

[Extended Abstract]

Revisiting the Structural Traps of Ultra-Low Fertility: A Systematic Review of Global Evidence with Special Reference to South Korea

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BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The global decline in fertility rates has emerged as one of the defining demographic transformations of the 21st century. While many high-income societies experience below-replacement fertility, South Korea presents an extreme case of persistent ultra-low fertility, with its total fertility rate (TFR) falling to 0.7 in 2023, the lowest in recorded history. Despite decades of expansive pronatalist interventions including cash transfers, childcare subsidies, and parental leave schemes, fertility rates continue to decline. This paradox suggests that policy proliferation alone cannot address deeper structural and cultural constraints. The South Korean case thus provides a critical lens for re-examining the structural traps that entrench low fertility across advanced economies. This study systematically reviews global empirical evidence to identify the multi-level determinants of fertility decline and to situate South Korea's experience within broader comparative patterns.

THEORETICAL FOCUS

This study is guided by three complementary theoretical frameworks that illuminate the intersection of gender, institutions, and culture in shaping fertility behavior. First, gender equity theory explains that fertility tends to decline when women's advances in education and employment are not accompanied by equality within families and domestic labor divisions. This imbalance generates "role incompatibility" which discourages childbearing. Second, institutional dualism highlights how segmented labor markets divided between secure insiders and precarious outsiders create prolonged economic uncertainty, delaying marriage and childbirth. Third, cultural-structural embeddedness situates fertility decisions within the enduring influence of Confucian familism, credentialism, and education-centered competitiveness, which elevate the perceived social and financial cost of parenting. Together, these frameworks conceptualize ultra-low fertility as an emergent outcome of institutional rigidity and cultural inertia, where policy abundance fails to overcome structural asymmetries and socio-cultural expectations.

DATA AND METHODS

Following PRISMA guidelines, the review systematically searched five major databases including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and ProQuest for studies published between 1990 and 2023. The initial search identified 38,868 records; after screening for eligibility and relevance, 67 studies were included in the final synthesis (57 quantitative, 9 qualitative, 1 mixed-method). Each study was coded by country, methodology, and thematic domain. A multi-level analytical framework was applied to classify determinants of fertility across: i) macro: economic structure, housing markets, labor precarity, and national policy context; ii) meso: institutional supports such as parental leave, childcare systems, and workplace practices; and iii) micro: gender norms, fertility intentions, and household decision-making. Thematic synthesis was then conducted to identify cross-national patterns, contextual variations, and interrelations among economic, institutional, and cultural factors.

FINDINGS

Across global contexts, several consistent determinants emerged. First, economic insecurity, rising house costs, and youth unemployment remain the strongest predictors of postponed or foregone childbirth, particularly among younger cohorts in urban settings. Second, labor market dualization characterized by rising precarious work and limited career stability has created systemic uncertainty that undermines family formation. Third, gender inequality in care responsibilities persists even in societies with high female labor participation, reinforcing the incompatibility between work and family life. Fourth, cultural expectations around intensive parenting and education-driven competition, and Confucian familism amplify perceived childrearing costs. Fifth, a temporary decline in fertility rate during the COVID-19 pandemic further revealed how macroeconomic shocks and rising insecurity shape reproductive decisions. While family-friendly policies such as childcare subsidies, parental leave, and flexible work arrangements have shown modest positive effects, their impact is often mitigated by entrenched institutional and cultural barriers. Differences in policy effectiveness across employment types, particularly between public-sector and irregular workers, also highlight persistent inequities in access to family support measures. South Korea exemplifies this “policy-structure paradox.” Despite an extensive suite of pronatalist measures, the coexistence of insecure labor conditions, unaffordable housing, and traditional gender norms continues to suppress fertility intentions. Comparative evidence from Japan, Italy, and Spain suggests similar mechanisms at play in other low-fertility contexts, reinforcing the global relevance of South Korea’s case.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings indicate that ultra-low fertility cannot be reversed through financial incentives alone. Effective fertility recovery requires systemic alignment between gender, labor, and welfare systems. Three strategic implications emerge: i) integrate gender equity across both public and private spheres by redistributing care responsibilities and addressing workplace discrimination; ii) reduce economic precarity by reforming dual labor markets and improving housing affordability to restore intergenerational confidence in life-course planning; and iii) shift policy orientation from short-term subsidies to long-term social infrastructure such as universal childcare, parental support networks, and inclusive employment systems. Additionally, attention should be paid to emerging contextual factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and shifting family aspirations, which have reshaped the timing and meaning of parenthood among younger cohorts. The study underscores that sustainable demographic resilience depends on dismantling the structural traps that link gendered inequality, institutional rigidity, and socio-cultural expectations.

CONCLUSION

Ultra-low fertility reflects not merely a demographic shift but a manifestation of deeper socio-economic and cultural asymmetries. South Korea’s experience reveals how modernized societies can become trapped in self-reinforcing cycles of low fertility when institutional and cultural systems fail to adapt. By synthesizing global empirical evidence through an integrated theoretical lens, this study reframes fertility decline as a structural challenge requiring transformative rather than incremental policy solutions. Lessons from South Korea provide valuable insights for other advanced economies confronting the demographic paradox of progress and population decline.

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