

Family Formation Attitudes of South Korean Women: A Life Course Perspective

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Research background

Previous literature indicates that South Korea is experiencing a significant ideational change, with a trend toward liberal views emerging in the younger generation compared to the more traditional views of older cohorts, consistent with the cohort replacement theory where the younger cohorts slowly replace societal views of older cohorts. The literature has covered the changes over the years in gender ideology, attitudes towards marriage, family and intergenerational support for South Korea and other East Asian countries (An et al. 2022; Eun and Lee 2005; Lee et al. 2018). Younger cohorts consistently feature more egalitarian gender attitudes than older cohorts across several historical and cultural contexts. South Korea had the most traditional views on family gender roles, marriage, cohabitation, and divorce internationally in 2002-2003 but they also saw an increasing gender egalitarianism across cohorts over time with an important polarization between the younger and older cohorts (Eun and Lee 2005). However, the liberalization of trends does not occur at the same pace for all the above attitudes. For example, Koreans remain conservative on marriage significance in life, its benefits for women and men, father's role and divorce affecting children negatively (Lee et al. 2018). Attitudes towards family support, intergenerational support, are less covered in the literature than gender ideology and attitudes towards marriage (e.g. three-generation household, acceptance of financial aid for elderly parents).

However, few studies have examined both cross-cohort and within-cohort changes over extended periods, with within-cohort changes in family preferences remaining inconsistent in the literature. One study suggests that women tend to become more conservative as they marry and have children (Kim and Cheung 2015), while another shows a shift away from traditional gender norms over time, particularly when it comes to views on marriage (Tan 2023). This could be due to data limitations as both studies have been limited in their ability to track long-term changes. Furthermore, these differing results could also be due to differences in classification of attitudes. There are broadly two ways to classify attitudes: based on one dimension (e.g. grouping attitudes questions about marriage, gender ideology, family separately) which is the usual approach (Domínguez-Folgueras 2025; Kim and Cheung 2015) or based on multiple dimensions (e.g. taking questions from several topics) to

emphasize the complex aspect of individual's values (Tan 2023). This paper will reconcile these differing patterns of change by first, using the same dataset as Kim and Cheung (2015) and Tan (2023), the Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Families, to pinpoint the origin of their differing results and adding recent waves to observe a decade of change. Second, comparing the changes between unidimensional and multidimensional classifications to determine which approach is most effective for illustrating the different viewpoints one can have towards family formation. Third, examining the reciprocal relationship between these attitudes and life stage events, how the latter shape attitudes and how attitudes, in turn, shape experiences such as first employment, first marriage, and first childbirth.

Data and methods

For this study I am using data from Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Families, a panel survey developed by the Korean Women's Development Institute, totaling nine waves. Our population of interest are Korean women that are continuously surveyed throughout seven waves (2010-2022) as the objective is to study how their attitudes change over their life course. The final sample is 12,593 Korean women aged 19 to 82. Specifically, this study examines multiple family preference dimensions that are grouped into three distinct categories in this survey: attitudes towards marriage and marital life, attitudes towards gender roles and attitudes towards family support. To capture these changing patterns, latent class analysis (LCA) is conducted by pooling all waves to identify distinct attitudinal classes. Two types of classification are conducted. First, LCA models are run separately for these three categories and second, based on the literature, the most important attitudes indicators in each category are chosen to create a second group of LCA models. Several fit indices such as entropy, BIC, maximum and minimum probability, average posterior probability, are used to determine the optimal number of classes that have high classification accuracy and quality.

Preliminary results

The first group of LCA models produced mixed results. The marriage and marital life indicators produce four classes (Table 1), women refusing the marriage package and family-centered women make up the majority (63%), followed by traditional women (23%) and

child-centered women (14%). Family support indicators produce three classes (independence, intergenerational support, high support) with good fit indices and class interpretability.

Table 1 Agreement probability to each item – 4-class solution (marriage attitudes)

Marriage attitude variables	Traditional (23%)	Refusal of marriage package (33%)	Family-centered (30%)	Child-centered (14%)
Marry with similar background	1	0,49807	0,71602	1
Marriage is a must	0,90591	0,16979	0,80549	0,58634
Must have child(ren)	0,96456	0,36736	0,87188	0,92442
Early marital childbirth is good	0,93566	0,25471	0,87399	0,76543
Marrying early is good	0,66936	0,05809	0,68836	0,23942
Personal accomplishments > marriage	0,18281	0,57952	0,52008	0,58972
Must divorce if husband has an affair	0,25065	0,61222	0,46435	0,63936
Acceptable to divorce even with children	0,19713	0,70773	0,55864	0,64767
Acceptable to have sex without commitment to marriage	0	0,48598	0,60272	0,24557
Unmarried couple may live together without intention of marriage	0,0029	0,35026	0,52659	0
Extramarital birth is acceptable	0,01077	0,17359	0,35733	0
Marriage restricts lifestyle choices	0,56353	0,71854	0,68399	0,95687
Sexual satisfaction is important to marital life	0,74332	0,72632	0,78875	1
Need male friend other than husband	0,0373	0,21445	0,25699	0,10084

However, the gender ideology indicators yield inconclusive results, as the model yield poor fit indices and limited class interpretability. Therefore, a second group of LCA will be conducted by choosing the most important attitudes indicators in each attitude category to produce multidimensional classes that will represent englobing attitudes regarding family formation.

Preliminary descriptive results reveal women refusing Korean marital life has increased at the expense of traditional women for whom family is necessary across cohorts and age groups (Figure 1 and 2). However, traditional attitudes among older cohorts remain largely unchanged over time, whereas younger cohorts display greater attitudinal shifts towards marriage refusal between 2010 and 2022 (Figure 2).

Figure 1 Proportion of marriage refusal class across age groups and cohorts (2010-2022)

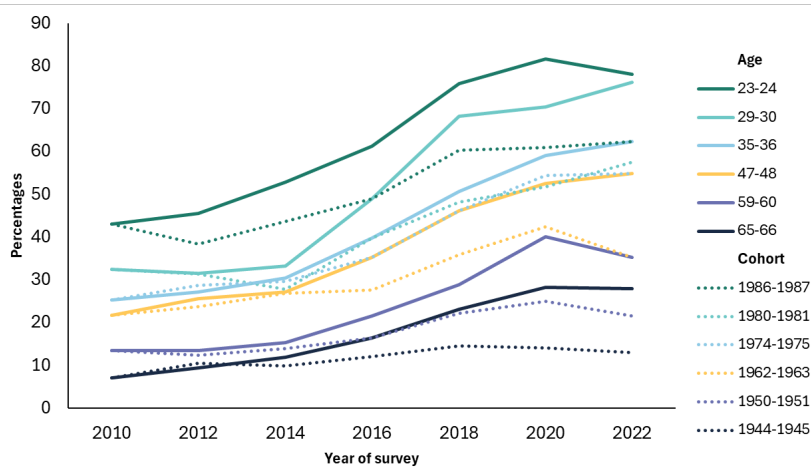
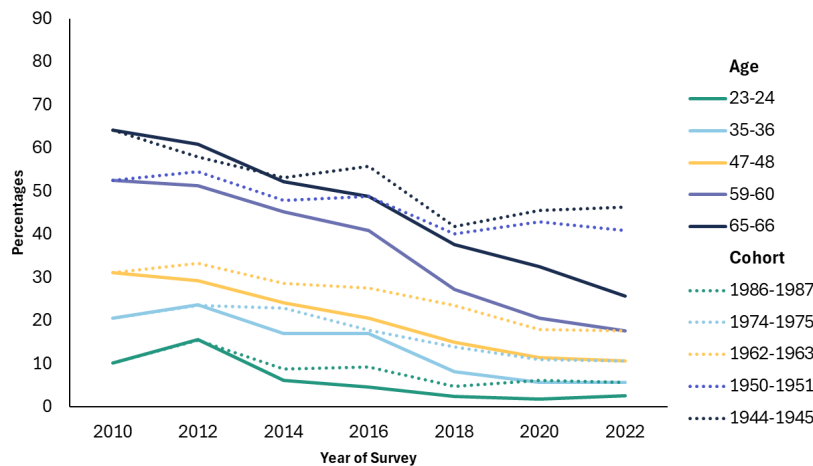


Figure 2 Proportion of traditional class across age groups and cohorts (2010-2022)



Additionally, family support norms have not changed, they remain high and stable throughout the whole observation period: Korean women continue to uphold a strong sense of responsibility toward childrearing despite changing views on marriage. Finally, fixed effects regression will be used to capture within-individual changes in attitudes over time and a log-linear path model with latent variables will be used to estimate reciprocal effects between family formation attitudes and life events.

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