



2021  
Research Paper-20

# A Paradigm Shift in Policy Responses to Low Birthrate ( II ): Reorganization of Discourse inResponse to Low Birthrate

Eun-Ji Kim, Hyo-Jean Song, Ho-Jung Bae, Jin-Hee Choi,  
Kyung Sung, Jeong-Mi Hwang, Young-Mi Kim, Eun-Jeong Park



Korean Women's Development Institute

**A Paradigm Shift in Policy Responses to  
Low Birthrate (II):  
Reorganization of Discourse in Response  
to Low Birthrate**



©2021

**Korean Women's Development Institute**

225 Jinheung-ro Eunpyeong-gu

Seoul, 03367, Republic of Korea

[www.kwdi.re.kr](http://www.kwdi.re.kr)

# Contents

I. Introduction .....	1
II. A Review of Previous Discussions: Theoretical Discussions and Online Data Analysis .....	2
III. Analysis of Diversity in Life Prospects of Youth: Quantitative Data Analysis .....	5
IV. Life Prospects of Young People and Their Perceptions of Policy: Qualitative Data Analysis .....	11
V. Policy Suggestions .....	19



---

# A Paradigm Shift in Policy Responses to Low Birthrate (II): Reorganization of Discourse in Response to Low Birthrate

Eun-Ji Kim  
Hyo-Jean Song  
Ho-Jung Bae  
Jin-Hee Choi  
Kyung Sung  
Jeong-Mi Hwang  
Young-Mi Kim  
Eun-Jeong Park

## I . Introduction

Changing life prospects of young people seem to constitute the most crucial part of a complicated mechanism of low birthrates. As rapid social change occurs, their outlook on life is altering. The point that is directly related to the ‘low fertility’ in the change of life outlook is the restructuring of ‘intimacy’, that is, the social norms and the youth’s expectations of the family are changing.

In this aspect, the first year of this study reveals the problem of gendered life prospects of the youth. Previously, men were expected to live a “work-centered” life while women were expected to live a

“family-centered” one. However, today’s young people, regardless of their genders, put priority on a “work-centered life” and want intimacy that makes it possible to maintain such a life. Nonetheless, “actual” life prospects are still based on the gendered life course. This study points out this gap. In other words, the gap between young individuals’ expectations for the life course and the reality, which makes it impracticable to realize the expectations, lies behind the low birthrate phenomenon. Moreover, since these characteristics of life prospects are clearly visible in the 20s and high-educated groups, the gap is expected to widen in the future.

The purpose of this study is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the research results of the first year and to seek new policy discourses and messages suitable for the sensibility of young people, particularly young females. While the first-year study primarily conducts descriptive analysis of gender differences, this study focuses on diversity within genders, particularly differences in values regarding family and gender equality and differences among classes, in addition to analyzing gender differences. By identifying policy language and frames friendly to the youth, this study intends to produce persuasive policy evidence.

## **II . A Review of Previous Discussions: Theoretical Discussions and Online Data Analysis**

This chapter examines existing theoretical discussions about low birthrates and change in life prospects. Through online data analysis, we analyze online discourse about women’s life prospects over the past 15 years, thereby examining a flow of discussions concerning low birth rates

and life prospects in our society in a time series manner.

The main theoretical discussions are reviewed as follows: First, Cross-country comparative studies show that East Asian countries tend to have groups with low birthrates while Korea shows a much lower birthrate. This tendency has become even more evident if the temporal effect caused by delayed childbirth is controlled. Unlike European countries where birthrates temporarily declined due to delayed childbirth and have recovered later on, East Asian countries are characterized by “unrecovered delay,” and this trend is most powerful and obvious in Korea.

Second, there have been various discussions about what caused low birthrates. The discussions can be explained by diving them largely into three: a micro approach associated with economic discussions; macro approach that explains it with cultural change; and institutional approach that pays attention to the institutional context mediating micro and macro factors. With factors explained by these theoretical discussions not mutually exclusive, economic factors and institutional factors related to gender equality are more persuasive in explaining low birthrates. Particularly in East Asian countries, the delay in their gender equality systems works as the most decisive factor, and economic factors appear to further strengthen this influence..

Finally, the most notable phenomenon regarding low birthrates in East Asia is to delay and avoid marriage, which can be interpreted as an incomplete East Asian style “gender revolution.” Young women’s life prospects are rapidly shifting from family-centered to work-centered, and incomplete institutions in response to such change are pointed out as a fundamental factor that brings about non-marriage and low birthrates.

By analyzing online data, we then have reviewed how discussions on women's life prospects have developed online. First, the results of quantitative analysis of the data from Naver Blog clearly show a relative decline in the gendered role of "full-time housewives," the commonization of "working moms," and the recent emergence of discourse on the newly coined term in Korea, "no-marriage."

Second, major keywords have changed by time. There were time-series changes in the semantic network related to life prospects, such as childrearing and education, "housewives," "working moms," and "marriage." In 2005 when child care policies were not yet commonplace, major issues included the burden of childcare and education costs, romantic narratives about "marriage," gender-discriminatory career breaks, and sharing housework with their husband among "full-time housewives." During the period of the conservative government (2010) when "freedom of choice" was strengthened, the problem of educational competition, such as early English education, appeared as a major keyword. As a result, there emerged references to the need for information on childrearing and emotional costs of childrearing. In this period, the term "working mom" began to appear in earnest. In 2015, free childcare and free education took root, making discourse about childcare and educational institutions appear in the semantic network in full scale. In the semantic network of "full-time housewives," the issue of the quality of care appeared in relation to child abuse. In the semantic network of "working moms," anxiety about educational competition and contents about homeschooling were found. In this period, "marriage" became somewhat independent of the semantic network of "housewives" for the first time, forming an independent semantic network as intimacy, a lifecycle event and gender discrimination issue. In 2020 characterized

by the COVID-19 pandemic period, discussions took place centering on the care gap. The burden of unpaid work appeared in the semantic network of “full-time housewives,” and the problem of organizing work and care arose in that of “working moms.” Also, the keyword “no-marriage” first appeared in this period.

Lastly, according to the analysis results of posts in Brunch, concerns and concepts fragmentarily presented in Naver Blog were considered more deeply. In the semantic network of “full-time housewives,” association with the working life was frequently observed. In the semantic network of “working moms,” the role and existence of mothers and the identity as a woman were presented as reflective keywords. And conflicts about the family-centered life and working life were connectively discussed. Meanwhile, “marriage” and “never-marrieds” were not simply regarded as words of avoidance. Rather, they were presented along with ontological keywords, such as “person,” “thought,” “live,” and “hurt.”

### III. Analysis of Diversity in Life Prospects of Youth: Quantitative Data Analysis

This chapter analyzed types of life prospects of young people regarding whether to have a childbirth plan and how to adjust childcare and work career after childbirth. After verifying the distribution of life prospects of the 2030 youth, we analyzed 4,715 childless young people regarding the distribution of types of life prospects, their attitudes toward children by type, the hierarchy determining life prospects, and the influence of gender equality/family values. Major analysis results are as follows:

First, we checked types of life prospects regarding childbirth plans and plans to adjust childcare and work career. To simplify analysis, life prospects of young people were classified into three: an “outlook for no kids” with no prospect of childbirth over the entire lifetime; “outlook with equal gender roles after childbirth” to get out of the existing gendered life trajectory; and “outlook with traditional gender roles after childbirth” accepting the existing gendered life trajectory.

According to the classification, the “outlook for no kids” took up the largest proportion among both young women and men. As for young women, the “outlook with equal gender roles after childbirth” accounted for the second largest proportion. Only about 10% of the childless 2030 women had the “outlook with traditional gender roles after childbirth.” In contrast, among young men, the “outlook with traditional gender roles after childbirth” made up the second largest proportion. However, about 17% of the young men also had the “outlook with equal gender roles after childbirth,” showing that a certain proportion of them had prospects for life trajectory based on equal relationship.

Second, we verified young people’s attitudes toward their kids according to the types of life prospects. To this end, we used the frame of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) to examine the distribution of a series of their attitudes, such as expected effects of kids, perceived norms and the prerequisites for having children. In addition, we analyzed young people’s perception about whether our society had established a child-friendly environment.

Analysis results showed that compared with the other two groups wishing to have children, the group with “outlook for no kids” placed more importance on “work” and “personal life” and less importance on “partnership” and “children,” among both young men and women. Also,

a much higher proportion of young women thought “kids” would negatively affect their life than young men. Within each gender, the group with the “outlook for no kids” thought kids more negatively. Particularly regarding items related to personal life or restrictions on economic conditions (“economic situation,” “possibility of desired hobbies/leisure,” “possibility of maintaining desired work,” and “possibility of living as desired”), up to 80% of young females thought children would have negative effects. There was a group with relatively positive perception of “children” within each gender. It was the group with the “outlook with equal gender roles after childbirth” in cases of women and the group with the “outlook with traditional gender roles after childbirth” in cases of men. It was noteworthy that among young women, the group wishing to have children while continuing their working life perceived kids most positively. Meanwhile, the influence of “marriage” on life was similar to that of “children” on life. However, the perception of “children” was generally more negative than that of “marriage.”

When asked about conditions under which they would have children, using various items, the two groups with prospects for children mostly agreed to have (more) kids if certain conditions were satisfied than the other group with the “outlook for no kids,” among both young men and women. As to important prerequisites for having children, all three groups of women chose, as important, items on equal relationship, such as “partner’s active participation in childrearing” and “partner equally sharing housework.” This tendency was most conspicuous among the group with the “outlook for no kids.” Among men, economic requirements, such as “a better life than mine,” “my financial preparation,” “my stable job” and “a stable house” dominated the top

ranks. In particular, all the top 5 items chosen by the group of men with the “outlook with traditional gender roles after childbirth” consisted of factors related to their economic situation and health.

Meanwhile, we compared each type of group regarding whether their parents, relatives or friends thought they should have (more) children. The group with the “outlook for no kids” among both men and women mostly perceived that a low proportion of such people thought “they should have more children.” Normative pressure from their friends was very low among women, but relatively high among men.

Also, young people were asked how child-friendly they felt the daily living environment was. No big difference was found among the groups of women, and a relatively high proportion of women with the “outlook for no kids” felt that our society was not child-friendly. In other words, this group was most aware that raising children in our society would cause difficulties in all aspects of life, such as moving, going out, traffic safety, and neighbors. This sensitive perception could be interpreted as strengthening their life prospects for no kids. In contrast, men with the “outlook for no kids” were least sensitive to the child-friendly environment.

Third, we examined how types of life prospects were distributed according to the socio-demographic characteristics of the youth, particularly according to hierarchy variables. As hierarchy variables, young people’s own educational levels and subjective hierarchy evaluation variables were used. According to analysis results, both young women and men tended to show a higher level of subjective hierarchy evaluation as they were more educated, except for those with the “highest” subjective hierarchy evaluation. The relations between educational levels and subjective hierarchy evaluation were more

consistent among young men than young women.

As to the distribution of types of life prospects by hierarchy, differences occurred between “outlook for no kids” and outlook for kids (“outlook with equal gender roles after childbirth” and “outlook with traditional gender roles after childbirth”) according to hierarchies, among both young women and men. Specifically, as the hierarchy rose, the “outlook for no kids” decreased while the outlook for kids increased. Among young males, a distinct trend was found in both educational levels and subjective hierarchy. Among young females, however, a more obvious trend was identified in subjective hierarchy rather than in educational levels.

When they had an unstable job, the “outlook for no kids” increased among both men and women. When they had a stable job, however, the proportion of the “outlook with equal gender roles after childbirth” rose among young women, and that of the “outlook with traditional gender roles after childbirth” increased among young men. In other words, their job stability was contributing to having an outlook with changed gender roles or maintaining an outlook with existing gender roles.

Fourth, we analyzed whether types of life prospects varied depending on gender equality/family values of young people. Using 25 questions, we conducted a latent class analysis. Three groups were identified: a group with “equal values” if it strongly agreed on gender equality; group with “traditional values” if it had relatively traditional attitudes; and group with “moderate values” if it was in the middle. Among childless young women, approximately 39% of them belonged to the group with “equal values,” about 34% belonged to the group with “moderate values,” and about 27%, the group with “traditional values,” showing that they mostly agreed on equal values. In contrast, among childless young

men, only about 8% of them belonged to the group with “equal values,” some 40% belonged to the group with “moderate values” and about 53%, the group with “traditional values,” showing that they largely agreed on traditional values.

We also examined the relationship between perception of the severity of discrimination against women in our society and gender equality/family values. According to the results, women in the group with “equal values” in particular considered gender discrimination serious, with some 89% of them saying gender discrimination was serious. Even in the group with “traditional values” which was least sensitive to the issue, 67% said gender discrimination was severe. On the other hand, a low proportion of men perceived gender discrimination and no consistent tendency was discovered between their gender equality/family values and perception of gender discrimination in our society.

We then reviewed the relationship between types of life prospects and gender equality/family values and perception of the severity of discrimination against women in our society. The results showed that gender equality/family values of women were the most obvious factors explaining types of life prospects. Women with relatively equal values already prospected their life trajectory without kids, whereas women with relatively traditional values had an outlook on life raising children and working in the labor market. Even among women with traditional values, only a few of them prospected life with a career break after giving birth to children. Among men, those with traditional values largely had life prospects with “traditional gender roles after childbirth.” Those with equal values mostly had an outlook with “no kids.” The outlook with “equal gender roles after childbirth” was not yet an appropriate alternative for men with equal values.

Effects of perception of gender discrimination in our society on life prospects differed between men and women. For women, sensitive perception of gender discrimination was closely related to their decision not to have children, which was a trend not found in men.

Finally, each variable was inputted to verify factors determining types of life prospects. The analysis results showed that among young women, gender equality/family values served as a factor with the most powerful and consistent influence although the hierarchy factor partially worked. In addition, the age of early 20s and whether to have a full-time job were the most obvious factors determining types of life prospects among young women. On the other hand, young men prospected a traditional life trajectory concentrating on work if they were high in the hierarchy and had a job or traditional values. Men low in the hierarchy had prospects for a life trajectory with no kids. When other factors were controlled, the age of early 20s was the only variable that raised the possibility of an alternative outlook on life that considered childcare important.

#### IV. Life Prospects of Young People and Their Perceptions of Policy: Qualitative Data Analysis

Like other social policies, low birthrate response policy should be formulated based on socio-scientific evidence by diagnosing community needs according to a changing social environment and identifying the demand of a targeted group. However, the “low birthrate phenomenon” occurs where the most personal and private areas, such as intimate relationships, reproductive health, marriage culture and family

reproduction, are mixed with macroscopic and public areas, such as the social community, population reproduction, employment quality, labor market restructuring, childrearing, the educational system and social polarization. Such complicated social context concerning low birthrates could make decision-making on effective means of policy and priority difficult and above all, may make it difficult to identify the targeted group's "demand" or may distort it.

In this chapter, we re-examined the standard norms of our society regarding the transition period to adulthood, which were included in existing low birthrate response policy, from a viewpoint of young people. For example, stereotypes about the lives of the 2030 youth were reviewed, such as "If you get a job, you can get married, and if you have a house, you can have children." To this end, a systematic analysis was conducted on qualitative data collected through one-on-one in-depth interviews (16 cases) and a group interview (16 cases) of young activists. In addition, by referring to European studies analyzing fertility intentions based on the TPB, we contextually interpreted the Korean youth's positive aspirations and negative anxiety about marriage and childrearing. We then categorized their intentions to marry and raise children to figure out each of the characteristics. The following trends were noted in their life prospects and life stories:

First, in-depth interview participants viewed "independence" and "work" as most important in their life prospects. In particular, female participants desperately talked about "independence" and "work" in a reality where it was hard to realize work-centered life prospects. However, with the job market freezing, young people, especially job seekers, talked about their invisible future and harsh reality. As to marriage and intimate relationships, their narratives differed according to

genders. Young women either refused to enter the patriarchal marriage system or put marriage at a lower priority in their work-centered life prospects. Young men delayed, avoided or gave up marriage until they were ready to become breadwinners. The participants also said that marriage was a choice, living alone was a dream, and there were many things more enjoyable than dating. They mostly spoke with a changed and open attitude about living together in an intimate relationship without getting married, but some talked about institutional and social restrictions in realizing such life.

The participants' outlook on fertility and childrearing was relatively vaguer or more negative than that on marriage and intimacy. Female participants mostly said childbirth and childrearing changed their lives, work, body and everything, but in a society that never understood such things, having children would be difficult. Most participants talked about the economic burden of childbirth and childcare and the burden of responsibility as a parent. Male participants were vaguely optimistic according to their values and economic conditions but they felt the burdens as well. Regarding gender issues over marriage, childbirth and child raising, participant's perceptions widely varied depending on genders. Women said that the nation, society and men were not sensitive to issues over women's body, and expressed obvious opinions about issues over their reproductive rights, in particular.

Second, young people didn't regard marriage and childbirth as life events they should achieve in a few years or particular period. Rather, they were considering such issues in terms of very long-term life prospects and time planning. Most thought employment or economic stability should come first. Furthermore, they sensitively felt that they needed more preparation and career flexibility, such as changing jobs,

getting two jobs and starting a business, because lifelong jobs were no longer guaranteed although life expectancy had been extended to the age of 100. Both men and women agreed that economic independence was a prerequisite for marriage and childrearing. Korean young women had already internalized so-called “labor market biography.” Also, the norms of the marriageable age had already weakened a lot, but there were differences in the content of such norms depending on genders. Women mostly thought it was better to choose against marriage or to marry after their 40s or 50s when “they could decide for themselves” because marriage and childbirth could have “irreversible” consequences in their careers. Men tended to take it for granted to postpone the marriageable age until their 40s for their “optimal preparation.”

Third, in their previous discourse, young people tended to emphasize pain and frustration, as shown in the expression of “generation that gave up on three.” However, in these in-depth interviews, we could glimpse their new imaginations about the transition to adulthood itself, as well as difficulties in such transition. For instance, they viewed living alone in a single-person household not as an unstable state in the transition period, but as their “dream of independence,” or an opportunity to enjoy “their own space and time.” Many thought that marriage was good but they could also live happily alone. Although applying Western society’s emerging adulthood to Korea would be difficult, young people’s perceptions of marriage and childbirth as the standard norms of adulthood were already changing considerably.

Fourth, interesting changes in the norms of marriage and childbirth were also observed in the social networks of young people and in the expectations of important others, including their family and friends. While some parents pressured their children to marry and have kids,

others had a “half-and-half” attitude, agreeing that living alone was okay to reduce burdens or sacrifices and show off their children’s abilities. The normative pressure young people felt around them could not be simplified as a generational confrontation between parents and the youth, and various aspects appeared depending on their educational levels or hierarchical background. Their friends and peer groups shared ambivalent feelings about marriage and childrearing: they would be happy but have serious difficulties and make sacrifices at the same time. Among young people, the perception that “it was okay to get married and raise children and it was also okay not to do so” was not just a metaphorical expression, but a very realistic choice.

Life prospects and life stories of young people found in the in-depth interviews suggest many implications for direction-setting for policies. Most noticeably, there were markedly different aspects in their intentions to marry and intentions to raise. When we classified the “marriage intentions” of young people, there were more cases in the middle than those who definitely wanted to marry or those who definitely did not want to marry (“no-marriage”). Women showed an attitude that they put their own careers or financial footing ahead of marriage. Men in the middle wanted to marry, but they were often passive “because they didn’t have what it took to get married or because of the economic burden.” On the other hand, most said that they “certainly did not” have the desire or intention to raise children, and young people with various job statuses, academic backgrounds and genders showed a concerted attitude that they did not want children. The general expectation that “promoting marriage would naturally solve the low birthrate problem” was completely inconsistent with the outcomes of the in-depth interview analysis. The analysis result that many don’t want childrearing shows that it is hard

to seek effective means of policy in reality. The analysis results also imply that particular support policy may result in choosing or excluding some from the groups of young people with diverse intentions to marry or raise children.

Though some had different perception of low birthrates, in-depth interview participants expressed various critical views about low birthrate policy. They were critical of housing support policy with many conditions and barriers, as well as society and policy centering on marriage and normal family. They said that taking parental leave was difficult at workplaces other than large companies or public institutions, and that men had difficulties taking paternity leave in reality. Also, they said it was necessary to improve the reality where they couldn't work because they couldn't leave children safely at a care center all day. As to low birthrate policy directions, the participants said that a broad and wide approach should be made rather than a fragmentary one. They said policy giving "stability in individual life" to young people should be prioritized. They appealed that policy should be established on the premise that there was no life without work for young women. In addition, they said the opinions of young people should be reflected in youth policy.

Eventually, to change the intentions of young people who feel negatively about raising children under the current conditions, a greater level of social change is needed beyond just simple economic and housing support. It is expected that young people's intentions not to have children will not be easily altered without fundamental changes that turn the burden and deprivation of caring for children into a positive experience and enable women to have children without risking a break in their careers and deprivation.

After that, we examined the life prospects of young activists who had participated in focus group interviews (FGIs). First of all, when prospecting their future, the activists mostly mentioned the desire for “stable workplace/work/economic ability,” as well as for “housing” or “independence”. However, most seemed to have difficulties picturing their future under the current “unstable” conditions. None of them considered getting married to be something they “must” do. Rather, they viewed it as an individual’s choice. Many participants introduced themselves as “never-marrieds.” Some expressed the phenomenon of women avoiding marriage as a “marriage market without a partner.” Others talked about a reality where women were forced to perceive marriage negatively, such as misogynistic society and patriarchal family relationships. The emergence of young people who plan a non-marriage life without entering the traditional marriage system shows that their values have changed and they are realizing them in their lives. Some activists specifically introduced about a movement to newly design their lives and intimacy by making a non-marriage-oriented childless community.

When talking about childbirth, the young activists mostly showed a very critical attitude, mentioning a social environment where they “didn’t want to have children and raise them.” Regardless of genders, the activists pointed out, as factors negatively influencing childbirth, prospects for unstable future and negative situation, such as the production and distribution of sexual exploitation videos in the so-called Nth room case, misogyny, the climate crisis, norms imposed on women, employment difficulties, and private education problems. They did not have any particular expectations for their own childbirth. However, some activists pursuing non-marriage or alternative intimacy/communities

talked about childbirth and childrearing without marriage, as well as hopes for raising children together in various family relationships and communities.

Regarding low birthrate policy, the young activists denounced the reproductive rights only for childbirth, saying that discourse without self-determination had limitations. The activists also harshly criticized policy attitudes, which talked only about childbirth while ignoring the lives, safety and welfare of the citizens currently living in our society, as low birthrate policy for “citizens before birth” only. They said that policy to induce young people into the system (marriage) for childbirth within normal family without respecting individuals’ rights of choice made them feel rejected and alienated from such policy. By saying so, they denounced the limitations of normal family-centered policy that failed to respect family diversity. They mostly criticized housing support policy. Specifically, they argued that housing support policy for newlyweds on the premise of marriage made young people planning and realizing various lives experience exclusion and frustration. Also, they pointed out that young people, other than newlyweds or single-person households, were marginalized from the housing policy, and that the policy demanded excessively strict conditions. Among other problems raised, were the poor housing quality far from the quality of life, narrow and strict financial support for housing, and government-led housing community policy without philosophy and values.

The youth activists were skeptical about whether policies for young people had considered lives they wanted and dreamed of. As to low birthrate policy, they said it was required to change the policy frame that if men had stable jobs and housing, they would get married and low birthrate would be resolved. In addition, the activists said it was

necessary to think about how to stabilize women's lives, such as resolving the vulnerability of women in the labor market.

## V. Policy Suggestions

Based on the aforementioned contents, we suggest the following policy directions in this study. First, it is necessary to recognize women's working life and establish policies based on such life. Family based on gendered roles is widely denied among young people, and a "society where all women marry" is rapidly shifting to a "society where all women work." According to quantitative analysis, only a few young women have life prospects based on traditional gender roles. Qualitative analysis shows that young women put "independence" and "work" at the center of their life prospects. As young females hope for working life and economic independence, the difficulty of achieving "work-family balance" is causing non-marriage, childlessness and low birthrates, rather than their career breaks. Therefore, it is necessary to completely change the direction for policy established under the premise that women exclusively care for children with their work optional.

On the other hand, change in the values of young men who want a new life balance is identified. Among them, far fewer than the majority want to have and raise children while concentrating on their work. In particular, a life outlook putting emphasis on family beyond the traditional life trajectory are emerging among men in their early 20s. Eventually, society is shifting to one where women put work first and men don't want to, and can't, raise children alone, in their life prospects.

With this in mind, the following policies can be suggested. The overall

working hours should be shortened to strike a work-life balance through the establishment of a labor market structure that enables men and women to realize “working life.” Policy for work-life balance should be available to all working people, rather than to some groups of people. As a key issue that weakens the sustainability of working life, working very long hours goes against the work-life balance that young people dream of. Therefore, endeavors to normalize working hours and thus strike a work-life balance should be made. By doing so, a social foundation should be laid that enables young people to realize both working life and “life with dinner” and consider life prospects with family. The “52-hour workweek” and “extension of parental leave for all working parents,” which is now discussed in earnest, are good policies that can serve as a starting point for achieving such universal work-life balance and reducing working hours. These policies are also viewed as consistent with the life prospects of the youth.

In addition, the social childcare system needs to be reconstructed on the premise that no women exclusively care for children at home. In this regard, a considerable progress has been made in policy for childcare in the preschool period due to the introduction of “free childcare,” etc., but issues over the low quality of childcare are still raised, as shown in the online data analysis. Low-quality childcare, combined with “competition” in early education, requires women to play a “maternal” role again. This in turn hinders women from pursuing working life, making them avoid childbirth and childrearing. The period of school age beyond the period of “free childcare” is more problematic. Elementary schools still stick to school schedules that do not fit women’s working life. The frequent closure of schools caused by the pandemic this year has contributed to raising social awareness of the importance of space

and time of public education. Under the premise that all adults pursue their working life during the daytime, schools should be reborn as a space providing sufficient and high-quality education and care.

Second, full-fledged efforts should be made to institutionalize new intimacy beyond the existing family system. In this study, a lot of young people had an outlook for “no kids” and the concepts of “no-marriage” was found in the online data analysis. It is very dangerous to interpret this phenomenon simply as young people desiring to live alone or “giving up marriage” due to economic difficulties. Rather, the analysis shows that life prospects with “no-marriage” are associated with women’s reflective considerations of life. In in-depth interviews, female participants suggested “twilight marriage” after their 40s and 50s when they can make their own decisions beyond social norms. Young activists also suggested life prospects in various communities outside of the marriage system. In other words, wishes to realize intimacy and fulfill them in a way different from the unequal marriage system are emerging.

In particular, strengthening the foundation for life of young people and their economic conditions is required, but such support policy is effective only when it is consistent with new life styles they dream of. This shows that a policy that “encourages marriage” through simple economic support without recognizing the limitations of institutional marriage partnerships is hardly persuasive for the young generation. For example, a series of controversies over support for “housing for newlyweds” indicate that providing economic support to “newlyweds” including women of childbearing age, as low birthrate policy, is scarcely persuasive for young people. In contrast, a keen interest in the “Sayuri phenomenon” (i.e. having a sperm donor baby) and voluntary non-marriage childbirth shows that young people have a deep desire for new intimacy beyond

institutional marriage partnerships. In our society where the class gap is widening, various policies to narrow the gap and policy to support economic independence are required. Nonetheless, such policies could be viewed as acceptable only when they move toward new lifestyles young people dream of.

As such, it is necessary to reinforce institutional protections for various partnerships outside of the marriage system, while amending various systems and policies that presuppose a “normal family.” In addition, it is required to revise policy support presupposing the existing marriage system, such as “housing for newlyweds,” to “support for the first housing in lifetime” presupposing each individual’s independent life trajectory and “support for households with children” that provides additional incentives.

Third, ultimately, changing policy perspectives from a nationalist viewpoint to a viewpoint from individuals’ happiness and quality of life should be the fundamental philosophy of “low birthrate response policy.” According to analysis in this study, a social environment that is not friendly to children or a sexist and misogynistic social atmosphere is connected with women’s outlook for no kids. This shows that it is hard to expect women to have and raise children in a society that lacks fundamental human rights for minorities. Debates in Sweden in the 1930s that stressed individual human rights and “voluntary parenting,” rather than nationalistic perspectives as a solution to a low birthrate, while maintaining social interest in the low birthrate itself still leave an effective lesson to the current Korean society. Deciding whether to give birth to children, when and how many years apart they will do so should be guaranteed as individuals’ rights. And a guarantee of women’s rights to their bodies should form the very basis of guaranteeing such

---

“reproductive rights.” Eventually, gender-sensitive policy responses are required that support equal intimacy beyond the unequal family system with out demanding sacrifices regarding individuals’ life prospects.

