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A comparative analysis of perceptions of fertility between Koreans living in Barcelona and in South Korea

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Abstract

South Korea exhibits the lowest fertility rate of all developed nations, a national crisis that the Korean government has been trying to increase the fertility rate for the past two decades with limited success. This paper explores through a new perspective how Koreans living in Spain and Koreans living in South Korea perceive the fertility issue as well as what influences their reproductive decision-making. Both groups have shown different perspectives, especially on what factors they consider affect their decisions regarding childbirth. Through the collected data via online a survey it has been revealed that while South Koreans value economic stability, Koreans living in Spain value the social atmosphere the most. Ultimately, we can conclude that policies to boost fertility should not be focused on cash incentives only but rather be complemented by policies that aim to create a new social environment where fertility thrives through broader societal changes.

Dades del TFG

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Paraules clau

Baixa natalitat, Corea del Sud, Crisis demogràfica, Atmosfera social, polítiques de fertilitat

Resum del TFG

Corea del Sud mostra la taxa de fecunditat més baixa de les nacions desenvolupades, una crisi nacional que el govern coreà ha estat més dues dècades intentant solucionar amb uns resultats insuficients. Aquest treball de final de grau ofereix una nova perspectiva analitzant la percepció sobre la baixa fecunditat i les influències a l'hora de prendre decisions sobre reproducció que tenen els coreans residents tant a Corea del Sud com els residents a Espanya. Ambdós grups han mostrat perspectives diferents, especialment en expressar quins elements influencien les seves decisions respecte la reproducció. A través de les dades recaptades gràcies a la enquesta en línia, s'ha descobert que els coreans que viuen a Espanya valoren molt més l'atmosfera social a diferencia dels residents a Corea del Sud que valoren la estabilitat econòmica per sobre. En última instància s'ha pogut concloure que les polítiques per augmentar la taxa de fecunditat haurien de focalitzarse no només a promoure incentius monetaris, sinó també a crear una nova atmosfera social a través de canvis socioestructurals en la qual la reproducció és més viable.

Datos del TFG

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Baja natalidad, Corea del Sur, Crisis demográfica, Atmosfera social, políticas de fertilidad

Resum del TFG

Corea del Sur muestra la tasa de fecundidad más baja de las naciones desarrolladas, una crisis nacional que el gobierno coreano ha estado más de dos décadas intentando solucionar con unos resultados insuficientes. Este trabajo de final de grado ofrece una nueva perspectiva analizando la percepción sobre la baja fecundidad y las influencias sobre la reproducción que tienen los coreanos residentes tanto en Corea del Sur como los residentes en España. Los dos grupos muestran perspectivas diferentes, especialmente al expresar cuáles son los elementos que influencian sus decisiones sobre tener hijos. A través de la información adquirida mediante de una encuesta en línea, se ha descubierto que los coreanos que viven en España valoran la atmósfera social mucho más que los residentes de Corea del Sur que valoran la estabilidad económica por encima. En última instancia se ha podido concluir que las políticas para aumentar la tasa de fecundidad deberían focalizarse no solo a promover incentivos monetarios, sinó también a crear una nueva atmosfera social a través de cambios socioestructurales en la cual la reproducción es más viable.

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저출산 문제, 출산율 인식, 인구 위기, 출산 정책, 사회 분위기

초록

대한민국은 모든 선진국 중에서 가장 낮은 출산율을 기록하고 있으며, 한국 정부는 지난 20년 동안 출산율을 높이기 위해 대책을 펼쳤지만 성과는 제한적이었다. 본 논문은 새로운 관점을 통해 스페인에서 거주하는 한인들과 한국에 거주하는 한국인들이 출산 문제를 어떻게 인식하고 있으며, 의사결정에 무엇이 영향을 미치는지 상세하게 분석였다. 두 그룹은 특히 자녀 출산을 고려할 때 어떤 요소가 결정에 영향을 미치는지에 대해 다른 관점을 보여주었다. 온라인 설문조사를 통해 수집한 자료에 따라서 한국에 거주하는 응답자들은 경제적인 안정성을 중요하게 생각하는 반면에, 스페인에 거주하는 한인들은 사회적인 분위기를 가장 중요하게 생각한다는 사실을 밝혔다. 결론적으로 출산율을 높이는 대책은 현금성 지원에만 집중하면 안 되며, 오히려 제도적인 사회적인 변화를 통해 출산이 긍정적으로 이루어질 수 있는 환경을 만드는 정책으로 보완되어야 한다고 결론을 내릴 수 있다.

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1 Introduction

The fertility decline is a global phenomenon that began during the 1960s instigated by the global increase in prosperity, socioeconomic development, trade and globalization after the Second World War. These brought access to more education and economic opportunities which led to the formation of smaller families and higher costs of living alongside the increase in urbanization, delayed marriages, new contraception methods and professionalization of jobs among the population, all of which derived in a decline in fertility rates in the most economically developed countries (Aitken, 2024).

In recent decades the Republic of Korea, as well as most OECD countries, has been facing the problem of low fertility (OECD, 2024). The Total fertility rate (TFR) is defined by the World Health Organization as the average number of children women aged from 15 to 49 years would have at the end of their reproductive period if they were subject to the fertility rates and not subject to mortality, which is expressed as children per woman (World Health Organization, n.d.). The TFR in South Korea has gone from 6.0 in 1960 to 1.3 in 2001, which can be understood as a consequence of the economic growth since the late 1960s and subsequent economic crisis, such as the 1997 Asian crisis (Lee & Choi, 2016). In 2023, the fertility rate dropped to 0.721 (KOSIS, 2025), continuing the declining trend and falling in the so-called *low fertility trap* and becoming the lowest rated country in the world (UN, 2025). Such low fertility entails social consequences such as the risk of a collapse of the pension system, worsening the inequality issues and pushing the elderly into hardship (Beak, 2025). Not only that but the economic impact that low fertility can have could also raise uncertainty and worsen the environment in which economic prosperity and fertility occur (OECD, 2024).

So far there have not been any research on the fertility rate of the Korean diaspora living in Spain and overall diaspora's fertility trends. In the case of Spain, this is a very under-researched topic in comparison to other East Asian countries' diaspora such as the Chinese or Japanese diaspora. The research aims to address this gap and understand

the perception of fertility of the Korean diaspora living in Spain to explore how a culturally different, yet economically similar environments can influence fertility and how. By doing so, we can shine light into what aspects of Spanish society could have a positive influence if present in South Korea in the eyes of this diaspora.

This paper's goal is to explore the issue of low fertility in the Republic of Korea by analyzing the different perspectives over the issue and the willingness of Koreans when it comes to childbearing both national and diaspora by conducting a survey. This diaspora will be the one located specifically in Spain, mainly in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. By investigating the difference of opinions and perspectives between Koreans abroad and Korean nationals we can showcase to what extent the differences in the environment they reside in have a positive impact in fertility. Through this data, this paper hopes to contribute to the current discussion about how culture and social environment, despite two countries having similar economic size, could have an impact on the decision-making regarding childbearing.

This investigation is guided by three core questions. First: Is the perception of fertility and childbearing among the Korean diaspora different than that of Koreans within South Korea? Second: If so, what factors could be influencing childbearing decisions? Third: What insight can be drawn from these results?

This thesis has been structured in six sections to provide a comprehensive analysis of the collected data and results found. The first section is this introduction. In the second section a literature review of previous conducted research and analysis will be presented to establish a conceptual framework and contextual background. The third section outlines the research methodology and details the survey’s formulation. The fourth section presents the survey’s results as well as an interpretation of the data it reveals. The fifth section explains how these results reinforce existing literature, it also discusses the core findings regarding the perception and opinions of respondents about fertility. Lastly, the last section offers the final remarks and conclusions.

2 Literature review

2.1 Scope of the Crisis: Demographic Threats and Spatial Disparities

Understanding why and acknowledging that having a low fertility rate is a serious issue is crucial in order to start engaging with the problem. When considering why the TFR being below the 2.1 replacement rate is an issue, it is not only about the willingness of population to have children, but it also represents a future threat for the economy. This threat is palpable in a fast-aging society like the South Korean, which is expected to surpass Japan on median age by 2040 (Kim and Chung, 2014). This has a profound implication for workforce dynamics, economic growth, healthcare systems and the necessary social policies to take care of this aging population. Higher aging population leads to bigger government spending on the healthcare system, negative consequences on labor market and the risk of worsening the condition of the elderly. Having a low TFR and an aged population entails a future where the state will not be able to maintain economically the elderly. If left unrevised, further social problems like elderly poverty, social isolation or the risk of never retiring could manifest. There is also the risk of a reinforcing loop forming, in which the elderly would have to be taken care of by their families which inevitably would worsen the material conditions necessary for sustaining a positive fertility rate (Kim and Chung, 2014).

So far, the low fertility problem has been discussed extensively in the social science sphere. However, there hasn´t been a consensus on how to approach the low fertility rate decline. In this section, different points of view and proposed solutions will be presented to address the issue. Even though there is general agreement that the low fertility rate is a severe issue, there are many disagreements and ways of theorizing a possible solution. Nonetheless, most scholars emphasize that the most important role in reverting the declining trend must be the government's role and its policies (Bogenscheinder & Lee, 2024; Jeong, et al., 2022; Kim, 2024; Cho, 2021). Traditional socioeconomic analysis on this issue often emphasizes that the decline comes from the increase of female education rate and participation rate in the labor force, which leads to later marriages. However, this explanation has various limitations and puts indirectly the blame on women. It's an explanation to support a political agenda instead of seeking a solution to the problem. There are various factors that influence fertility decline and

the focus shouldn't be put on the role of women in the labor economy but on examining the effectiveness of policies and the social environment (Jeong et al., 2022). In the academic sphere, it is also discussed that a new perspective is needed since the policies until now, even though the fertility rate decline has been to some extent mitigated, have not solved the issue and a long-term policy is called for (Kwag et al., 2024).

Some authors who analyze the issue attribute its origins to the Confucianist culture in the region, the overall study and work culture, as well as calling for a broader societal change (Beak, 2025; Jeong et al., 2022; Lee & Lee, 2025). It is well known that economic development and urbanization greatly influence the fertility rate negatively. The rapid economic development, alongside the Confucianist background that aligns well with the current neoliberal tendencies has been crucial in constructing South Korea as a major economic power in the 21ts century. However, these have influenced fertility rates negatively not only in South Korea, but overall, the OECD members' economy. Furthermore, the cultural and historical background of the country has had a great influence in explaining why South Korea is the lowest fertility rate of the OECD members. This can be seen in *Understanding South Korea's Birth Rate Collapse: From Overeducation to Underpopulation,* where the problem is defined as:

> *This crisis is not just about numbers. It is rooted in the social and economic structures that shape people's lives: an unforgiving work culture, high education costs, and gender inequality.* (Beak 2025, on OECD 2024).

Regional disparities are mentioned as an important factor that indirectly affects fertility rates across the country by causing a lack of income stability, employment opportunities, housing affordability and access to services. But more importantly by causing a migration from rural areas to the economic center of the country (Lee & Lee, 2025). Demographic imbalances have a chain effect on fertility which is known as the neighborhood effect: lower income households tend to try to match the higher income household's educational investment. Under this premise and that the best education exists in Seoul, it is not surprising the huge number of households seeking education and employment opportunities in the metropolitan area. Furthermore, more opportunities result in higher income, and individuals with higher incomes tend to prioritize consumption and individualistic values over marriage or childbirth (Lee & Lee, 2025). The concentration of the economy in Seoul leaves behind the rest of the territory leading to a high economic disparity. Since the tendency is to look for better opportunities, younger

generations migrate to Seoul or other metropolitan areas leaving the rural areas in a serious state of stagnation. Furthermore, societal pressure from the economic centers halts the migrant's fertility. This entails that not only will migrants not contribute to the fertility rate of their home region but also will fall in the fertility trap in their new destination (Lee & Lee, 2025).

These regional disparities contribute to the decline of fertility rate in an important manner, and we could argue that a comprehensive national-level discussion on solving the fertility decline crisis integrating an alternative regional level approach is necessary (Lee & Lee, 2025). Parents who want to provide the best education need to move closer to where these services are provided. The best services are allocated in more competitive areas, which has led to migration towards the surroundings of Seoul. Nonetheless, Seoul lacks the space and security needed for family friendly environments. Because of this, parents often move to Gyeonggi and must commute every day to Seoul adding up to societal burnout (Han, 2015). The regional disparities and migration are a prime example of how the systemic problem caused by the centralization of the economic activities in the country contributes to fertility decline and should be considered when discussing the issue.

2.2 Structural Pressure: Work Culture, Education and Burnout Economy

When a great part of the population avoids childbearing, this is likely attributable to systemic structural conditions. If the cost of childbearing is elevated, the general perception appears among the population that having children is a burden, rather than understanding childbearing as a meaningful stage of life to be embraced. In the following section different theories about what the systemic problems that cause low fertility rate are will be presented.

Samuel Beak (2025) points out work culture as something that is too harsh on citizens. Specifically, in the metropolitan area where commuting is estimated to be 101 minutes each day. This is paired with demanding work hours, not many holidays, job uncertainty and the great percentage of Arubaitu (아르바이트: temporary part time jobs) that are excluded from benefits such as parental leave. This situation has caused a phenomenon where many young Koreans remain in a lingering position and cannot transition into

marriage or parenthood, either because they don't meet the job requirements, or because there aren't enough job opportunities.

Furthermore, for those who do meet their career goals parenthood becomes an expensive burden. Gender roles determine that women must take care of children, and parental leave is seen as a treason to the employer. Consequently, women who have graduated after years of hard work from top universities hardly would want all their hard work halted by parenthood (Baek, 2025). So, it is argued that work culture in South Korea is also a problem to be addressed seriously as long working hours, pressure and expectations can cause burnout. Burnout can be defined as a phenomenon related to external expectations and social demands which are present in South Korea. These external expectations keep the individual from taking their desired decisions in favor of the common goal presented by society, which in long term cause depression and a lack of purpose (Han, 2015). There are many causes of burnout: long working hours, long commuting time, deadlines, undesired company dinners (Baek, 2025), but perhaps the most relevant to the fertility rate and the work culture is giving up parental leave, or for women, the impossibility of having children and maintaining a professional career.

Reconciliation of work and family is a huge obstacle for South Koreans, especially women who are expected to take care of children, women whose careers are abrupted by childbirth (Cho, 2021; Baek, 2025). Nonetheless, the societal pressure, and specifically the work cultural pressure, also affects men in this regard. Men are expected to not take parental leave, even if they have the legal right to do so. Parental leaves have been extensively discussed by Korean scholars, some research determined that taking parental leave creates guilt in many since reflects negatively in their commitment to the employer or could interfere with their relationship with their colleagues (Bogenscheinder & Lee, 2024). It is reported that one third of human resources departments states that taking parental leave causes work overload amongst colleagues. It is also reported that another third states that finding a substitute worker is quite hard (Bogenscheinder & Lee, 2024). In their work Bogenscheinder and Lee (2024), emphasize that the government must develop the policies necessary to lower the costs of children bearing, adjust its parental leave policy, encourage companies to create a safe environment for future parents and make it easier to employ substitutes. Since taking parental leave can damage one's career and economic capacities, people just give it up (Baek 2015). This contributes to the idea that having children is a burden rather harmful

than beneficial to one's life. Ultimately, having to decide whether having children or not because it is something that could harm one's position is how childbearing becomes a form of burnout for the individual (Han 2015). Many want to have children but the pressure from their environment doesn't allow them to do so in a comfortable manner, feeling that either they have to give up childbirth or they have to give up their career goals.

The societal pressure does not stop there. There is also the Confucianist and other religious influences. These are present in the fact that before parenthood a couple is expected to be married, and unmarried couples or single parents often lack social acceptance and have limited legal support. Marriage is often seen as a prerequisite for having children, and many feel that marriage can become a burden because of gender roles. It is also important to point out that South Korea is a society where people are expected to be married before having children. Furthermore, they also are expected to own a house before marrying. In this context, the social expectations are impossible to meet for young couples, so marriage and childbearing are delayed or given up (Beak, 2025).

Lastly, the other systemic issue at hand is the education system in South Korea which is again related to the Confucianist duties to one another. The education in South Korea has been vastly recognized as a key issue regarding fertility rate by scholars because of how expensive, competitive and demanding it is (Anderson and Kohler, 2013; Bae, 2012; Kim and Chung, 2014). Anderson and Kohler expose than 77% of the respondents to their investigation explained that private school's expenditure is the main difficulty when educating primary school students (Anderson and Kohler, 2013). It can be concluded that the cost of education and pressure on both children and parents have a great influence on why more Koreans delay or avoid childbearing.

Furthermore, parents have the duty of providing the best education for their children, which has become an arms race. Parents are willing to pay more for the best education, and when all parents do the same the more expensive it becomes (Anderson and Kohler, 2013). This entails that children's education becomes extremely expensive, and it becomes an important factor when considering childbearing (Kim et al., 2024). We can see how these externalities cause economic burden, and how it's not limited to housing and the cost of living but add up to it. Dedicating such an enormous amount of income for each child's education denies the possibility of raising more than one or two children

for average income households. This trend of high parental investment is known as the education fever, which exemplifies the idea of quality (of children) over quantity and inevitably leads to a fertility drop:

> *After all, the more children in a family, the fewer financial resources are able to be delegated to each child's education and as thought by many Korean parents, the less likely their children will end up being 'successful' (Anderson and Kohler, 2013, p. 203).*

This not only stops parents from having more children but also puts pressure on both students and parents to perform better and not fail each other. A survey by the Health Ministry exposed that 9 out of 10 people in Korea say that the low fertility rate is serious, but people are reluctant to have children due to financial problems (Bae, 2012). A student who suffers a lot of pressure and spends most of their time studying is most likely to settle down later, because they want to enjoy life after exiting the education system instead of forming families. This is prime consequence of the hyper-competitive education system.

The education fever can be explained by the notion that any child can achieve advancement, prosperity and social mobility through education. In this environment parents must invest in the best education to not fail their children. In 2009, it was estimated that 75% of all children part-took some type of private education, which happened to grow up to 80% in 2024 despite the dropping TFR (KOSIS, 2024). This competitiveness is applied to everything, and parents who fail to provide support break the norm are classified as irresponsible. Having to meet all these social demands inevitably adds up to the idea that childbearing is another burden. The sacrifice of parents is reflected by a phenomenon called the girogi appa (기러기 아빠) or geese father which is a term used when a parent stays in Korea and the rest of the family lives in a English speaking country so their kids have a bilingual education (Anderson and Kohler, 2013). This is not an isolated case occurring in South Korea, it is global phenomenon that it's especially noticeable in East Asian nations where there are high competition and a high population density. Kim Chae Young and Sung-Hoon Chung (2024), look at similar countries such as Singapore, Japan and China to see what we can learn from their cases. They highlight the fact that this is a shared problem and there are cultural, historical and economic reasons why the region has developed in this way. They explain that in East Asian nations many parents spend much more time and financial

resources ensuring that their children gain access to top universities and careers than other regions which leads to couples only having 1 or 2 children or not having children at all. This is also reflected in another phenomenon that contributed to the low fertility rate which is the quality over quantity phenomenon. Quality over quantity means that parents prefer to have one well-educated kid that will take care of them when they are older rather than many children. This also ties up with the education fever especially in very dense demographic regions such as the big metropolitan cities of East Asia (Kim and Chung, 2024). This has a domino effect that puts pressure on younger generations who might not be able to meet the external expectation and end up burned out and becoming extremely individualistic, refusing normative lifestyles and traditional family models (Han, 2015).

2.3 Gender Dynamics, Labor and the Traditional Family Model

The approach to how policies regarding the issue of the low fertility rate and how these impact women is complex. In the 1994 Cairo and 1995 Beijing Conferences governments acknowledged reproductive rights as universal human rights. It was established that family planning is a goal to help empowering women and their status and to improve fertility rates (Cho, 2021). Following these principles, we can understand that the relationship between a government and women's decision to engage in motherhood is sensible. Government should not impose an obligation of maternity upon the population.

By the beginning of the 2000's, the South Korean government started to plan policies to boost fertility. However, these policies gave limited consideration to substantial factors such as enhancing gender equality, women's individuals' rights, welfare and support. The policies and the way they approach women's rights and gender role in society can be seen reflected in Kyung Ae Cho (2021)'s research. Here she exposes the idea that in the early 2000's younger generations of South Korea women felt that "*the government simply sees women as a tool for childbirth and is attempting to control population growth*" (Cho, 2021). This showcases the insufficient integration of the 1994 Cairo and 1995 Beijing Conferences and neglecting the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ratified by South Korea in 1984. By 2021 the government reestablished the policy for society and population welfare adding necessary considerations such as: governmental support for healthcare services for

pregnancy, sexual health, menstrual health, contraceptives and abortion rights, sexually transmitted infections and gender-based violence prevention. However, unlike other OECD nations, family related policy is only applicable for marriage, blood or adoption relationships, limiting the impact of government de facto relationships support receive. The integration of various types of families as well as research, education and policy developments are necessary to have a positive effect on fertility (Cho, 2021).

Women's studies in both South Korea and the East Asia region expose the gender inequality as direct causes of fertility decline (Kwag et al., 2024). The participation of women in labor is often pointed out as an important cause of low fertility. However, feminist literature points out how this is not a direct reason to why fertility has declined. Instead, some researchers point out that low fertility is not strictly caused by the participation of women in labor, but because of the demographics transitions due to the growth of the economy instead (Ochiai, 2020). For instance, in Europe these demographic transitions took over a hundred years to happen. However, in Asia since the economies developed so quickly these demographics transitions happened in the span of one or two decades, a phenomenon which we can refer to as compressed modernity. Countries that experience this compressed modernity phenomenon are those that industrialized and developed economically in the second half of the 20th century and experience low fertility rate as a consequence of such quick economic and demographic changes (Ochiai, 2020). In a broader understanding of the matter, the participation of women in labor is not such a direct cause of fertility decline as the impact of socioeconomic changes in an individual’s lives is. The socioeconomic development of a country, especially under neoliberal pressure and the individualist values it carries, are the main systemic factors that lead to fertility decline. In short, fertility decline is more connected to social welfare and the hostile environment that citizens experience, rather than women participation in labor. Failing to recognize this and putting the blame on women, eventually would lead to regression in social policies regarding equality, which would worsen the environment for fertility.

The traditional female role is established with the creation of nation states, and in East Asia particularly, what we often refer to as tradition is a recent construction. This construction represents the values and beliefs of the elite, in the case of South Korea yangban (양반), rather than the broad historical culture of all people sangmin (상민).

Efforts for industrialization and the construction of the nation-state is the indoctrination of the majority in what elites believe is civilized in an effort to create a shared identity and receive the majority's loyalty. In other words, a cultural revolution was conducted which had underlying social consequences and established an occidental model of modern family. This is relevant because female studies and folklore studies show that common people did not have such gender labor disparities, since in poor families all members work and Neoconfucianism was by and for the elite mostly (Deuchler, 2012). Female labor was widely extended in Korea historically and fertility rate was not necessarily declining due to this reason. This fact is important because criticizing female work participation for leading to low fertility rates is a conservative political agenda to keep this elite's beliefs and values relevant, rather than providing an objective criticism to solve the issue.

Housewifization is the term we use to refer to the role of women in the traditional gender role model where women are regarded as the administrator of the household. Furthermore, we also find the term dehousewifization, which is used to explain the phenomenon occurred where women access labor outside the household. Women studies argue that due to low fertility rates some countries are experiencing rehousewifization (Ochiai, 2020), which is the phenomenon of women returning to the modern families' role of household administrators. Rehousewifization can happen due to government short-term policies to increase fertility, which indirectly blame the participation of women in labor of the fertility decline. If looking to boost fertility holding this position is dangerous. Female labor does not necessarily entail fertility decline, but the worsening of gender equality, women's rights and economic independence could. Instead, social long-term policies promoting welfare and reducing pressure for all are needed to have long-term stability (Kwag et al., 2024).

2.4 Lessons from Past Policy Efforts and their Limitations

Since 2006, the South Korea government has implemented five-year policy cycles known as the Basic Plan for Low Fertility and Aging Society aiming to reverse the demographic decline and promote policies to boost fertility rates.

In the first Basic Plan (2006-2010) the government identified delayed marriages as the primary issue regarding the low birth rate and linked this phenomenon to youth's low income and employment instability. Furthermore, they dedicated 60% of the policies

to the decrease in childbirth rates, which continues in the Basic Plans up to date. They specially focused on incentives to increase marriages. However, it has been concluded that citizens were avoiding marriage, as well as childbirth, altogether and the impact of the first Basic Plan was limited (Kim, 2024).

In the second Basic Plan (2011-2015) the government kept the same strategy and focused on incentivizing marriages. Policies for public childcare, education, medical expenses for pregnancy and childbirth were expanded but its influence was still limited.

During the third Basic Plan (2016-2020) the government cut down the number of policies and shifted towards youth independence hoping that young people could find jobs earlier and marry early. Its effect was also limited since the government kept focusing on the issue of marriages.

In the fourth Basic plan (2021-2025) the government finally expanded its definition of the problem: it was recognized to be not only the issue of late marriages but the societal structure's flaws that lead to this phenomenon. The labor market gaps and instability, gender inequality, risk of career breaks and rising prices of houses are established as the reasons why marriages and childbirth are delayed or abandoned. During this period the right to parental leave was strengthened, incentives for companies to hire women who have undergone career breaks were introduced as well as measures to support housing for the youth and equal gender environment. There were advancements especially regarding gender inequality. However, it still failed to recognize that the problem is not only gender inequality, but more complex structural issues that cause the universal youth struggle as well as the issue of population concentration in the Seoul metropolitan area (Kim, 2024).

We can see that the government failed to address the youth struggle and focused strictly on tackling the decline of childbirth rates through policies seeking boost marriages and economic benefits. It is argued that this is partly because the government sought short-term visible solutions, such as financial support for new parents, instead of a long-term structural shift involving broader societal changes to address the origin of low fertility (Kim, 2024).

In 2022, the Young Adults Survey conducted by the Korean government was conducted, by analyzing it researchers argue that economic approach is not significant in some respects, meanwhile pointing out that social approaches should be considered more seriously in order to overcome this issue. Gender equality, proportionate childcare

responsibilities, social trust and self-actualization amongst others, were found as key points to address when making low fertility awareness campaigns or policy (Kwag et al., 2024). Because of this there researchers have been calling for demographic research that should address the multifaceted nature of fertility decisions and a more holistic approach to policy based on this demographic research from researchers (Kwag et al., 2024).

Regarding types of policies, some scholars divide the South Korea's low fertility rate policies as it follows: cash policy, in-kind policy, voucher policy, service policy and education and public relations policies. Cash policy is presented to be the direct economic support for children under the age of 7. In-kind policy are various policies related to providing families with essentials such as diapers and infant formula. Voucher policies include support related to health during pregnancy such as ultrasound examinations and service policy related to education, childbirth preparation classes and so on. Upon analyzing policies in this framework through a quantitative method, it is concluded that these policies overall didn't have the expected results. It is again argued that policies didn't accomplish an actual change nor short or long term (Jeong et al., 2022; Kim, 2024). Further analysis proposes the idea that policies until now have been centered on childbirth and not the decline in the fertility rate. In other words: policies support those who already have children but do not incentivize population to have them. This reflects the limited efficiency of cash support or childcare services which account for a great proportion of the policies. Instead, policies should seek to reshape the environment in which citizens decide to have children. Another point of argument is that some policies apply to married couples denying support for non-traditional families or single parents (Jeong et al., 2022), limiting the effect of policies. The perspective that cash incentives are not enough, and that the government should focus on housing, pensions or infrastructure as well is well expanded in the academia (Beak, 2025; Jeong et al., 2022; Kim, 2024; Kim and Chung, 2024).

To address the decreasing population, three main strategies are proposed: first, using immigration as an alternative to increase the workforce and counter the low birth rates to balance the demographic structure and reinforce the economy (Baek, 2025). There might be downsides to this measure, mainly political and social resistance evidenced by far-right groups that lead to political instability and societal divisions (Kim and Chung, 2024). The dependence on immigration might create long-term imbalances and strain

public services and infrastructure due to the sudden increase of population. Another challenge is the quality of the labor imported, this could lead to an oversupply in certain sectors leaving key sectors in shortages and exacerbating the underlaying causes. The challenge of ensuring the well-being of immigrants as well as nationals also could appear (Kim and Chung, 2024).

The second proposed strategy is providing financial support which have proved to have a significant role in cases such as Hungary and Sweden. These policies involved guaranteeing parental leave and lifted housing cost burden by providing huge housing subsidies. Still, it is argued that these kinds of policies by themselves are not sufficient to solve the fertility issue (Kwag et al., 2024). There is also the problem of crafting financial policies that are accessible to all population, not only traditional marriages. Also addressing the cost of living effectively is an important challenge (Baek, 2025). Such policies would need to be monitored and reconsidered following society's developments and economic needs for separate times (Kim and Chung, 2024).

Finally, there is a social support policies strategy. These are meant to provide what financial support policies do not: promoting self-actualization, equality of gender, career and financial stability and a reform on societal norms and the view on marriage that influence negatively on fertility rates and similar opinions. To some extent this type of policies where present in the previous Basic Plans (Kim, 2024). One of which is the education and awareness programs that address and educate citizens on the low birth rate issue (Kim and Chung, 2024). Implementing these strategies offers us an importantly holistic and inclusive approach. Since the causes of the fertility issue are manifested in different fronts, a holistic approach is needed. Not only economic but normative policy and societal approaches seem the optimal way to more towards a long-term solution.

3 Methodology

3.1 Case study: Korean Immigrants in Spain

This study focuses on the case of Korean immigrants in the Kingdom of Spain. The kingdom of Spain shows a low fertility rate itself just like South Korea, along with problems in housing and pension. Yet, the observations of Korean immigrants in Spain seem to perceive Spain as a better environment for childbirth. Paradoxically Korean immigrants in Spain seem to be more receptive to the idea of childbearing than Koreans inside the Republic of Korea. Under this hypothesis, we will compare and analysis the data collected from the survey (see 3.2).

It Is estimated that there are around 700 Korean residents in Barcelona (IDESCAT, 2024). It is a small community compared to the diaspora allocated in other countries and it can be divided between older and new generations. On one hand the older generation is the one who still holds Confucianist and patriarchal values and started to arrive during the 60's and formed a community surrounding churches. On the other hand, we refer to new generation as the migrants who arrive after the 2000's and 2010's and have a different view on transnationalism and traditional values. These two generations have diametrically different positions on social issues and do not interact with each other (Lee, 2021).

It is interesting comparing Spain and South Korea due to demographic and economic similarities of the two countries. Comparable data to create a picture of how similar both economies are at a macro level can be found as follows (Table 1*)*:

Indicator	Republic of Korea	Spain
Population (2024)	51,805,547	48,619,695
GDP at market prices (2024, trillion USD)	1,823	1,707
GDP per capita (2023, USD)	34,168	33,123
Total Fertility Rate (2023)	0.721	1.04

Table 1. Comparison of main indicators Republic of Korea and the Kingdom of Spain (Source: KOSIS, 2025; INE, 2025)

The Republic of Korea and Spain have a total population of 51,805,547 and 48.619.695; GDP at market prices of 1,823 trillion USD and 1,707 trillion USD, and GDP per capita of 34,168 USD and 33,123 USD, respectively, which are very much similar. Nonetheless the fertility rate does have a significant gap as TFR in 2023 of Spain were 1.04 and a lowest figure recorded for South Korea of 0.721 in 2023(KOSIS, 2025; INE, 2025). Culturally, however, these two countries are quite different from one another, especially when it comes to work, social expectations, values and academic culture.

The scope of this paper was determined to analyze the opinion and perception about the fertility issue and childbearing of Korean nationals on one side and, the Korean diaspora in Spain on the other. It is important to remark that this paper did not explain

the reason for this difference in TFR. Rather it focused on how the environment can influence the TFR of the Korean diaspora. This paper by no means aimed to describe Spain's existing policies regarding TFR decline, nor compare them to the Republic of Korea's policies. Both economies, even although nominal aspects might seem similar, are quite different when it comes to specific policy, politics, and cultural background. So, to compare both more in-depth and detailed analysis would be necessary was not presented in this study. This paper also did not present statistically representative data since the scale of the surveys conducted are rather small, instead data reflected an explorative insight that tried to highlight a trend within the diaspora in Spain and the Korean nationals that had taken part of this study. The result offered an initial framework that could be expanded, refuted or studied further in detail in future investigations.

3.2 Online Survey

An online survey has been used as a main research method. The target of this survey are Koreans residing both in South Korea and in Spain, specifically Barcelona, between the ages of 18 to 59 years old. This survey has been divided into three parts: the first part aims to establish the demographic group indicating age, gender, marital status, place of residence, interest in childbearing and what factors they consider when thinking about it. The second part is dedicated those who reside in Korea, the third part those who reside or have resided in Spain. Both include questions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of these places regarding childbearing: Housing market, education system, work culture, societal pressure, what did they consider is more important and why, also if governmental support influences and what do they think could solve the problem. It has been designed in Korean and distributed online via Google Forms. It consists of thirty-three questions with multiple question types, mainly multiple-choice questions followed by an open answer question. It has been distributed from December 2025 to March 2026. The total number of participants has been 54: 38 residing in Korea and 16 who have resided in Spain for at least three years. Participants have been anonymous, no sensitive personal data has been asked, and the academic nature of the investigation has been informed before providing the questionnaire. Despite the short time and small number of respondents this survey offers some original and empirical data that contributes to the better understanding of the fertility rate of Koreans in Spain.

4 Survey Results

In this section the primary data collected from the survey is introduced to understand the Korean's perception regarding fertility in terms of how the social environment impacts their views on perspective. The presented data is both qualitative and quantitative to showcase the trends and shine light into the insights.

4.1 Profile of Respondents

In the following table, we can find respondents' gender by age group and location (Table 2*)*. Most of the respondents were women in their 20's and 30's who were directly connected to the fertility issue, and were expected to have children:

Location	Age Group	Male	Female
South Korea	10s	1	0
	20s	2	20
	30s	3	3
	40s	1	1
	50s	1	2
Spain (≥3 years)	20s	1	1
	30s	3	5
	40s	2	2
	50s	0	2
Spain (<3 years)	20s	0	2
	30s	0	1
	40s	0	1
TOTAL		**14**	**40**

Table 2. Location of survey respondents by age group, gender and place of residence

In the following (Table 3), an insight of look at the marital status in relation to gender and place of residence. Out of the 54 respondents 32 were single, the majority being men and women on their 20's and 30's. An interesting aspect to point out is that none of the 38 respondents from South Korea was in a situation of co-habiting with their partner, signaling that couples do not live together before marriage as Beak (2025) explains is due to societal pressure, unlike the 4 respondents out of the 16 who reside in Spain who are co-habiting.

Location	Age	Gender	Married	Co-habiting	Single
South Korea	10s	Male	0	0	1
	20s	Male	0	0	2
		Female	1	0	19
	30s	Male	2	0	1
		Female	1	0	2
	40s	Male	0	0	1
		Female	1	0	0
	50s	Male	1	0	0
		Female	2	0	0

Spain (≥ 3 yrs)	20s	Male	0	0	1
		Female	0	1	0
	30s	Male	1	0	2
		Female	2	2	1
	40s	Male	2	0	0
		Female	1	0	1
	50s	Female	2	0	0
Spain (< 3 yrs)	20s	Female	0	1	1
	30s	Female	1	0	0
	40s	Female	1	0	0
TOTAL			**18**	**4**	**32**

Table 3. Marital status of respondents by gender, place of residence and age group

Furthermore, another interesting view that matches the expectations can be identified: out of all the respondents none had children outside of marriage (Table 4).

Location	Marital Status	No Kids	1 Child	2+ Kids
South Korea	Married	4	1	3
	Single	**26**	**0**	**0**
Spain (≥ 3 years)	Married	2	5	1
	Co-habiting / Single	**3**	**0**	**0**
Spain (< 3 years)	Married	0	1	1
	Co-habiting / Single	**2**	**0**	**0**
TOTAL		**42**	**7**	**5**

Table 4. Number of children of respondents by location and marital status

Finding also showcase that couples with more than 2 children who reside in South Korea are on their 50's and none of the married couples in their 20's or 30's had children yet, meanwhile the one's residing in Spain some had children. This supports the idea that younger generations have less children and have them later in life (Table 5).

Location	Age Group	0 Kids	1 Child	2+ Children
South Korea	20s	1	0	0
	30s	3	0	0
	40s	0	1	0
	50s	0	0	**3**
Spain (All)	30s	2	2	1
	40s	0	4	0
	50s	0	1	1

Table 5. Number of children of married couples by location

This phenomenon is connected to the idea that the highly competitive education and economic environment lead South Koreans to delay or give up childbearing in front of

economic stability. The following table displays how, even there were less respondents from Spain, these had more children than the ones from South Korea. This signals that the hypothesis that a different environment like the Spanish society where the education and work culture are more relaxed have a positive impact on fertility. It is also concluded that none of the 6 respondents from South Korea in their 30's had children, while the 7 from Spain 2 of them have one child (Table 6).

Resident Location	Age Group	Accomplished education Level	No Children	Has Children	Total with children
South Korea	20s	High School	10	0	**4**
		Bachelor's	10	0	
		Master's	2	0	
	30s	Bachelor's	4	0	
		Master's	2	0	
	40s	Master's	1	0	
		Bachelor's	0	1	
	50s	Bachelor's	0	2	
		Other (working school)	0	1	
Spain (All)	20s	High School	2	0	**8**
		Bachelor's	2	0	
	30s	Master's	5	1	
		Bachelor's	2	1	
	40s	PhD	1	1	
		Bachelor's	0	3	
	50s	PhD	0	1	
		Master's	0	1	
TOTAL			**41**	**12**	**12**

Table 6. Highest level of education and number of children by location and age group

4.2 The Social Atmosphere and Conditions for Childbearing

In this section, the data collected reflects the respondent's willingness to engage in childbearing and what they perceive as obstacles will be presented. By examining the average desired and actual average childbearing, the fertility gap and contrast the results of Koreans in South Korea and in Spain can be identified (Table 7):

Location Group	Average Desired	Actual Average	Fertility Gap
South Korea (34)	1.37	0.24	**1.13**
Spain (All) (20)	1.23	0.5	**0.73**

Table 7. Desired fertility of respondents and actual fertility by location

The fertility gap is significant in both cases. However, despite the sampled group being smaller in the case of Spain the actual average is twice the South Korean. This is also reflected in the difference between both fertility gaps value, which for South Koreans is notably larger (Table 7). By examining at this data, it was concluded that Koreans residing in Spain found themselves in an environment where achieving their childbearing goals is more feasible. It is also important to point that the desired average is higher in South Koreans, this can be interpreted as South Koreans not being able to achieve their desired childbearing due to the obstacles caused by the immediate environment rather than the lack of desire. This exact phenomenon was explained by one of the respondents who stated the following:

> *I believe there is a problem with government policies that only provide monetary support. I think the situation would improve significantly if there were tax exemptions or other benefits, like Eastern Europe. Looking at my friends, many of them want to have more children, but they don't want to have a second child due to economic issues. (Respondent number 45 from Spain).*

The period in one's lifetime when respondents wanted to engage in childbearing was as follows (Table 8):

Ideal age for childbirth	South Korea (34)	Spain (All) (20)	Total
20-25 years	2 (5.9%)	1 (5.0%)	**3**
25-30 years	10 (29.4%)	4 (20.0%)	**14**
30-35 years	20 (58.8%)	12 (60.0%)	**32**
Over 35 years	0 (0.0%)	1 (5.0%)	**1**
No appropriate age	2 (5.9%)	2 (10.0%)	**4**

Table 8. Ideal age for childbirth by respondents

There was a consensus around 60% of the respondents that the best time to have children is in the first half of one's 30's (Table 8). This was consistent with the idea that

before having children one must secure an appropriate and stable job (Baek, 2025). Even though participants from Spain and South Korea agreed in this regard, the significant difference lied on how the environment allows them to achieve this position in this period of their life or not. As shown in Table 6 none of the respondents from South Korea in their 30's had children, meanwhile some in Spain did. There are also some testimonies that support the fact that private life and work-life reconciliation is a problem:

> *(As a solution to the fertility problem) Strengthening work-life balance and creating a social culture where women's career advancement and childbirth can coexist. (Respondent number 32 from South Korea).*

Another interesting response highlighting the ineffectiveness of cash policies and the traditional family role model was from respondent number 5:

> *To have many children, the age of childbirth needs to be younger. However, childbirth requires marriage, and marriage requires a job with stable income instead of one-time financial support. It is difficult to have children just because the government gives a bit more subsidies. I believe we need policies that allow people to secure stable jobs quickly in their early 20s. (Respondent number 5 from South Korea)*

This recurrent argument that one of the most important factors in the fertility issue is the importance of the immediate environment's pressure was supported by another finding: the significant percentage of respondents who believed raising children overseas is better than doing so in South Korea (*Figure 1*):

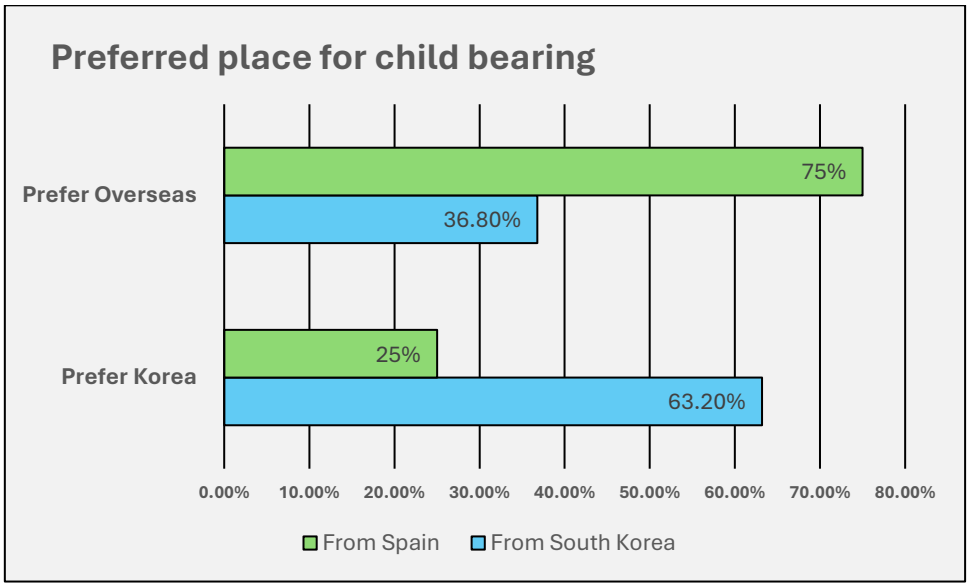


Figure 1. Preferred place for childbearing from respondents

More than one third of respondents from South Korea believed that overseas is more suitable for childbearing than South Korea reinforcing the idea that the immediate environment itself is a significant problem to them, meanwhile three fourths of the

respondents from Spain expressed the same attitude showing that living abroad consolidates this opinion.

Respondents also expressed the reasons why they don't want more children or any at all as follows (Table 9):

Reason	South Korea	Spain
Financial burden (rearing/education)	15 (**39.5%**)	4 (**25.0%**)
Work-life balance difficulties	12 (**31.6%**)	4 (**25.0%**)
Lifestyle (freedom/personal time)	8 (**21.1%**)	5 (**31.2%**)
Old age preparation/pension concerns	5 (**13.2%**)	2 (**12.5%**)
Do not feel the need for marriage/childbirth	3 (**7.9%**)	3 (**18.8%**)
Health-related difficulties	3 (**7.9%**)	1 (**6.2%**)
Burden of traditional gender roles	3 (**7.9%**)	1 (**6.2%**)
Other reasons	2 (**5.3%**)	1 (**6.2%**)

Table 9. Reasons to avoid childbearing by respondents by place of residence

In this a great number of the respondents express their concern with financial burden caused by childbearing, as well as the work and family balancing difficulties can be seen. On top of that individual lifestyle choice, the lack of need for marriage or childbirth were also present in the data. As expected, the biggest burden Koreans perceive towards childbirth was posed by economic obstacles and work-family reconciliation of personal and professional life. This suggests what kind of policy should be sought to solve the issue, not only economic support but policies that aim to make work-family reconciliation possible.

These ideas were also supported by some respondents, specifically Respondent number 7 from South Korea highlighted the indifference of the younger generation towards fertility rates due to their more immediate problems:

> *Personally, I think the problem of low birth rates in South Korea is serious. However, friends of a similar age to me don't seem to have much interest... I believe the social and educational system, which only forced us to study to enter a good university before we turned 20, makes it difficult for students who grew up in this system to feel well-disposed towards having children. (Respondent number 7 from South Korea).*

The following testimony suggests that the lack of interest in solving the problem from younger Koreans is due to educational burnout caused by the system and its implications. Furthermore, other respondents have similar opinions and criticize the education system:

> *The low birth rate in Korea is at a serious level. Fertility rates are 0.6 because after marrying people hesitate whether having at least 1 child. There are a heavy burden of private education costs and a strong tendency of distrust towards public education. Due to the culture of comparing oneself to others, people feel they are falling behind if they don't provide private education. (Respondent number 35 from Spain)*.

This last testimony reflects perfectly the reality of education's arms race, the high cost of education and how societal pressure influences parents to provide the best private education to their children, indirectly putting obstacles to childbearing (Kim and Chung, 2024; Baek, 2025; Anderson and Kohler, 2013). It can also be found that respondents who clearly point out the gender roles and how they believe this is a serious factor:

> *I think that the low fertility rate is a serious social crisis. It seems difficult that it would be solved merely by expanding monetary support. There is a structure where the anxiety over career breaks, specially from women, are excessive. I also believe that the origin of this issue is the weight of having to bear with the role of parent and its responsibilities that makes people hesitate when considering childbirth. (Respondent number 19 from South Korea).*

Respondent number 19 displayed this attitude of women having to worry about career breaks and their individual freedoms being reduced due to the traditional role that women are expected to adapt after marriage and childbirth in South Korea.

Respondents number 42 and 23 also expressed their inconformity towards the gender role status and family's model when asked about the fertility issue stating:

> *(The low fertility rate) is the result of the societal men-women discrimination. (Respondent number 42 from Spain).*
>
> *I think it's a serious problem, there is a need for change in the social perception of gender roles and what a family is, as well as participation of childcare in a social dimension. (Respondent number 23 from South Korea*).

Lastly, respondent number 2 expressed their concern for the future of the country due to the complexity of the issue and the scope of the required solution:

> *For the future of the country this must be solved. However, education, cost of living and housing, etc... These fundamental socio-structural issues are intertwined and are not easy to solve. It feels suffocating. (Respondent number 2 from South Korea)*

All these clearly express the idea that it is not only about economic factors rather than societies' expectations of them, and how this leads to an inability for self-actualization, self-development and causes a feeling of imprisonment (Han, 2015).

Nonetheless, when asked if an increase in government support would influence them, most respondents expressed that it would have an influence on their position towards fertility (Table 10):

Would government support influence your position?	Total
Some Influence	40 (**74.1%**)
Significant Influence	8 (**14.8%**)
No Influence at All	5 (**9,3%**)
Other: Living overseas, so not sure.	1 (**1.9%**)

Table 10. Influence of governmental support policies

In their response to this question, only a minority of 14.8% expressed how government support could influence them, while 74.1% expressed that it would have some influence. This reinforces the recurrent finding that cash policies or direct support from the government is not as important as a cultural swift towards a less pressure inducing society where citizens are more likely to have children due to low externalities.

4.3 Cross-National Perspectives on the Child-Rearing Environment

In this section, participant's concerns and perceived advantages of living in either in South Korea or Spain are presented and contrasted to delve deeper into the differences of opinions between both respondents' groups and how these can change depending on where they reside at.

When asked about the impact of the housing issue in considering childbearing respondents from South Korea showed a greater grade of concern than the ones in Spain (Table 11). As discussed before this can be connected to the fact that due to social pressure couples in South Korea need to marry before having children, and to marry they need to have a house:

How much impact do you think the housing issue where you reside has on the decision to have children?	**South Korea Residents**	**Spain Residents**
Very large impact	18 respondents (**47.37%**)	4 respondents (**25%**)
Large impact	12 respondents (**31.58%**)	6 respondents (**37.5%**)
Some impact	8 respondents (**21.05%**)	4 respondents (**25.0%**)
No impact at all	0	2 respondents (**12.5%**)

Table 11. Impact of the housing crisis on childbirth decisions

This evidence was also present in testimonies:

> The situation is extremely serious, prioritizing resolving the housing issue as well as employment difficulties should come first. (*Respondent number 34 from South Korea*).

When asked if South Korea's work culture has an impact in childbirth decisions residents of South Korea answered the following (Table 12):

How much impact do you think workplace culture has on the low birth rate problem?	**Total**
Very large impact	19 (**50%**)

Large impact	13 (**34.2%**)
Some impact	3 (**7.9%**)
Don't know	3 (**7.9%**)

Table 12. Impact of work culture in childbirth decisions of South Koreans

> *Even if the system exists, there are disadvantages to taking maternity leave: whether it is limiting one's chances of promotion inside the company or the pressure from colleagues and superiors. It can even become an obstacle in the hiring process. (Respondent number 8 from South Korea).*
>
> *Taking parental leave is equal to causing harm to your coworkers. (Respondent number 5 from South Korea*).
>
> *I believe that for ordinary female workers, who are not civil servants, it is difficult to regain one's career position after resigning or taking leave due to pregnancy. As someone in my late 20's, my age was a factor when I took job interviews. The company seemed to assume that interviewers at the age of marriage were thinking about marrying and having children. In fact, a friend of mine is currently hesitating about pregnancy for this very reason.* (*Respondent number 7 from South Korea*).
>
> *In Korea, the atmosphere of competitive system and rote learning is excessive. I feel pity for children who must grow up in such environment. Especially, this is an environment and system in which mothers who have children cannot build a career. Even if you are a freelancer or work at a large corporation, childbirth and raising children is difficult if you are not well off. (Respondent number 8 from South Korea).*

As exposed, all of these reinforces once again the significant problem that work-family reconciliation in South Korea. It could be argued that the work environment is one of the main deterrents for young Koreans when considering childbirth, and a significant cause of the decline thus reconciliation should clearly be an important focus of the policies that aim to solve the fertility issue. On the other hand, residents of Spain, when asked how they felt about the work-family reconciliation issue compared to life in South Korea, the majority answered that they felt it was much better than South Korea (Table 13):

How do you feel the child-rearing environment in your current country of residence compared to South Korea?	**Total**
Much better	3 (**18.8%**)
Somewhat better	8 (**50%**)
Similar	3 (**18.8%**)
Somewhat worse	1 (**6.3%**)
Other *(somethings are better, some are worse)	1 (**6.3%**)

Table 13. Perception of childbearing environment of Spain compared to South Korea

Another interesting finding is the difference between what South Korea residents and Spain residents thought was the main influences on childbirth regarding their place of residence (Table 14):

Influence	South Korea Residents	Spain Residents
Economic stability	21 (**52.9%**)	2 (**12.5%**)
Social atmosphere	6 (**17,6%**)	10 (**62.5%**)
Educational system	3 (**8.8%**)	1 (**6.25%**)
Workplace environment	3 (**8.8%**)	2 (**12.5%**)
Public services / welfare	2 (**5.9%**)	1 (**6.25%**)
Medical system	2 (**5.9%**)	-
Other	1 (**2.6%**)	-

Table 14. Factors that influence childbirth decisions by location

Here a distinction between the two groups its shown: on one hand South Korea's majority considered Economic stability as a major factor to consider when having children while on the other hand Spain's considered the social atmosphere as the greater influence. This reflects the need for social policies that aim for a reform of the Confucianist hierarchy system, and how residents of Spain acknowledge actively the importance of a less pressure, less competitive environment in which healthy relationships can happen. On the other hand, most South Korean respondents showed the worry of not having enough economic means to maintain a family, so they don't have more children or any at all. This mimics the government's policy of cash supports instead of fixing the underlying social anxiety and pressure and the fight for this economic stability that Koreans in Spain can find and see more influential to childbirth than the economic aspect of childbearing.

From a qualitative standpoint, respondents' comments also supported these ideas:

> *It was surprising that (in Spain) people do not view others with the same critical 'gaze' as in Korea, and that people educate their children according to their own style. It was also surprising that family types are not unified like in Korea but are instead very diverse. (Respondent number 35 from Spain).*

This perception of family structure and the fertility problem can be seen on other respondents from South Korea as well:

> *While many say that the reason for the low birth rate is the high cost of childbearing, I believe that the reality is different. Although it is expensive, government support makes it manageable. However, my opinion is that the cost of marriage and housing is excessively high compared to other developed countries, causing many young people to hesitate or feel fearful. Many, especially the older generations, view weddings not just as an event for the couple, but as a parent's (family) event, which often causes family conflicts. Because of this, we need detailed policies that aim to address the excessive cost of weddings, the society's views on single mothers, and consistent and long-term*

government support to allow all types of households to be integrated as normal in society. (Respondent number 29 from South Korea)

In these testimonies, what we refer to when explaining societal pressure is present. One of the key underlying cultural factors that determines how relations are conducted, especially on family structure and expectations: on one side we have the Confucianist individual role structure's legacy present in Korean society where the person has to fit in and follow their role for the greater good. On the other hand, we find the Spanish Catholic individual's role structure's legacy where the individual can only be judged by God. This second background leads to less guilt when considering other's views of oneself. In a way, this testimony reflects the unhealthy way in which expectations are put on parents, who are comparing themselves to other families to evaluate how well they accomplish what is expected from them by society.

4.4 Need for Change and Rethinking the Future

Lastly, when asked what kind of change respondents' thoughts were necessary, they expressed it as follows (Table 15):

Needed Changes	South Korea Residents	Spain Residents
Broader systematic changes	25 (**65.8%**)	13 (**86.75%**)
Changes in workplace culture / policies	21 (**55.3%**)	9 (**60%**)
Expansion of current policies	10 (**26.3%**)	3 (**20%**)
Changes in family policies	6 (**15.8%**)	6 (**40%**)
Other	1 (**2.6%**)	1 (**6.7%**)

Table 15. Opinion on necessary changes by demographic group

This result shows us the popular demand from both groups for broader systematic changes necessary to boost fertility rates and how most residents of Spain group's respondents thought that way. This could be due to experiencing a different environment where the externalities do not influence so much on fertility. Broader systematic changes are those where policies aim to address the underlying fundamental structural flaws of society that require a paradigm shift, rather than merely re-examining policies such as cash subsidies. Another important finding is that 40% of the Spain residing respondents selected that it is necessary to have a change in family policies in South Korea in front of the 15.8% of Korean residents. As discussed before since the model of ideal family in South Korea is stricter than in Spain the social acceptance of when it's correct to have children can negatively impact fertility. Spanish society is more diverse in terms of family models, and cohabitation before marriage, single parents, civil unions are recognized and are subjects of the benefits of policies. Respondents who live

in Spain have this reality present and are more consciousness on why this type of reform could be beneficial. On top of that, both groups expressed their need for changes in workplace culture and policies. This can be evidenced in the different replies respondents gave when asked why they thought that way:

> *Due to poor decentralization, the population is concentrated in Seoul, Gyeonggi and Incheon. Because everyone tries to enter universities in the capital area competition the competition has become super intense. Not only that but due to the lack of government support the environment is one of having a guaranteed stable future, because of the economic uncertainty many decide not to marry or become "DINKs" (Double Income, No Kids). Personally, I want to have children, but I wouldn't raise them in South Korea. (Respondent number 35 from Spain).*

> *There is the feeling that family matters should be acknowledged and solved at home, and that at work one should prioritize tasks and performance. (Respondent number 3 from South Korea).*

> *Minimizing career interruption for women guaranteeing parental leave and job security. In Korea, there are a lot of situations where one has to quit their job leading to a career break. There is the need for policies to change this inside the workplace. (Respondent number 35 from Spain).*

There was a striking number of comments about the perception of children and care for women in respondents from Spain who identified that there is a need for a change of perception and overall atmosphere influenced by their overseas living experiences:

> *There is a need for change on perception (Respondent number 49 from Spain).*

> *Spain too has low fertility rate, in Spain you also pay a lot of taxes and there isn't much support for childbearing. However, I wonder if the reason to why fertility is higher than Korea is because the social consideration for children and pregnant women. (Respondent number 45 from Spain).*

> *It's about perception, (in Spain) there is less individualism. As well as the way people see children, which is more warm-hearted. (Respondent number 26 from Spain).*

> *(In Spain) the entire process of giving birth costs zero euros in medical fees. Children's hospital visits are also free so there is no financial burden regarding healthcare. On top of that people really like children and are tolerant. When we go out there are a lot of people who interact with my children. (Respondent number 42 from Spain).*

> *(An aspect from Spain that could have a positive effect if reinforced in South Korea is) The helping each other and the perception of family from society. (Respondent number 38 from Spain).*

Shouldn't we move towards a society where a mature democracy is established instead of one of excessive comparison or growth? I believe the social atmosphere is much more important than the system itself. (Respondent number 41 from Spain).

Parental leave reduced working hours, commuting schedules, opportunities for remote work and the possibilities both men and women to achieve an equal work-life balance. (Respondent number 54 from Spain).

In all of these, people's desire to be in a healthy environment stands out as a recurrent theme. An environment in which raising children does not imply a deep economic burden for parents, nor one where children disrupt one's professional career. An environment where parents are not under the pressure of keeping up with other parents' competitiveness nor society's expectations. These results showcase that to solve South Korea's fertility issue, policies catered for Korea's social environment must be implemented taking in consideration the factors perceived as a detrimental by the population. Some of these include the old-fashioned gender roles, impossibility of self-actualization due to competitiveness and economic pressure, as well as the difficult work-family reconciliation between family and work.

5 Discussion

5.1 Need for a Paradigm Shift: From Economic Anxiety to a Social Atmosphere Approach

This research has examined the tendency of the ethnic Korean diaspora in Spain, who seem more willing to engage in fertility than South Koreans. By doing so, some interesting results have been found, which showcase that the late marriages and economic anxiety approach is not entirely why Koreans don't engage in childbirth. Rather it is a complex and wide range of issues that lead to it. Koreans in Spain have shown less worry about economic factors and a higher degree of positive influence due to social factors. It contrasts from how the South Korean government's policy measures regarding the low fertility issue is heavily based on the idea that this phenomenon is due to late marriages and economic pressure (Kim, 2024). Although these factors explain fertility decline, it is not entirely the only reason.

Re-examining and proposing a social reform that challenges the existing social atmosphere is needed. Although economic anxiety is undeniably a significant factor, we must go further beyond and not fall into the idea that by simply solving economic anxiety we will also solve low fertility. Furthermore, the way in which relations are constructed in South Korea indirectly influences fertility negatively: gender roles, hierarchies, place of residence and the conservative family model. All of which exclude individuals who don't fit in with the norm from the economic advantages and worsen the social environment.

This structural rigidity creates severe contradictions: what good does it bring to have an impeccable paternity system if fathers refuse to take it because of the work penalties it might bring them? What good does it bring to have the highest percentage of female degree holders if societal expectations pressures them to abandon their career for household tasks and maternity? These are the type of questions that South Koreans face in their day to day and reflect the inefficacy of trying to boost fertility through solely economic means without simultaneously addressing the social atmosphere and its issues.

5.2 Work culture, Education fever, Family and Work-life Reconciliation

Work culture is one of the key factors that need to be re-examined, the strict hierarchy structure of companies damages the rights of employees and their personal freedoms, causes burnout and prevents families from developing in a non-normative manner. South Korean companies demand a huge number of sacrifices to be made, and these are not demanded when already employed, but also in the recruiting process as seen in some of the testimonies from survey respondents. There is a big pressure caused by the

competitiveness in order to access a workplace at major conglomerates (대기업), most people desire these jobs because of the prestige and economic stability. But these require having an excellent background and often exclude certain people like young women who are suspected of being potential mothers. This entails more competitiveness, more burnout, the delay of settling down and forming families and gender inequality. Men who get hired by these won't challenge the existing status quo to not lose their jobs, which means that they are willing to work under worst job conditions than legally allowed: when they are asked to work overtime, or go to company dinners (회식), it is expected that they don't refuse. This fear of job demotion is also present with the opportunity of parental leave, so many refuse to take it. This environment does not allow fertility to increase steadily, even if we offer tax or cash benefits the underlying issue remains at place, because of this many researchers criticize the cash incentives (Beak, 2025; Jeong et al., 2022; Kim, 2024; Kim and Chung, 2024).

The education system in South Korea should be reconsidered. Expensive private academies are a deterrent for adults when considering having children. The social expectations for parents are that the best education is provided for their children, which is costly. Instead, it is recommended that incentives are provided to different career paths or ways of education promoted by government policy to bring some benefits to fertility. Not only that, children and teenagers face a stressful and demanding environment that expands individualist values that reduces the interest in forming families. Working hard for many years to achieve a degree and a good position at a company can be jeopardized by childbirth, so: why have children early in life if after getting a stable position at a company it's when they start having some individual freedoms? As exposed, this is a structural issue that creates a vicious loop and requires structural changes. This idea is supported by respondents who overwhelmingly call for broader changes as seen in Table 15 (65.8% of the respondents of South Korea and 86.75% from Spain). This research also aimed to highlight what ties fertility and the work culture: work-family reconciliation. Work-family reconciliation is one of the main issues policies should try to resolve. As shown in Table 7 there is a desire to have children (1.37 from respondents South Koreans and 1.23 from Spain) but South Koreans lack the environment in which individuals feel capable of engaging in parenthood. For this reconciliation to occur, long-term policy regarding gender equality, the normative family model, hierarchy, social expectations and work culture are needed to reform these factors into a less demanding model.

Lastly, the cost of education must be addressed. In Table 10, 19 out of the 54 respondents who took part in the survey showed their concern for childbearing costs, these results reinforce previous research such as Anderson and Kohler (2013), who determined that 77% of Koreans perceive the cost of education as an important obstacle.

Another interesting finding is that South Koreans value economic stability the most when considering childbirth, which reinforces existing literature (Bae, 2012). However,

Koreans living in Spain perceive the social atmosphere as more important. Table 15 reflects the positive impact of the direct environment when not facing the Korean private education system's costs. When stripped away from the Confucianist role expectations to each other, which for parents involve investing as much as possible on children education, Koreans in Spain seem to value more this freedom from the Korean social pressure. Respondents of the survey from Spain clearly show this freedom from other's attention (시선). Meanwhile, South Koreans value economic stability, Koreans living in Spain value an environment where there is less pressure caused by other's attention and expectations. In other words, these findings suggest that even if South Koreans have less economic pressure, there will still be a social pressure which Koreans in Spain have gotten away from as reflected in the survey responses from Koreans residing in Spain. This is another instance where results showcase the necessity of reinforcing policies regarding the harmful competitive environment (무한경쟁) where social relations are perceived as a zero-sum game in which other's achievements indirectly reflect one's failures.

5.3 Redefinition of the Family Model and Gender Roles

The South Korean family structure and gender roles have been a subject of debate for decades: In the late 50's the government enacted the 1958 Civil Act where the Hojuje (호주제) or patriarchal family system was institutionalized, in this system all members of a family are required to be registered under the male head of the house. It wasn't until 2005 that the Constitutional court abolished it under the premise of being unconstitutional. Until then the spouse and children were subordinated under the family head. Although the system was legally abolished the social presence of the Hojuje system has not faded yet.

Furthermore, in 2004 the Framework Act on Healthy Families was enacted, in which the family is defined by law as a link between marriage, blood or adoption. This definition struggles to keep up with the contemporary social structure and late marriages. Most importantly, it limits the legal support for couples who are not married. As stated before, in South Korea the social acceptance of marriage occurs when a couple can move together, but amidst a housing crisis the opportunities diminish. The survey results support this idea that housing affordability limits marriage (Kim, 2024) thus childbirth and the legal family definition delimit which couple can be recipients of government support reinforcing a normative model. To solve this problem, a revision of the legal definition of the family should be conducted to include non-normative families like the case of Spain, by doing so couple wouldn't face legal obstacles to receive benefits, not only for childbearing support but as economic units and legal powers as well. On the other hand, non-normative families could face social stigmatization. However, government promotion of new values that part away from pre-democratic Hojuje values

could solve this problem as well as allowing new families to form which could translate into more children being born.

The gender role in South Korea is strictly connected to the monolithic family structure and the institutional legacy of the developmental modern state. This research, although taking this into account, has not delved into this topic, yet still a part of the respondents of the survey points out the gender role burden as a reason to avoid childbearing. Another interesting factor to consider is that more social accepted family models allow for more relationships to flourish and couples to settle down and find stability, stability that respondents from the survey signal as an important factor when considering childbirth.

5.4 Call for Systematic Policy Reforms

Many of the respondents of the survey recognize that there is a need for broader systemic changes to boost fertility. These changes require long-term policy reforms that must be built based on those factors that make citizens refuse to have children. Alongside economic incentives and tax benefits for parents, policymakers ought to solve the competitiveness of the South Korean economic system and break the tradition family models as well as the social stigmatization regarding different models. All of which are necessary to achieve a different environment.

Lastly, policy not only should try to promote a new perception of childbirth and family structure but also solve the underlying material struggle that stir many young Koreans to give up their family forming ambitions in front of career stability. This last year, fertility rose slightly, that is likely due to the expansion of scope regarding the issue in the Fourth Basic Plan from 2021 to 2025 and the number of children from the generation born right after democratization. Nonetheless, despite a small rise in the fertility rate last year, policy needs to be revised and re-examined to fit a long-term increment goal.

6 Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the difference of perspective of fertility from both South Koreans and Koreans residing in Spain. By doing so, some interesting data has been found, even though further large-scale research is needed. The South Korean living in South Korea as expected show an important link between economic struggle and fertility. On the other hand, Koreans from Spain are more open to having children and put emphasis on the importance of the social atmosphere they live and raise their children. This research also found a significant gap between the desired fertility from South Koreans and the real fertility rate. It can be concluded that many Koreans wish to have children, and some see overseas as a much better suitable environment than South Korea. This, as well as the popular demand for broader systemic changes, showcases the need for policy reforms to create a better environment for young Koreans and new parents, rather than focusing on economic stability alone. Balancing economic and social demographic goals might be the most challenging aspects that South Korea will face in the following decades. Policies addressing the fertility trap and the rooted values that steer youth away from the modern family lifestyle in post neoliberal South Korea will certainly pose a problem in an increasingly conservative society and its contradictions. The government should focus on developing a new social environment that addresses contemporary issues and the concern of its citizens instead of reinforcing the old-fashioned traditional values and the interest of capital.

Lastly, due to limitations of this research, many interesting findings have not been explored in detail. However, through a comparative analysis of two different environments, this research has established a framework to explore upon future research. In future research, rather than only a survey, a series of interviews could be conducted to gather more information and capture what Koreans consider the problem more in detail. This will allow us to have an in-depth knowledge of those who have given up hope for childbearing and those who plan to have children in the future and why.

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