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Japan and South Korea Fighting Low Fertility Levels Through Pro-natalist Policies That Support Female Employment

Topic and Research Question

The topic of the thesis is the comparative analysis of pro-natalist policies in Japan and South Korea, with a specific focus on pro-natalist policies that are designed to also support higher female employment rates. Both countries face historically low birth rates and ageing populations, prompting governments to implement various measures aimed at encouraging parenthood while ensuring that women remain in the workforce. Despite their shared demographic challenges, Japan and South Korea have developed similar yet distinct approaches in areas such as parental leave policies, childcare support, and workplace flexibility.

The research question guiding this study is: What are the similarities and differences in implemented pro-natalist policies to fight low fertility levels in Japan and South Korea, and can these be classified as supportive of high female employment rates? This thesis provides a descriptive comparison of policy measures in both countries, highlighting their structural similarities and differences while assessing whether they align with the objective of maintaining women's workforce participation alongside efforts to increase fertility.

State of the Art

Research on pro-natalist policies has traditionally suggested a negative correlation between female employment and fertility, with higher workforce participation leading to lower birth rates due to career opportunity costs and work-life conflicts. Early studies (Brewster & Rindfuss, 2000) argue that women who work tend to have fewer children, while others highlight the role of educational attainment in delaying childbirth and reducing family size. However, more recent research indicates a changing relationship between fertility and female employment. Studies on OECD countries (Engelhardt & Prskawetz, 2004; Rindfuss, Choe & Bruner-Otto, 2016) show that countries with higher female workforce participation often also exhibit higher fertility rates, suggesting that comprehensive childcare support and parental leave policies can mitigate work-family conflicts. This shift aligns with the U-shaped hypothesis proposed by Sacerdote and Feyrer (2008), which suggests that as women's labour force participation rises beyond a certain threshold, fertility

stabilises or increases. This is also closely linked to greater gender equality and the development of more family-friendly and gender-inclusive social and workforce structures. Given these findings, the literature suggests that pro-natalist policies supporting female employment—such as paid parental leave, workplace flexibility, and accessible childcare—are key to addressing declining birth rates while maintaining women's economic participation. This thesis contributes to this discussion by comparing how Japan and South Korea structure such policies and whether they align with broader trends observed in international research.

Methodology and Approach

The thesis adopts a comparative descriptive approach to examine pro-natalist policies in Japan and South Korea, focusing on their similarities and differences in addressing low fertility rates while supporting female employment. Secondary data analysis is used, drawing on government reports, policy documents, and academic literature to systematically compare key policy areas, including parental leave, childcare support, and workplace flexibility. By categorising these policies, the study explores how they align with efforts to maintain high female workforce participation. Rather than assessing their effectiveness, the thesis maps policy structures and highlights areas of convergence and divergence between the two countries. This approach ensures a neutral and structured comparison, illustrating how Japan and South Korea have developed similar strategies in response to shared demographic challenges while also demonstrating where they differ in emphasis and implementation.

The analysis is structured around key policy categories to maintain consistency in the comparison, ensuring that differences and similarities are systematically highlighted. The findings contribute to the broader discussion on how pro-natalist policies can be structured to support both fertility and employment, offering insights relevant to other nations facing similar demographic challenges. Through this structured comparison, the thesis provides a clear overview of the policy frameworks in both countries and how they have been implemented to balance demographic concerns with female workforce participation.

Main Facts

Japan and South Korea have implemented pro-natalist policies that also support female employment, responding to persistently low fertility rates and ageing populations. Both countries have introduced parental leave schemes, flexible work arrangements, and expanded childcare services to help working parents balance employment and family responsibilities. Japan provides paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers, while South Korea offers a similar framework with differences in leave duration and payment schemes. Additionally, both governments promote part-time and flexible work arrangements to enable parents, particularly mothers, to remain in the workforce after childbirth. Childcare services have been expanded in both countries, but their approaches differ. Japan has focused on increasing public daycare availability, while South Korea has largely relied on the privatisation of childcare to meet rising demand, leading to a predominance of private childcare providers.

While these measures share common goals, differences exist in their implementation and emphasis. The thesis presents a descriptive comparison of these policies, analysing how they have been structured in both countries to address declining birth rates while maintaining female workforce participation.

Results

The comparative analysis shows that Japan and South Korea have developed similar pro-natalist policy frameworks, centred on parental leave, part-time and flexible work arrangements, and childcare support. Both countries legally provide paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers but differ in leave duration and payment schemes. Flexible work arrangements, including part-time employment and reduced working hours, are promoted to allow parents to remain in the labour force, yet differences in uptake and implementation remain.

In terms of childcare, both Japan and South Korea have expanded support services, though their approaches differ. Japan has placed greater emphasis on public

childcare facilities, while South Korea has relied more on private childcare providers to meet the increasing demand. While the policies in both countries aim to increase birth rates while supporting female employment, the analysis highlights differences in their structure and areas of focus.

Despite these efforts, both countries continue to face challenges in fully integrating these policies into the workforce due to a combination of social, cultural, and economic factors. Long working hours and workplace structures that are not always compatible with family life create difficulties for parents balancing careers and childcare. Social and cultural expectations surrounding gender roles still place much of the childcare responsibility on mothers, influencing both career progression and family planning decisions. Additionally, economic factors such as the high cost of living and education contribute to hesitancy in having more children, as financial stability remains a key consideration for many families. While Japan and South Korea have introduced policies to address these challenges, ensuring their effectiveness and accessibility remains a key issue, highlighting the need for continued policy refinement and structural adjustments.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <https://theses.univie.ac.at>

About the Author

Launa Camilla holds a Bachelor's degree in Management and Leadership from Oslo Metropolitan University. She brings experience from the public sector and non-profit organisations. She currently works as Communications Manager for the European Association of Nuclear Medicine (EANM).



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