

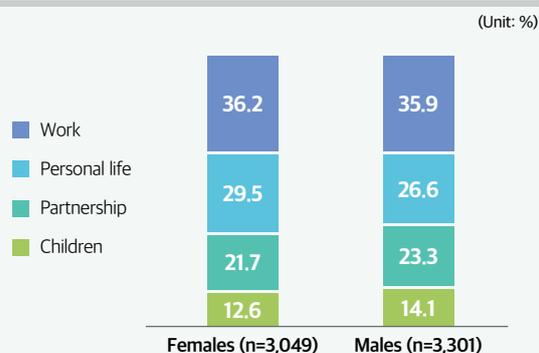
Research Title Paradigm Shift in Policy Responses to Low Birthrates (I): An Analysis of the Gendered Life Perspective and Policy Validation of Youth
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Gender Differences in the Life Perspective of Youth, and the Root Causes of Low Birthrates

Abstract

- The present study conducts gender analyses of the life perspective of youth to present a new policy paradigm addressing low birthrates by taking into account youth's perspectives.
- The results of the study suggested that young women no longer believe that the marriage institution can act as the foundation for their survival throughout their lives. Young women therefore plan for a 'work-oriented life' to 'survive on an individual basis'. For them, marriage and having children are dangerous events that can threaten their survival as workers. Thus, young women perceive that they can have children only if their partners actively share the risk. Young men also pursue a model in which men and women both engage in work and care amid unstable living conditions.
- In light of such perceptions of life perspectives among youths, relevant policy paradigms need to direct their focus on 'the survival on an individual basis and the balance in life'. Relevant social systems also require a reform to ensure that the 'work-oriented life' of young women are implemented throughout their entire life cycle, and to respond to young men's voices seeking 'the balance in life'. It is time to reflect on the paradox that 'families' can recover when a society is redesigned around the unit of 'individuals'.

Perceptions of 'the importance of life tasks for youth' among males and females in their 20s and 30s



Source: Survey on the perceptions of life perspective for youths in their 20s-30s

Top 3 'prerequisites for having children' among males and females in their 20s and 30s

Rank	Females	males
1	'Partner's' active 'participation in child-rearing'	Ability to pass on a 'better life than my own' to my children
2	Fair 'sharing of housework' with my 'partner'	'My' 'financial preparedness'
3	'Partner's' access to 'maternity/paternity leave, childcare leave' from work	'My' access to 'a stable job'

Note: The list above includes the items that gained the highest percentages of agreement (agree + extremely agree) among 19 response items such as: my financial preparedness, stable job, health, maternity/paternity leave and childcare leave, working hours; partner's financial preparedness, stable job, health, maternity/paternity leave and childcare leave, working hours; relationship with my partner; sharing of housework with my partner; partner's participation in child-rearing; access to reliable childcare centers; less competitive education systems; stable housing; child benefit payments; childbirth grants, etc.
 Source: Survey on the perceptions of life perspective for youths in their 20s-30s

1. A need to analyze the life perspective of youth in the age of low birthrates

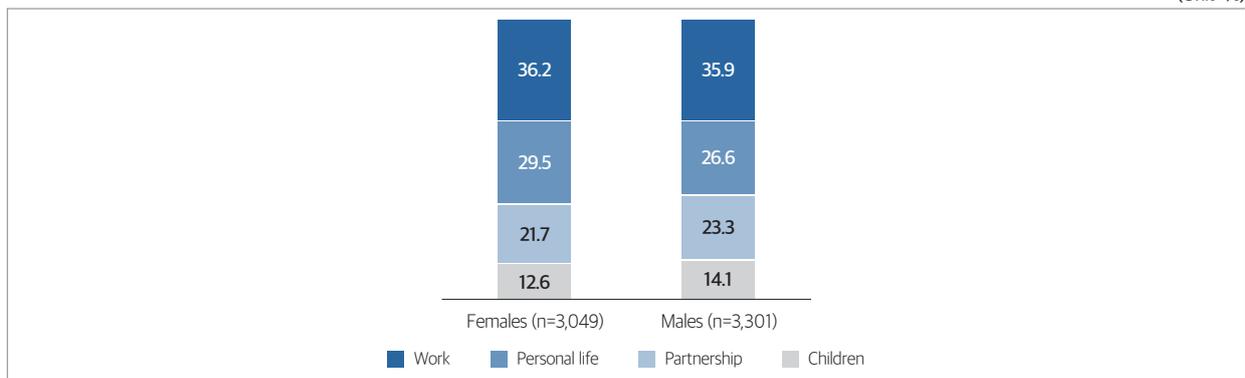
- Previous studies often characterized the recent generation of young people as the generation whose aim is to 'survive' in competitions (Kim Hong-jung, 2009), while other studies pointed out differences depending on classes and regions (Joung Su-nam et al, 2012; Choi Jong-ryul, 2017). One of the biggest shifts recently observed in the generation of youth is the change in gender perspectives. That is, the notion of 'men's work-oriented life courses versus women's family-oriented life courses' of the past became obsolete, and now both men and women tend to consider the 'work-oriented life course' as a crucial aspect of life (Lee Soon-mi, 2014).
- However, unless there is an adequate institutional foundation to support this 'individualized' life perspective, the younger generation, especially young women, is unlikely to change their decisions related to childbirth (Kim Young-mi, 2016a) while being stuck in a situation where they must 'take care of themselves' (Kim Young & Hwang Jung-mee, 2013). The present study conducts gender analyses of the life perspective of youth to present a new policy paradigm addressing low birthrates by taking into account youth's perspectives.

2. Young women are planning "work-oriented lives" so they can "survive on an individual basis."

- Young women no longer believe that the marriage institution can act as the foundation for women's survival throughout their lives. As a result, they are desperately choosing to maintain work-oriented lives throughout their life course.
 - 'Young women's rating of the 'four important life tasks for youth': Young women tended to perceive personal life as important, as demonstrated by the high response scores assigned to work and personal life and low scores assigned to partnership and children. A similar trend was observed for young men.

<Figure 1> Perceptions of the 'relative importance of life tasks for youth' among men and women in their 20s and 30s

(Unit: %)

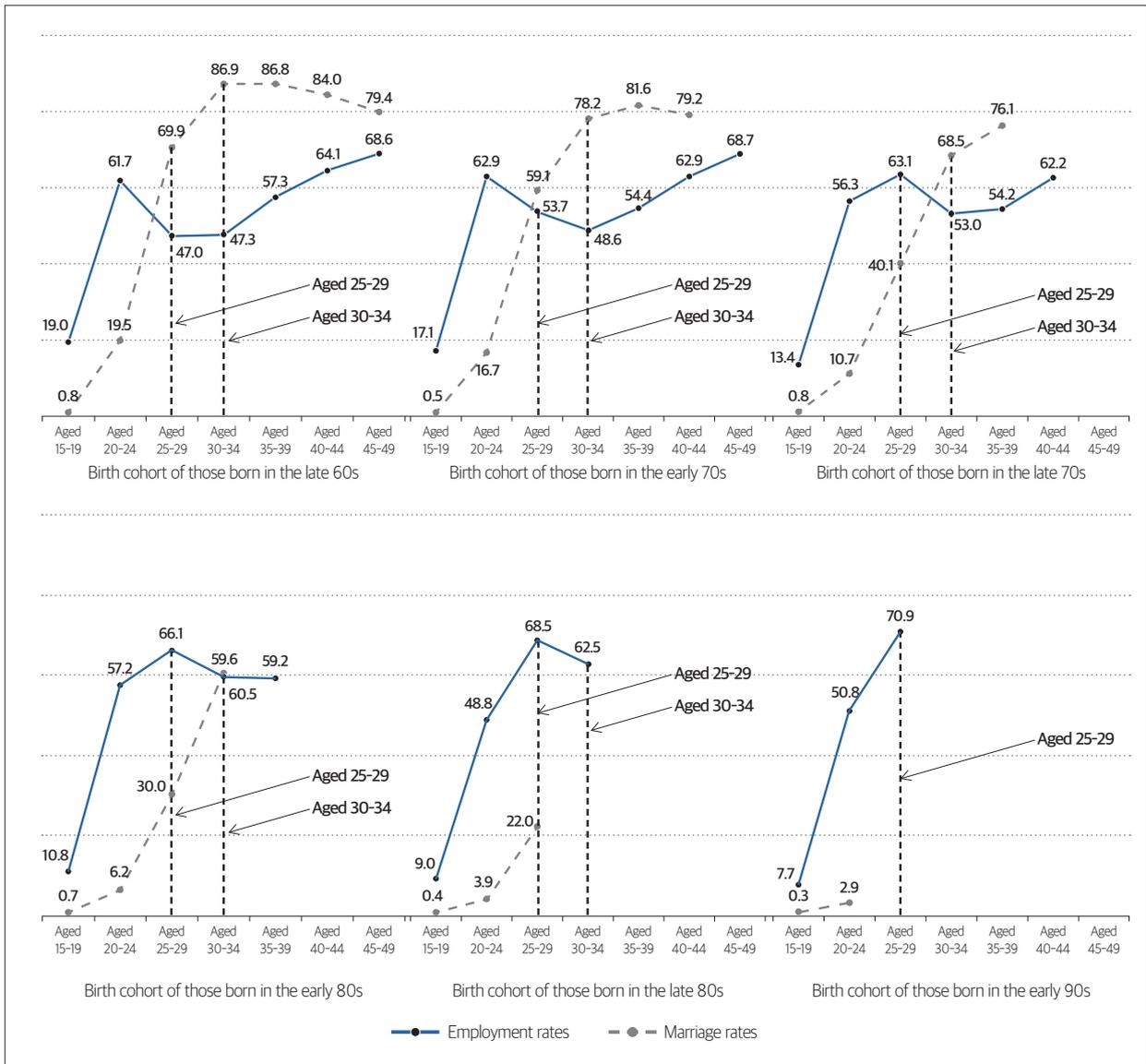


Source: Survey on the perceptions of life perspective for youths in their 20s-30s

- In fact, the results showed that the employment rates of women in their late 20s and early 30s tended to exceed their marriage rates as the cohort groups for the survey become increasingly recent.

<Figure 2> Women's employment rates and marriage rates by birth cohort: Birth cohorts of those born between the late 60s and early 90s

(Unit: %)



Source: Reorganization of the Economically Active Population Survey, Statistics Korea, and the Population Census, Statistics Korea

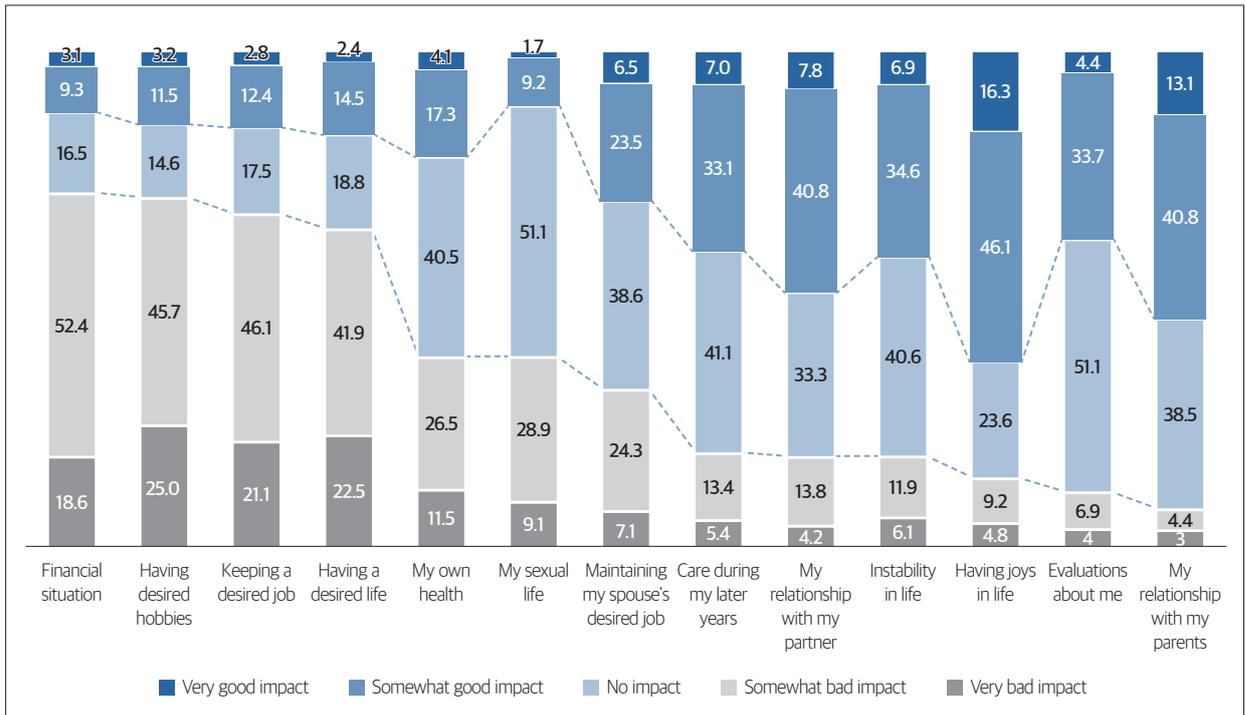


Also, young women considered a pursuit of intimacy as a viable life plan only if their own survival was not threatened. For young women, getting married and having children were perceived as risky affairs that could jeopardize their survival as workers. Having children is therefore becoming an impossible choice for young women because it threatens their survival unless their partners actively share the risk.

- Young women generally evaluated more negatively about children's impact on their own lives compared to young men. Young women gave the most negative ratings for the areas such as 'financial situation', 'having desired hobbies', 'keeping a desired job', and 'having a desired life'. The largest gender gap in the responses was observed especially in 'keeping a desired job'.

<Figure 3> Perceptions of the 'positive versus negative impacts of children on people's lives' for women in their 20s and 30s

(Unit: %)

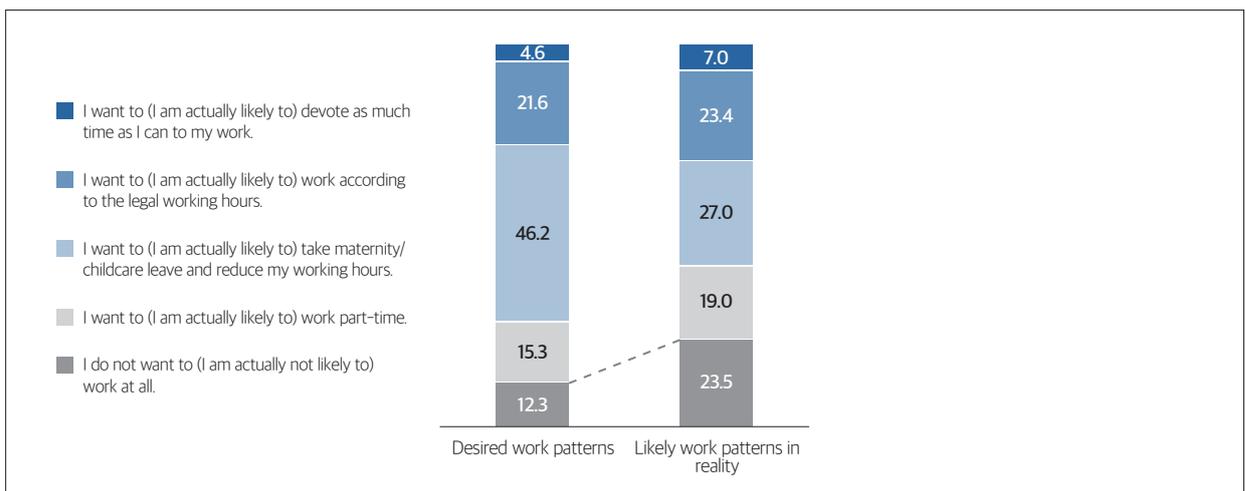


Source: Survey on the perceptions of life perspective for youths in their 20s-30s

► The majority of young women reported they 'want to work' even after having children, and many of them especially reported that they want to work 'by taking childcare leave'. However, a relatively high proportion of women also reported that they are 'not likely to work' in reality.

<Figure 4> Perceptions of 'the desired work patterns' and 'the likely work patterns in reality' after having (more) children among women in their 20s and 30s

(Unit: %)



Source: Survey on the perceptions of life perspective for youths in their 20s-30s

► Young women were highly likely to rate 'partner's participation in child-rearing', 'fair sharing of housework', and 'ability for my partner to get maternity/paternity leave and childcare leave' as the prerequisites for having children. Women ranked these factors higher than other factors such as financial situation or their ability to maintain work-family balance, and their ranking of these factors were markedly different from men's ranking.

<Table 1> Top 10 'prerequisites for having children' among men and women in their 20s and 30s

	Females	males
1	'Partner's' active 'participation in child-rearing'	Ability to pass on a 'better life than my own' to my children
2	Fair 'sharing of housework' with my 'partner'	'My' 'financial preparedness'
3	'Partner's' access to 'maternity/paternity leave, childcare leave' at work	'My' access to a 'stable job'
4	Ability to pass on a 'better life than my own' to my children	Access to a 'stable housing'
4	'My' access to 'maternity/paternity leave, childcare leave' at work	'Partner's' active 'participation in child-rearing'
5	Access to a 'stable housing'	'My' 'good health'
6	'My' access to reduced or flexible 'working hours'	'Partner's' 'good health'
7	'My' 'financial preparedness'	'Partner's' access to 'maternity/paternity leave, childcare leave' at work
8	'Partner's' access to a 'stable job'	'Partner's' access to a 'stable job'
9	'My' 'good health'	Satisfactory 'relationship with my partner'
10	'Partner's' access to reduced or flexible 'working hours'	'Partner's' access to reduced or flexible 'working hours'

Note: The list above includes the items that gained the highest percentages of agreement (agree + extremely agree) among 19 response items such as: my financial preparedness, stable job, health, maternity/paternity leave and childcare leave, working hours; partner's financial preparedness, stable job, health, maternity/paternity leave and childcare leave, working hours; relationship with my partner; sharing of housework with my partner; partner's participation in child-rearing; access to reliable childcare centers; less competitive education systems; stable housing; child benefit payments; childbirth grants, etc.

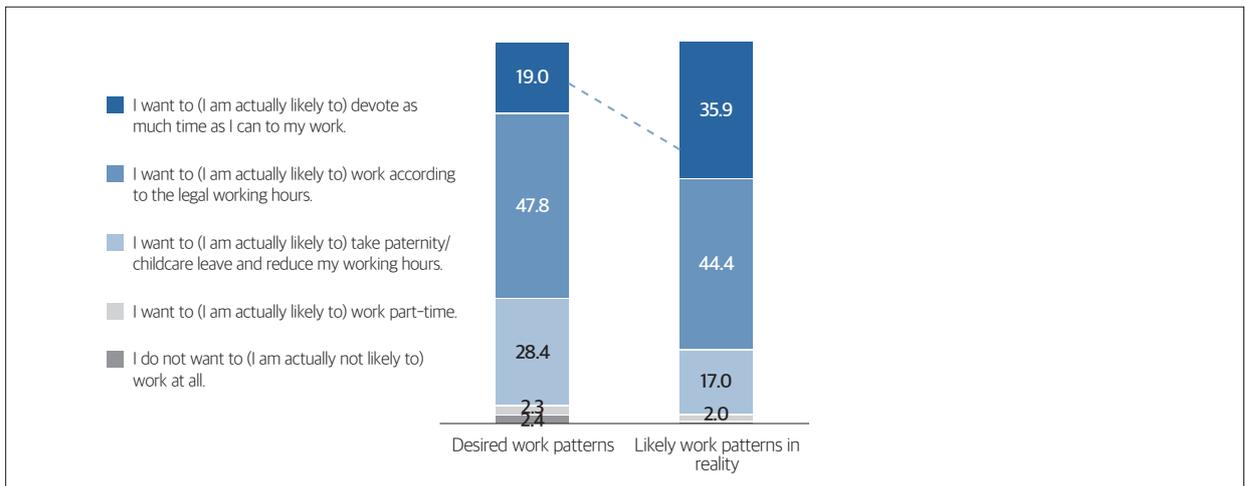
Source: Survey on the perceptions of life perspective for youths in their 20s-30s

3. Young men pursue the 'model in which both women and men participate in working and child-rearing' amid unstable living conditions.

For young men, getting married and having children do not tend to jeopardize their own survival on an individual basis, so they are less likely to feel the dire threats associated with marriage and having children as much as women do. However, young men are also seeking the model that would enable women to participate in work alongside men while simultaneously enabling men to participate in child-rearing amid unstable living conditions.

► The majority of young men reported that they want to 'get off work on time' or take 'childcare leave' when they have children, yet a relatively high proportion of them also reported that they are likely to 'work long hours' in reality.

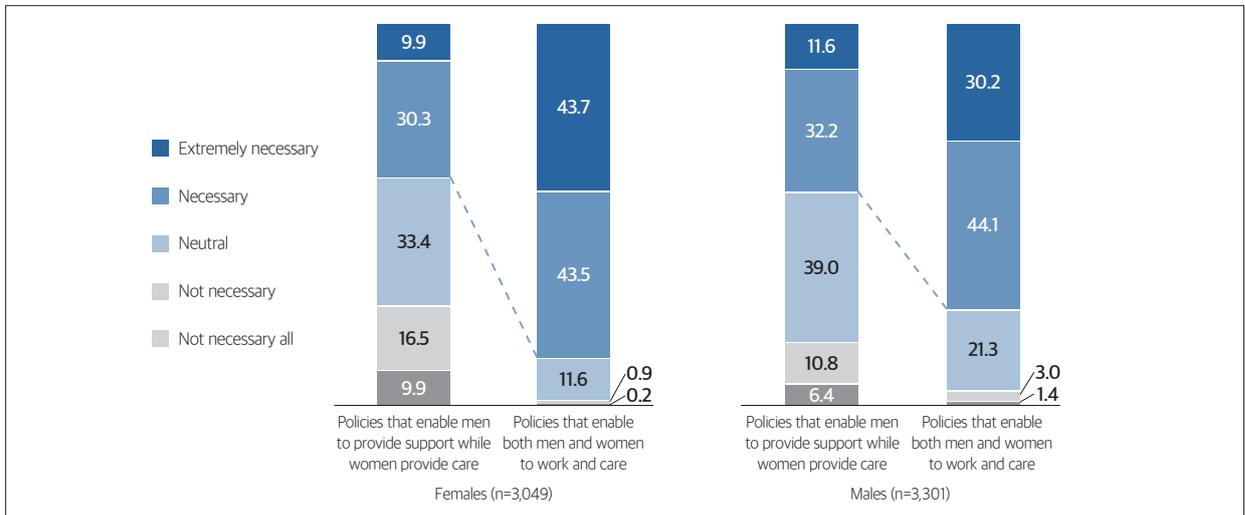
<Figure 5> Perceptions of 'the desired work patterns' and 'the likely work patterns in reality' after having (more) children among men in their 20s and 30s (Unit: %)



Source: Survey on the perceptions of life perspective for youths in their 20s-30s

- ▶ Similarly to women, the overwhelming majority of young men preferred child-rearing 'policies that enable both men and women to work and care' to 'policies that enable men to provide support while women provide care'.

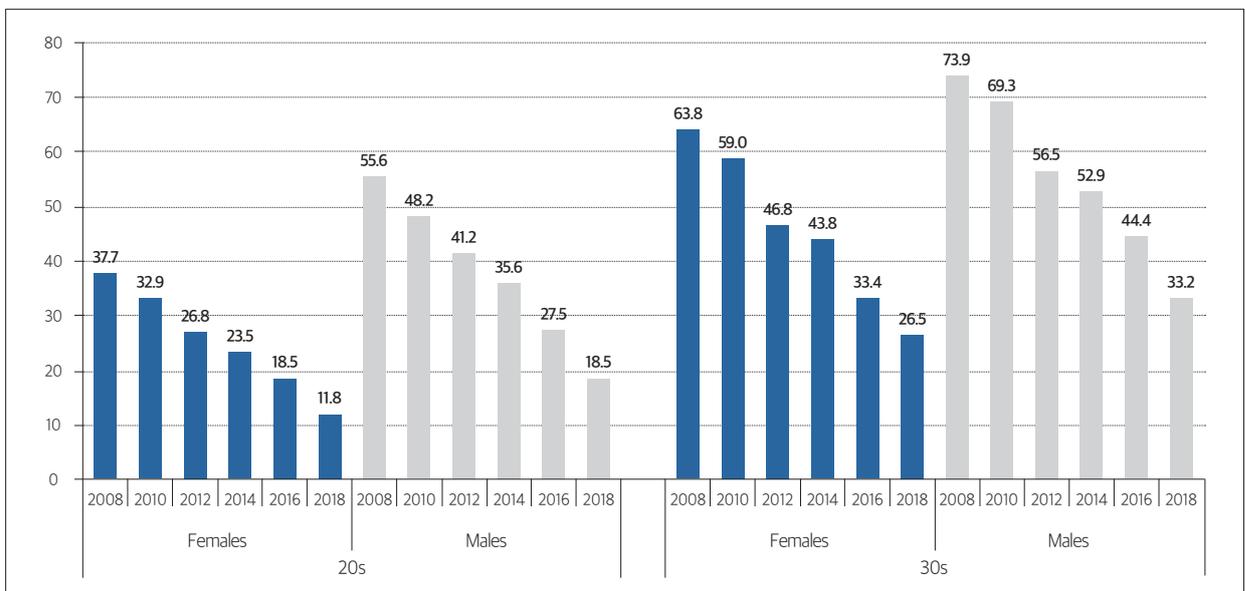
<Figure 6> Agreements on the policy directions for childbirth and childcare among young men and women in their 20s and 30s (Unit: %)



Source: Survey on the perceptions of life perspective for youths in their 20s-30s

- ▶ In fact, according to the Statistics Korea's 'Social Survey', the percentages of young men and women who agree that 'housework is a woman's responsibility' have been declining sharply for a decade.

<Figure 7> Agreements with the statement 'housework is a woman's responsibility' among men and women in their 20s and 30s: Social Survey 2008-2018 (Unit: %)



Note: The figures combine the agreements with the statements 'housework is a wife's responsibility only + housework is a wife's responsibility mostly but her husband should help'.

Source: Social Survey by the Statistics Korea, 'Views on sharing housework'

4. Policy recommendations

- ④ As feminism has become popular and the notion of reasonable fairness has become the most important merit in today's competitive environment, young women have decided to internalized the value of gender equality. The present study confirms that young women do not accept unequal treatment based on gender roles. This finding implies that women are not likely to easily change their decisions about having children until gender-equal reorganizations take place on a broad scale (Kim Young-mi, 2016a).
 - ▶ In order to help the new generation of individuals to establish equal partnerships, relevant policies will need to build policy-level and regulatory foundations that could facilitate women to realize work-oriented life perspective.
 - ▶ Although many young women and young men desire to have appropriate working hours and use the vacation and leave systems, the proportions of men and women actually taking advantage of these systems were found to be low. Those with high educational attainments and stable jobs were more likely to take advantage of these systems than other groups.
 - ▶ It seems that the most important policy direction in this era of 'low birthrates' is to create a steady mechanism that can redistribute hours dedicated to work and care during the 'Rush Hour of Life' (Tremmel, 2009; cited in Kim Young-mi, 2016b: 47), and to balance the 'tilted playground' so that intimacy-related life plans do not interfere with the realization of the 'work-oriented life perspective'.

- ④ 'The gap between the younger generation's desire to survive and the policy message 'get married and give birth to many children' is impossible to close.
 - ▶ [The government would provide support to families when they have second or third children?] Emphasizing policies that support the birth of third children for young people who believe that having any child itself threatens their survival on an individual basis would simply not work in reality. Given that the country is currently facing an emergency in which its birth rate is less than 1.0, now is not the time to discuss the birth of second and third children, but the time to make all-out efforts to encourage a successful raising of first-born children.
 - ※ Young people in their 20s and 30s, both men and women, endorse 'support for all children from first-born children' more than 'support prioritized for households with more than one children' (Survey on the perceptions of life perspective for youths in their 20s-30s).
 - ▶ [The government would give 'childbirth grants' for childbirth?] Temporary cash support at the time of childbirth cannot act as a safety net for the young generation whose individual survivals are at stake. The basic cost of raising children needs to be covered by the state-guaranteed 'child benefit payments' throughout childhood to reduce the threat to the survival of the young people who are prospective parents.

► [The government would provide support to tackle 'subfertility' but not abortions?] Every intimate relationship comes with the 'risk' of birthing children. A childbirth does not necessarily happen according to 'plans', but it may come quite abruptly at an unexpected time, only to shake up the life plans and threaten the survival of those involved. However, while government supports geared to tackle 'subfertility' continued to increase, abortion has been dangerous, criticized, and even illegal before the Constitutional Court ruled the abortion ban unconstitutional. In situations where women lack their rights to make decisions, 'intimate relationships' themselves can jeopardize women's survival. Thus, support for safe contraception and abortion are required as much as the support for subfertility. It is necessary to give women their rights to make decisions concerning their life plans so that women can raise their children whenever they are ready.

※ Women in their 20s and 30s agree more with the need for 'policies that support safe contraception and abortion' than the need for 'policies that support a rise in pregnancy and childbirth' (Survey on the perceptions of life perspective for youths in their 20s-30s).

► [The government would provide homes when couples get married?] For young people who are concerned with their own survival on an individual basis, the guarantee of their survival on an individual basis needs to be addressed first in policies. Currently, it is difficult for young people to have safe homes away from their parents. In particular, in a society where sexual violence is prevalent, encouraging young women's independent living (through inadequate housing) can simply be dangerous. Thus, the government needs to provide proper 'first-time home support' services on an individual basis.



Relevant policies should make appropriate shifts to focus on the 'survival on an individual basis and the balance in life'. Guaranteeing the "work-oriented life" for young women and the "balance in life" for young men will encourage young people to move on to the stage of intimacy.

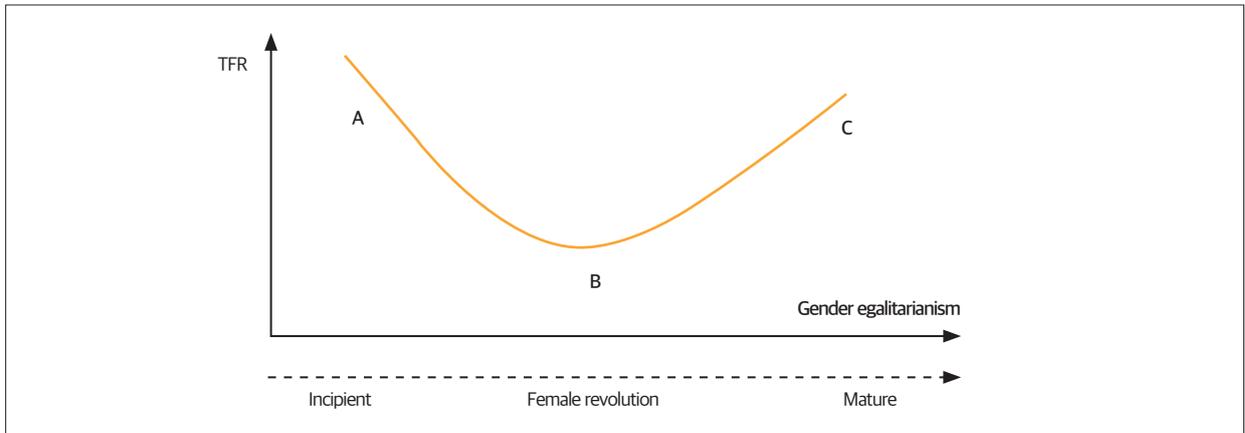
► Engaging in 'single parenting' based on the premise of supporting 'business-oriented people' is an impossible option for young women who feel insecure about their own survival, and it is also a challenging choice for young men who face rising instability in their lives. It is thus necessary to reform relevant social systems so that the 'work-oriented life' can guarantee young women's 'survival on an individual basis' throughout their entire life cycles. Also, now is the time to respond to the voices of young men seeking the 'balance in life.'

► The present study proposes the following policy directions.

- Reduce the standard working hours to enable people to enjoy their 'personal lives in the evenings'.
- Reorganize the school hours which currently assume that someone is constantly available at home.
- Improve the paternity leave system so that men can build life experiences as 'fathers'.
- Ensure children's rights so that they are not discriminated against based on what family situations they grow up in.
- Expand child benefit payments so that the government can cover the basic child care costs for each child.
- Guarantee the right to sexual/reproductive health, such as safe contraception and abortion.
- Implement a shift in the housing support paradigm by providing first-time home support services on an individual basis.

- ▶ The lesson from Western society is that, "When a society adapts to the new roles of women, a new family equilibrium emerges and the birthrates improve (Esping-Andersen)". It is time to reflect on the paradox that 'families' can recover when a society is redesigned around the unit of 'individuals'.

<Figure 8> Diagram showing the relationship between the 'revolution in gender roles' and birthrates



Source: Esping-Andersen & Billari (2015:9)

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Supervising ministry: Future Planning Team / Gender Equality Foundation Team / Inclusive Care Team, The Presidential Committee on Ageing Society and Population Policy

Relevant ministry: Family Policy Division, The Ministry of Gender Equality and Family