevance of low fertility to their personal life, the response "It is relevant" was most common in both countries (South Koreans: 62.2%; Japanese: 62.4%). In the case of Japan, however, "Don't know" was selected by 14.3% of respondents.
- (Causes of low fertility) In both countries, economic instability was the most common answer in this regard (South Koreans: 24.3%; Japanese: 28.0%), followed in South Korea by financial burden of

childcare and education (17.7%), increasing preference for delayed marriage and non-marriage (12.6%), and difficulty in achieving work-life balance (9.1%). In Japan, the increasing preference for delayed marriage and non-marriage (22.7%) and difficulty in achieving work-life balance (11.6%) were reported.

- (Social conditions needed to resolve the issue of low fertility) In both countries, job stability was the first choice (South Koreans: 25.4%; Japanese: 24.1%), followed in South Korea by a stable supply of and support for housing (16.7%) and support for maternity and parental leave (15.1%). In Japan, the next most common responses were support for maternity and parental leave (11.7%) and changing the culture of long working hours (9.4%).



[Figure 9] Measures to address the low fertility issue (1st rank, top 6 responses)

- The findings of the survey indicate that it is not a simple matter to identify solutions to low fertility without providing a new vision

of the future by making fundamental changes in the labor market, establishing gender equality-based policies on work-life balance designed to facilitate changes in gender relations, expanding gender equality, and strengthening the social security system.

IV. Perspectives on family, work, and life among those in their 20s through 40s in South Korea and Japan (2): Findings from the focus group interviews

- Focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 28 men and women in their 30s who live in Seoul or Tokyo. Major findings are as follows.
- In terms of their perspective on family, Koreans in their 30s, especially women, preferred focusing on their own lives over marriage. To the contrary, Japanese women were more likely to agree with the idea of marriage rather than outright object to it. Interviewees from both countries valued marriage by choice and held relatively open attitudes toward different types of arrangements between partners. Along with this, an important obstacle to choosing marriage for Korean women was the patriarchal family relations and culture they would face after marriage.
- Regarding the child-rearing environment, a number of issues were pointed out, including refusal to endorse the notion of a mother being devoted exclusively to child-rearing, anxiety over excessively competitive education, the low likelihood of class mobility through education, and environmental problems.

- When it comes to work and personal life, those in their 30s from both countries showed an unyielding preference for work. They believed that work is more important than marriage and hoped that work can be something they can do throughout their lives. However, the female Japanese interviewees expressed that they would be willing to live as a full-time housewife as long as a secure income was guaranteed through marriage.
- Koreans in their 30s showed a strong inclination toward stable jobs. In particular, men believed that a stable job is a prerequisite for marriage and expressed a strong opposition to long work hours. Japanese interviewees stated that their job provides them with an average level of satisfaction but insufficient income.
- Those in their 30s feel a high degree of anxiety over the future along with fatigue and skepticism about their current life. Korean interviewees had concerns about financial insecurity in the present and future due to unstable jobs and insufficient income. They expressed a strong dissatisfaction with their current lifestyle that prevents them from fully enjoying consumption.
- Lastly, interviewees tended to consider the issue of low fertility to be irrelevant to them personally. Both Korean and Japanese interviewees pointed out that their governments have yet to come up with policies by which people feel sufficiently supported. The strong reported need for policy support was translated into a need for work-life balance. For them, leaving work on time with no overtime work demands was more important than a small wage increase. They described a strong need for stable housing as well.

V. Determinants of happiness among married Korean and Japanese women

- Determinants of happiness were identified for married women in the 30-49 age bracket in the two countries using raw data from the Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Families(KLoWF) conducted by the Korean Women's Development Institute and from the Japan Household Panel Survey(JHPS)/Keio Household Panel Survey(KHPS) by Keio University in Japan.

〈Table 1〉 Variables for the analysis of the determinants of happiness among Korean and Japanese married women

Category		Operational definition	Notes
target group		married women in the 30-49 age bracket	
dependent variable	happiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Korean survey: Very unhappy - Very happy (1-10) • Japanese survey: Having no feeling of happiness at all - Having a feeling of complete happiness (0-10) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Korean survey: married women • Japanese survey: all respondents
independent variables	age	30-34, 35-39, 40-44, and 45-49 years of age	
	education	middle school education or below, high school education, college education, and university education or higher	
	employment status	employed and unemployed	
	employment type	regular, irregular, and non-paid employment	
	children	number of children	
	frequency of housework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Korean survey: Never - Almost daily (1-6) • Japanese survey: Never - Almost daily (1-5) 	standardized into a 5-point scale
	annual income	household income before tax	
	financial (household income) satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Korean survey: Deeply struggling - Very affluent (1-5) • Japanese survey: Unsatisfied - Satisfied (0-10) 	
	health status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Korean survey: Very poor - Very good (1-5) • Japanese survey: Bad - Good (1-5) 	

Data sources: The 2016 KLoWF and the 2016 KHPS/JHPS

- The basic statistics used for the analysis are as follows. Among married Korean women with jobs, regular workers amounted to 33.1% (471 persons), irregular workers 34.6% (492 persons), and non-paid workers 32.2% (458 persons). Among married Japanese women with jobs, regular workers constituted 24.4% (66 persons), irregular workers 64.1% (173 persons), and non-paid workers 10.0% (27 persons). In this analysis, the Japanese group features roughly twice the number of irregular workers compared to the South Korean group, but the South Koreans included three times more non-paid workers compared to the Japanese. The average number of children per family was 2.06 among the Koreans and 1.88 among the Japanese. For the frequency of housework participation as measured on a 5-point scale, it marked 4.31 for women and 2.03 for their husbands among Koreans, and 4.98 for women and 3.10 for their husbands among Japanese. According to the two surveys, men's participation in housework increased in both countries when their wives worked. The happiness score, which was measured on a 10-point scale, was 6.99 for Korean women and 6.67 for their Japanese peers.
- According to this analysis of determinants of happiness among married employed women, regular and non-paid workers were significantly happier than were irregular workers in the case of Koreans. There was no significant difference in this regard among the Japanese survey participants. Number of children showed a negative impact on happiness level among Japanese women, but no significant impact was apparent among their Korean counterparts. In both countries, the level of happiness went up among both employed married women and all married women when husbands' housework participation increased.

VI. Conclusions and policy implications

○ Guaranteeing social citizenship

- Improving quality of life as social citizens: Governmental policy on low fertility should be rooted in a sound social security system. It is necessary to strengthen the social security system in order to allow the fulfilment of people's basic needs as social citizens and, subsequently, to support family formation and child-rearing on the basis of gender equality.
- Securing stable employment through improved employment conditions: The rights of social citizens should be guaranteed by improving employment conditions and securing stable employment. In particular, stable employment for women as well as for men would mean that the responsibility for sustaining a household's livelihood should be shared between men and women and a sufficient lifestyle should be guaranteed for all.

○ Spreading a new family culture

- Gender equality-based division of roles within the family: In line with the growing call for a gender equality-based division of care duties rooted in a reconstruction of gender roles, it is necessary to transform corporate culture and raise social awareness so as to facilitate men's more active participation in childcare. A new model for gender roles must be constructed in which men and women participate equally in both work and care.
- Expansion of gender-equal family culture: Efforts are needed to abolish the long-standing practice of patriarchal family relations and to reconstruct family ties. The division of roles and responsibilities

for childcare and housework should be rearranged in a way that eases the burden on women as sole care providers and that establishes a shared care system between men and women.

- Development of a family equality index: A family equality index needs to be developed in order to accurately assess the degree of gender equality within family relations and the culture and to help identify clear policy goals and targets.
- Strengthening social protection for birth: When it comes to birth, not only are the rights of the parents important, but also those of the child. Protection and support for all births should be enhanced so that children can be born and raised in a secure environment.

○ Reducing the gender gap in the labor market

- Support for the continuation of women's careers: While previous and existing policies have focused on reentry into the labor market by women suffering career disruptions, it is more important to prevent such career disruptions and help women to sustain their careers. In this regard, the continuation of women's careers during the childbirth and childcare phase should become a key element of the policy agenda.
- Guaranteeing family time by addressing long working hours.

○ Enhancing the continuance of care

- Equal division of care duties within the family: Responsibilities and roles regarding family care duties should be socialized to accompany efforts to change family gender roles. A dual-earner dual-carer model should be established through gender equality-based parenting, work-life balance, and labor market reform.

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