
CHILDREN FOR DEMOCRACY: DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

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Demographic transition in the form of sub-replacement level fertility rates and increasing life expectancy has resulted in a rapidly-aging population in the Republic of Korea. A change of this nature is a challenge for any country but especially difficult for a nascent democracy still in the process of consolidation. This paper examines the social circumstances and factors surrounding Korea's demographic transition, the potential economic effects that transition entails and ways in which the stability of the nation's democracy may be affected. It concludes by recommending the most practical adjustments Korea can make to ensure increased quality of life, continued economic development and stabilizing consolidation of its hard-earned democracy.

Introduction: Calamity of Another Kind

The tsunami that struck Japan on March 11, 2011 temporarily overshadowed a natural calamity of another kind looming in East Asia. Demographic transition in the form of lower total fertility rates combined with increased life spans has been the norm in the developed economies of Europe and North America throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Two East Asian nations have displayed this trend in recent decades, and to an even greater degree. The Republic of Korea (hereafter, Korea) and Japan have joined Western countries in this societal transformation, producing fewer children as adults live longer. Their populations are aging as a result and the process is well into its third decade with no sign of stopping.

Korea and Japan have experienced this shift in the midst of rapid post-war economic development and democratization in a much more compressed manner than did any Western country, where democracy, economics, and

medicine were flourishing before demographic changes began to take effect. Fertility rates fell 50 percent in the developed world as a whole from 1950 to 2000 while Korean fertility rates plummeted 66 percent from the 1960s to 1980s and have been well below replacement level since the 1980s.¹ This shift has coincided with seniors living much longer due to greater access to improved health care as a result of development. The management of this demographic sea change will thus be more difficult in East Asia and directly shape the future international balance of power, as Korea and Japan are the region's two primary democracies.

Korea stands out as a special case in terms of this transition, compared even to Japan and the other Asian "tigers." The country has a relatively young democracy following a sustained period of authoritarian rule and is managing a complex and claustrophobic security situation. It is also in the process of finalizing its economic transition from manufacturing to services. Amidst those considerable challenges Korea is currently experiencing the world's most extreme demographic transition in terms of aging.² The nation's population is now at roughly 50 million and projected to shrink nine percent by 2050.³ More importantly in economic terms, by that time the working-age population will plummet 36 percent, contrasted with a 150 percent spike in the number of pensioners aged 60 and over.⁴ The socioeconomic implications of such a shift are immense, especially for a country which has had just 24 years to consolidate its democracy and seen only fourteen years pass since its first peaceful transition of power to an opposition party. No nation in history has managed changes of this nature in such a compact time frame, and policymakers face myriad social and economic challenges with few existing lessons on which to rely. This paper argues that the effects of Korea's demographic transition and its subsequent economic and social repercussions can endanger the country's ongoing democratic consolidation. Adverse economic effects may therefore beget objectionable political effects. Conversely, deft management of this "agequake" can ensure continued economic growth with lasting and healthy development for Korea's hard-earned democracy.

1 "An Exercise in Fertility," *The Economist*, September 18, 2010, 60.

2 Andrew Eungi Kim and John Lie, "South Korea in 2006 - Nuclear Standoff, Trade Talks and Population Trends," *Asian Survey* 47, (2007): 55.

3 Jack A. Goldstone, "The New Population Bomb: The Four Megatrends That Will Change Your World," *Foreign Affairs* 89, (2010): 34.

4 Ibid.

Korea's Demographic Transition: Origins, Current Course and Implications

Demographic transition is a multi-dimensional process and each element plays an important role in a country's past, present and future. One component is total fertility rate (TFR), a measure of all births per woman in a given nation. The other is life expectancy at birth, which indicates the number of years that people born in the same year and country can be expected to live on average.⁵ The interplay between these two statistics in a given country illustrates demographic change. Nations throughout history have experienced extreme variations in one of the two at a given time, but rarely both in unison. Korea's demographic change is extraordinary because the TFR declined precipitously in response to economic development following the Korean War, while life expectancy at birth rose as improvements in health care, nutrition and education improved the overall physical condition of Korean citizens. Moreover, the downward trend in fertility and upward trend in life expectancy have continued at their diverging and steep trajectories throughout Korea's development. As a result, the country now has the lowest TFR of all OECD nations at 1.15 children per woman along with an above-OECD average life expectancy of 79.9 years, higher than even that of the United States.⁶ One can think of Korean demographics as an elastic band. Development has pulled that band with equally-strong force from both sides since the country's economic take-off began. This section will explain why such demographic tension exists, where Korea stands today and how much more stress this elastic band can be expected to endure while supporting a relatively nascent democracy.

It is essential to consider that in 1960 Korea's life expectancy at birth stood at 54.8 years for both sexes combined.⁷ The TFR was 6.0 in that same year.⁸ Families saw children at the time as secure economic assets as opposed to their standing today as investments. In order to assuage the demographic boom, governments of the era made public efforts to suppress the fertility rate

5 For use in this paper I adhere to the definitions of these terms used in The United States Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook." <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html> (accessed November 24, 2011).

6 OECD, *Society at a Glance 2011: OECD Social Indicators*, 45, 79. https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/soc_glance-2011-en (accessed November 24, 2011). Also of note is that Korea has the third-largest improvement in life expectancy amongst OECD nations since 1983.

7 Data obtained from the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat at <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/unpp/p2k0data.asp> (accessed November 24, 2011).

8 Andrew Eungi Kim and John Lie, "South Korea in 2006 - Nuclear Standoff, Trade Talks and Population Trends," 56.



in order to foster the country's economic development as a whole. Numerous countries past and present have been unable to match an economic performance like Korea's "Miracle on the Han" for a number of reasons; the necessity to nourish large populations with inadequate food supplies being one of the most common. In a characteristically coordinated manner the Korean people and government pragmatically tamed the fertility rate through the 1960s and 70s in order to efficiently manage resources and expedite development. This measure combined with steadily improving health conditions unquestionably set the country on its path to today's prosperity and personal well-being, as well as its current demographic conundrum.

With wealth, democracy and the Seoul Olympics all arriving in the late 1980s and the good times ostensibly beginning, what has continued to dampen the TFR in Korea? Logically, development should provide people with incentive to want to bring children into the world. Even Western countries with low fertility rates today had periods of prosperity in which fertility sat comfortably above the replacement rate for extended periods of time. Has Korea developed so much so quickly that it bypassed that fertile "golden age" altogether and joined the ranks of Germany, Italy and Spain at the bottom of the fertility spectrum? It appears so, and reasons lie in an ever-evolving web of socioeconomic factors manufactured by that very development. Primarily, the vastly changed status and role of women in Korean society, burdensome costs of private schooling in an intensely competitive educational environment and a rapidly reshaping economic landscape are cited as reasons why couples are reluctant to have more than one child or any children at all.

Western countries saw women move out of predominantly homemaking roles and into the workplace in the post-war period, then embracing feminism from the 1960s onward. Korean women have adopted a similar assertiveness and reproductive resolve that would have been impossible decades ago, and the social repercussions have been substantial. The country saw 10.6 marriages per 1,000 people in 1980, but only 6.2 in 2009.⁹ The average age of couples when and if they do marry is steadily on the rise with each passing year. Someone in Korea is making the decision to postpone or decline to enter into marriage, and given recent societal changes it is most likely women. In 2000, 14.8 percent of Korean households were childless, just shy of double the 1985 rate of 7.8 percent.¹⁰ This marked increase means more and more couples are marrying

9 "Profiting from Sexism," *The Economist*, October 21, 2010.

10 Sungeun Yang and Paul C. Rosenblatt, "Confucian Family Values and Childless Couples in South Korea," *Journal of Family Issues* 29, (2008): 572.



and choosing to live together, yet not having children. It is important to note that the decision to live without children should not be construed as a wholesale rejection of Confucian parenting custom by increasingly westernizing women in Korea, but rather the inevitable result of their being presented with ever greater numbers of lifestyle options. In short, this is development, for better or worse. In a 2009 study on the attitudes of unmarried Korean university students towards parenting, Yang and Rosenblatt found that many young Koreans, male and female, felt that the standard for parenting in Korea is so high they cannot possibly live up to it.¹¹ Their mothers and fathers may take that as a compliment, as Confucian culture values both parenting and children highly, but it does not bode well for the future of the country.

In a polar reversal of scholastic tradition, the average young woman in Korea is now better educated than her male peers as a result of high performance in Korea's famously earnest and meritocratic educational system.¹² Nonetheless, of all of the college-educated women in the country between 25 and 64, only 60 percent work, making them the least-employed women of any OECD country, and those that are employed earn just 63 percent of what their male colleagues do.¹³ Even considering these discouraging statistics, many Korean women are following in the footsteps of their Western counterparts and putting their careers before the traditional role of motherhood by postponing pregnancy, not having children, or simply not marrying. This professional focus is a perfectly understandable development considering the time and effort they have invested in their own education and careers, but fertility suffers. Unsurprisingly, more than double the number of women in the country wanted to continue in the same job after childbirth in 2002 as did in 1991.¹⁴ However, as of 2008, only 33 percent of new mothers do continue working, half the OECD average.¹⁵ Support for working mothers and women planning pregnancies is a work in progress in the Korean labor market. The lack of support is a hindrance to women and a waste of precious human capital. Lastly, women who are balancing motherhood and careers still tend to assume the majority of childcare responsibilities at home, placing upon them an unduly heavy burden and serving as further incentive for younger women to avoid motherhood altogether.

11 Ibid., 585.

12 "The Odd Couple," *The Economist*, September 27, 2008, special section 4.

13 "Profiting from Sexism."

14 Sungeun Yang and Paul C. Rosenblatt, "Confucian Family Values and Childless Couples in South Korea," 586.

15 "The Odd Couple," special section 4.



Arguably the most important role for any Korean mother in regards to her children is the management of their educational experience. The country spends well below the OECD average on public education yet routinely pummels international competitors' reading, science and math PISA scores.¹⁶ The answer to that paradox lies in extensive private education, for which Korea infamously pays more than any other country. Spending on private study brings the public-private expenditure average to the top internationally, with recent estimates putting it at 30 percent of household income.¹⁷ Sending children to Anglophone nations to study is not uncommon and involves serious economic commitment from parents who are also aware that waiting at the end of this educational gauntlet is a tightening job market. There are constant calls for educational reform in Korea, and it can fairly be expected to come, but the expensive present state of schooling in the country is certainly affecting couples' family-planning decisions.

Expanding costs in education are not the only economic strain on Korean households. In a country once famous for a high level of saving which was a key component of its economic growth, inflation has outpaced income in recent years to make saving difficult if not impossible. Household debt is currently at 146 percent the level of income, slightly above the rate in the United States before the subprime crisis began.¹⁸ In the early 1990s saving rates relative to percentage of income were at 25 percent and have since fallen to three percent.¹⁹ The primary expenditure is on housing, and Korea's *jeonse* system, which has afforded families mobility in the housing market, is under strain because realtors face low interest rates and have fewer investment opportunities for the lump-sum deposits paid by renters. Now families often face an unfamiliar monthly-rental system which many find less advantageous to consumers. Along with housing, prices have risen for food, fuel, utilities and other basic amenities. Correspondingly, household disposable income has begun to evaporate after hovering at the OECD average for years.²⁰ To make matters worse, many people are more wary about job security since the Asian financial crisis in 1997 began to dismantle the lifetime-employment system and college graduates face an extremely difficult job market in which to attempt to launch careers. An

16 OECD, *Society at a Glance 2011: OECD Social Indicators*, 63.

17 Christian Oliver and Song Jung-a, "South Korea: An Economy Divided," *Financial Times*, May 29, 2011.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.



appreciating currency poses a constant threat to profits in what has long been an export-based economy, signaling Korea's development model itself is outdated and more sweeping, anxiety-laden economic changes are on the horizon. These factors combined no doubt intimidate young couples searching for a foothold in Korea's economy and influence their attitudes towards having children.

Korea is now the most rapidly aging country on earth.²¹ This demographic shift implies that with the passage of time there will be more senior citizens for the dwindling number of economically productive workers to support and has serious economic ramifications. The annual rate of growth in the Korean economy between 1970 and 1997 was 7.8 percent and one of the most stunning runs in history.²² Savings rates relative to gross national product were in the double digits throughout that period. Those days are over. The question demographic transition raises is whether an aging, declining population and shrinking workforce obligated to support increasing numbers of pensioners will bring about economic contraction, and if so, how much. Many factors suggest contraction will occur. The number of young workers in manufacturing will decline and such jobs will continue to move to developing countries. In total, Korea is estimated to encounter a shortage of 4.8 million workers by 2020.²³ Seniors will no longer have incomes and live off of their previous savings, cutting into overall savings. A smaller workforce will result in a reduced tax base from which government can invest for growth, pay for social services, and dole out pension payments to those seniors. Korea already spends the second lowest amount on health and other social services in the OECD, making a reduction in them an unwelcome idea.²⁴ Nonetheless, the government's expanding pension obligations will not be counterbalanced by tax revenue, making it difficult to fund social programs. Basic services will most likely become more expensive because fewer workers will be available for the jobs and thus command higher wages.

Lastly, businesses that have subsisted on public-works spending throughout the country's development stand to lose their sole client. Without quick and marked gains in total factor productivity to counterbalance its decline in workers, Korea's GDP cannot remain at current levels and the country's

21 Andrew Eungi Kim and John Lie, "South Korea in 2006 - Nuclear Standoff, Trade Talks and Population Trends," 55.

22 Deakeun Park and Chanyong Rhee, "Saving, Growth and Economic Change in Korea," *Journal of the Japanese and International Economics* 19, (2005): 394.

23 Andrew Eungi Kim and John Lie, "South Korea in 2006 - Nuclear Standoff, Trade Talks and Population Trends," 56.

24 OECD, *Society at a Glance 2011: OECD Social Indicators*, 87, 75.



standard of living will suffer. As this process takes hold in coming years Koreans can look eastward to Japan, which has experienced economic stagnation due in part to the same demographic circumstances, and west to China with its double-digit yearly growth rates. Can it learn from the East and not envy the West? Can Koreans who for decades lived through continuous enrichment acclimate themselves to economic stagnation and contraction? Finally, can Korea's democracy, born in and legitimized by rapid economic gains survive unscathed as conditions are reversed?

Demographics and Democratic Consolidation: Productive Stakeholders as Ideal Voters

Between 1960 and 2004 our world witnessed the foundation of 123 democracies, only 67 of which survived through 2004.²⁵ Democracy is therefore not the most stable form of government if a country's primary concern in leadership is continuity. It is true that the longer a democracy survives the better are its chances of continuing to do so, and throughout history the initial years of such governments have proven to be fraught with danger. The primary reasons for relapses to authoritarianism or other previous undemocratic forms of rule are economic. Some scholars speculate there exists a brief "honeymoon period" of two years before dissatisfaction amongst the electorate or potential for a coup d'état is likely to reemerge.²⁶ Positive economic performance in the early stages of a democracy is therefore essential, especially to lend confidence to the public that governments will be able to manage economic downturns both brief and sustained in coming years. As stated above, Korea's democracy is nearly a quarter-century old and with the election of Kim Dae-jung in 1997 saw its first peaceful transition of power to an opposition party. The country is one of the world's success stories in this regard, but its democracy is not yet fully consolidated and numerous obstacles exist in the completion of that process. Most have to do with what Sungmoon Kim calls, "an immensely grotesque mixture of a democratic hardware, on the one hand, and persistent authoritarian software, on the other."²⁷ Korea now finds itself in a race against time to reinforce its democracy as much as possible before challenges such as

25 Ethan B. Kapstein and Nathan Converse, "Why Democracies Fail," *Journal of Democracy* 19, (2008): 59.

26 Michael Bernhard, "Economic Performance and Survival in New Democracies: Is There a Honeymoon Effect?," *Comparative Political Studies* 36 (2003): 407.

27 Sungmoon Kim, "Civil Society and Political Action in Democratized Korea: Revamping Democratic Consolidation from a Participatory Perspective," *New Political Science* 28, (2006): 528.



demographic transition threaten its stability and livelihood.

Democratic consolidation is examined here in two senses; one pertains to the future and the other to the present. As concerned with Korea's future in the face of likely economic contraction, consolidation would be evidenced by stability. More particularly, democratic consolidation would manifest itself in the ability of the Korean electorate and government officials to withstand populist demagoguery and strong-arm promises of a return to past economic dynamism in the face of changing economic, social and security conditions. Such stability in the face of adversity would be indicative of trust in public institutions and assumption of responsibility by a cooperative electorate to manage problems as a community with both competing and common interests. Fears of an alternative course evidenced by a breakdown in trust in democracy are not unfounded when one considers that even after democratization Koreans chose former dictator Park Chung-hee as their most popular president.²⁸ There is undoubtedly a latent admiration for such leadership amongst some people in the country even if there is no correlation between regimes of that particular nature and economic performance. Humans are simply prone to remember positive elements of past experience in a glorified light. As Korea's middle class currently is being hollowed out in the course of economic transition and rising inequality, tensions could lead to instability and irregular voting patterns with some disenfranchised citizens voting against their own interests. Failure to maintain a sizable middle class, which is the foundation of both political and economic stability, will put the country in a less-than-ideal position to confront future problems.

Key to that stability in the future is consolidation through legitimization in the present. As an abstract concept legitimization is of course immeasurable, but best explained by Hahm and Rhyu as, "a political activity, a discourse carried on by the Korean people who share a common understanding as to what 'politics' is and what 'democracy' is."²⁹ In short, sufficient trust in the democratic process induces participation and indicates legitimization. Recent events in the country cast a shadow over consolidation in this sense. Participation in the most recent presidential election in Korea was at an OECD low of 46 percent and the country exhibited the second-largest decline in voting rates since 1980 amongst

28 Baeg Im Hyug, "Korea's Democracy and Economic Development After Democratization," *Koreabrand.net*, last modified March 25, 2011, http://www.koreabrand.net/en/known/known_view.do?CATE_CD=0007&SEQ=1667.

29 Chaibong Hahm and Sang-young Rhyu, "Democratic Reform and Consolidation in South Korea: The Promise of Democracy," in *Democratization and Globalization in Korea: Assessments and Prospects*, ed. by Chung-in Moon and Jongryn Mo (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1999) 71.



member nations.³⁰ Protests over the importation of US beef in the summer of 2008 quickly became general outcry at the unpopular policy-implementation tactics of an administration which had been in office for less than six months. Eventually a movement pushing for President Lee Myung-bak's impeachment collected 1.3 million signatures.³¹ The sustained demonstrations in central Seoul indicated a lack of respect for and trust in Lee as a leader and led to multiple televised apologies to the public. While Lee had won the election soundly over the second-place opposition candidate, less than 50 percent of the electorate had cast their votes for him, especially in the southwestern provinces, reminding the nation that historical, factional regionalism is alive and well. In such a system, network allegiances take precedence over policy substance and charisma over proficient leadership.³² Physical altercations between opposing parties in the National Assembly over the passage of controversial bills have become a staple on international news broadcasts in recent years. Lastly, there exists in Korea a tendency for newly-inaugurated administrations to engage in what can only be called character assassination toward their departing predecessors. This maltreatment creates further polarization and a zero-sum characterization of the political process as a whole in Korea amongst participants and observers. At the root of these difficulties is a critical lack of social capital in the form of trust. Korea ranked in the bottom quartile of the OECD in level of trust in others in 2008.³³ Trust is an essential component of a democratic culture, and if there is no culture there is no consolidation.³⁴ These combined flaws in civil discourse make it nearly impossible to call Korea's democracy "mature," the final tier of the process identified by Kihl as necessary for democratic consolidation.³⁵

Koreans can take most direct action to consolidate their democracy by voting in the upcoming presidential election of 2012 after having involved themselves in the campaigns and debates on issues facing the nation. Such debates would ideally include discussions on the value of democracy as a system of governance for Korea, rumination on the benefits it has brought

30 OECD, *Society at a Glance 2011: OECD Social Indicators*, 97.

31 Young Whan Kihl, "The Challenges of Democratic Consolidation in South Korea: Post-Election Politics of the Lee Myung-bak Administration," *Korea Observer* 40, (2009): 249.

32 Byung-Kook Kim, "Party Politics in South Korea's Democracy: The Crisis of Success." in *Consolidating Democracy in South Korea*, ed. Larry Diamond and Byung-Kook Kim (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000) 78.

33 OECD, *Society at a Glance 2011: OECD Social Indicators*, 91.

34 Chaibong Hahm and Sang-young Rhyu, "Democratic Reform and Consolidation in South Korea: The Promise of Democracy," 73.

35 Young Whan Kihl, "The Challenges of Democratic Consolidation in South Korea: Post-Election Politics of the Lee Myung-bak Administration," 234.



since 1987 and recognition that it is the most viable option to steer the country forward through awaiting challenges. High rates of participation in that election would signal a renewed determination by citizens to cooperate in the collective management of their country for the present so as to best ensure its future stability. Such stability, based on mutual respect, will be necessary to manage demographic transition as an economic test presented to them. People who are presently active participants in the Korean economy and stakeholders in society by way of raising families and owning property are more likely to vote than disenfranchised citizens who feel their interests have been neglected by illegitimate governments in the past. In this sense democratic consolidation is a synergistic process. Voters' trust in empowering government begets trust in them by that government, leading to respect of their needs throughout the policy-making process. An environment of this nature is in Korea's future. In the present however, its inability to fully consolidate its democracy has resulted in political instability that could deteriorate into fragility in a time of crisis, demographic or otherwise.

Mitigating Strategies

At present two primary options exist to confront the demographic reformation just over Korea's horizon. They could be employed solitarily or in tandem. One would address multiple problems the country faces while the other may create a host of new ones. The first is to overhaul employers' policies on maternity and paternity leave to give parents more flexibility in raising children while continuing as productive employees. Korea's infamously-long working hours, blamed not only for the low TFR but a number of other social problems, are an obstacle to raising children and discouraging to would-be parents.³⁶ Inherent in reform of maternity-leave policy is a new approach in general towards female employees, and more efficient use of female human capital is in the country's economic interest. It is telling that there are more women than men in the Seoul offices of Goldman Sachs, as foreign firms have begun acquiring well-educated Korean female talent underused by local firms.³⁷ Korea ranks ninety-seventh out of 128 countries on the World Economic Forum's ranking

36 Sung So-young, "Efforts to End Overwork Not Working," *Korea Joongang Daily*, October 21, 2010.

37 "Profiting from Sexism."



of gender equality.³⁸ Nations around the world have realized that streamlined involvement of women in the workplace has been a fast and practical way to invigorate stalled economies. Former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet, who is now the first Executive Director of UN Women, travels worldwide with this very message. Korea has a wealth of well-educated women and is in position to benefit greatly from such policy changes.

Debate has long existed on the viability of democratic thought and practice in the traditionally Confucian cultures of East Asia. Equally germane to today's world is a debate on the feasibility of maintaining patriarchal attitudes towards women in the workplace when efficient use of human capital is of increased importance in a globalizing economy. Adopting flexible attitudes towards expecting parents, especially mothers, and integration of women into top merit-based positions will almost certainly enhance Korea's competitiveness in the future as well as promote childbirth. The government has recently set a goal for the TFR to reach 1.7 by 2030 as well as pegged maternity pay at 40 percent of salaries, mandated flexible hours for mothers and assisted with school tuition for large families.³⁹ The existence of such initiatives makes it clear the low TFR is a serious problem and that the state intends to address it. The private sector must first comply and then follow.

The second option is to begin accepting large numbers of immigrant laborers when domestic supply fails to meet demand. Japan appears to have already rejected this idea and is sending large numbers of Brazilian laborers home with payments on promises not to return after having spent years working in the country.⁴⁰ Though there are foreign laborers currently in Korea both legally and illegally doing jobs the local population avoids, a large-scale importation of such workers would be problematic for a number of reasons. Korea is one of the world's most homogenous nations and as of 2008 only 1.8 percent of the population was foreign born, the fourth-lowest percentage in the OECD.⁴¹ Its society is rigidly hierarchical and focused on family, school and regional networks, making it difficult to penetrate for new arrivals, especially those facing language barriers. Due to these characteristics and a lack of experience in living alongside non-Koreans, the country fares well below the OECD average in tolerance for minorities.⁴² Its current largest minority is composed of Chinese

38 "The Odd Couple," special section 4.

39 "An Exercise in Fertility," 60.

40 Hiroko Tabuchi, "Japan Pays Foreign Workers to Go Home," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2009.

41 OECD, *Society at a Glance 2011: OECD Social Indicators*, 47.

42 *Ibid.*, 99.



citizens, many of whom are of Korean descent and face relatively minor cultural differences. Workers from distant countries and different cultures would not find their adjustment so smooth. Domestic social conditions would make it extremely difficult for immigrants entering Korea as laborers to climb the social ladder into white-collar positions, potentially creating an unassimilated, laboring underclass. Germany, France and the Netherlands currently face this situation as all three invited migrant laborers in the latter decades of the twentieth century who have not been fully integrated into domestic society. New arrivals may find better economic opportunities than those existing in their home countries and benefit Korea's overall commercial production, but a socially-polarized population would not lead to the democratic pluralism Korea has strived to create. Finally, these workers are likely to come from nations with an excess of undereducated, unemployed young who have little to no experience in democratic processes. In fact, between now and 2050, 70 percent of the world's population growth will be based in 24 countries, all of which have an average per-capita income of less than \$4,000 dollars and are therefore defined by the World Bank as lower-middle income or low-income nations.⁴³ This is the immigrant pool from which Korea would select workers unless it somehow manages to attract groups like highly educated, foreign-born ethnic Koreans.

Restructuring women's roles in the workplace is clearly the better of these two options. The quality of life for the female half of Korea's population could improve along with the TFR. Increased economic competitiveness in the form of rising total-factor productivity would be an excellent secondary benefit and contribute to long-term social and political stability. Sweeping change is not immediately possible. However, public awareness of the causes of and threats posed by demographic transition will increase the likelihood of the successful implementation of strategic countermeasures. The foundation of that strategy is a change of attitudes in one of the developed world's most conservative, male-dominated cultures.

Conclusion: Children for Democracy

The Republic of Korea has faced more than its fair share of challenges since its foundation. Developmental success in the face of prolonged adversity

⁴³ Jack A. Goldstone, "The New Population Bomb: The Four Megatrends That Will Change Your World," 36.



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would have been impossible if not for the renowned resiliency, tenacity and industriousness of its people. Korea has endured war, poverty and a march toward democracy that few if any people living in other developed nations today can understand. But yet another hurdle awaits. Demographic transition is both a different kind of problem than those faced in the past and one that can have profound effects on the future quality of life in Korea. Longer lifespans are now the norm and that advance will not change. It is therefore the other facet of this transition that must be addressed with a committed focus. In order to ensure the continued growth and health of their economy and democracy, Koreans must produce and raise more children who in the future vote as educated, productive and responsible stakeholders with the nation's best interests in mind. **PEAR**

