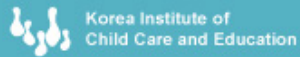


# What We Need to Do to Overcome Korea's Ultra-low Fertility Rate

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## Plummeting Total Fertility Rate in Korea

**Table 1** Number of births and total fertility rates (2013-2023)

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of Births	<b>436,455</b>	435,435	438,420	<b>406,243</b>	357,771	<b>326,822</b>	302,676	272,337	260,500	249,000	<b>230,000</b>
Total Fertility Rate	<b>1.19</b>	1.21	1.24	<b>1.17</b>	1.05	<b>0.98</b>	0.92	0.84	0.81	0.78	<b>0.72</b>

### Contributing key factors:

- Female workers **in their 30s** face widespread career interruptions due to childbirth and childcare
  - Stronger policies needed to promote male participation in childcare
- As industrial diversification has resulted in greater **employment flexibility &** shifting in parents' time use
  - A higher level of adaptability is needed
  - (Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC) services must adapt to these changes)

## Gender Issue in Employment

### Male employment rate:

- Over 70% since 1960s, **relatively stable**
- Slight **decline since 2000s**

### Female employment rate:

- Initially ~50% of male rate
- **Steady increase**, now around **50%** and expected to rise

### Age-specific patterns:

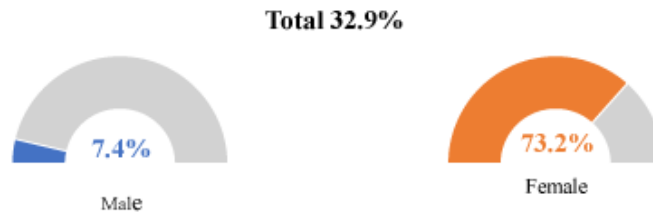
- **Both genders:** Employment ↑ in 10s and 20s
- **Males:** Rise until 30s, stable ~90% through early 50s
- **Females:** Peak (~70%) at 25–29 → lowest at 35–39 → rise again in 40s  
→ Reflects **career interruptions** during childrearing years

## Gender Issue in Employment

- Due to childbirth and childcare,  
the decline in female employment rates during their 30s indicates widespread **career interruptions**.
- In Korea, rising female employment alongside falling birth rates suggests  
persistent **challenges in balancing work and family life**.
- Despite legal guarantees for ‘maternity and childcare leaves’,  
it is still difficult to actually use them in practice.
- In addition, though male ‘parental leave’ usage increased: 17,662 (2018) → 29,041 (2021)
- **Gender gap in utilization:** 37.2% (mothers) vs. 10.6% (fathers)  
- **Average duration:** 17.8 months (mothers) vs. 9.5 months (fathers)

## Gender Issue in Employment

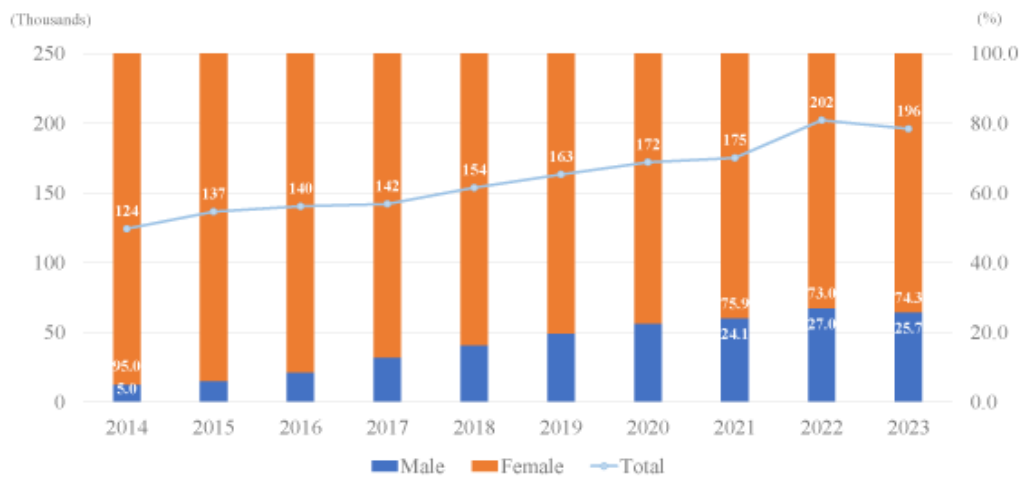
Figure 1 Rate of Parental Leave Usage (2023)



Korean Statistical Information Service(KOSIS)  
[https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT\\_CC2024D001&conn\\_path=I3](https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_CC2024D001&conn_path=I3)

## Gender Issue in Employment

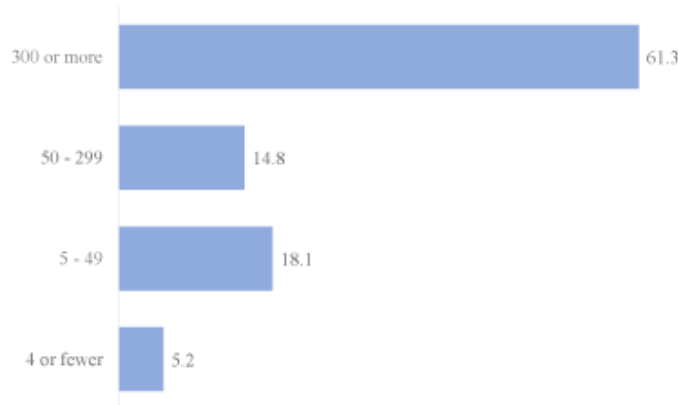
Figure 2 Total Number and Rate of Parental Leave Users (2014-2023, by gender)



Korean Statistical Information Service(KOSIS)  
[https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT\\_CC2024A001&conn\\_path=I3](https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_CC2024A001&conn_path=I3)

## Gender Issue in Employment

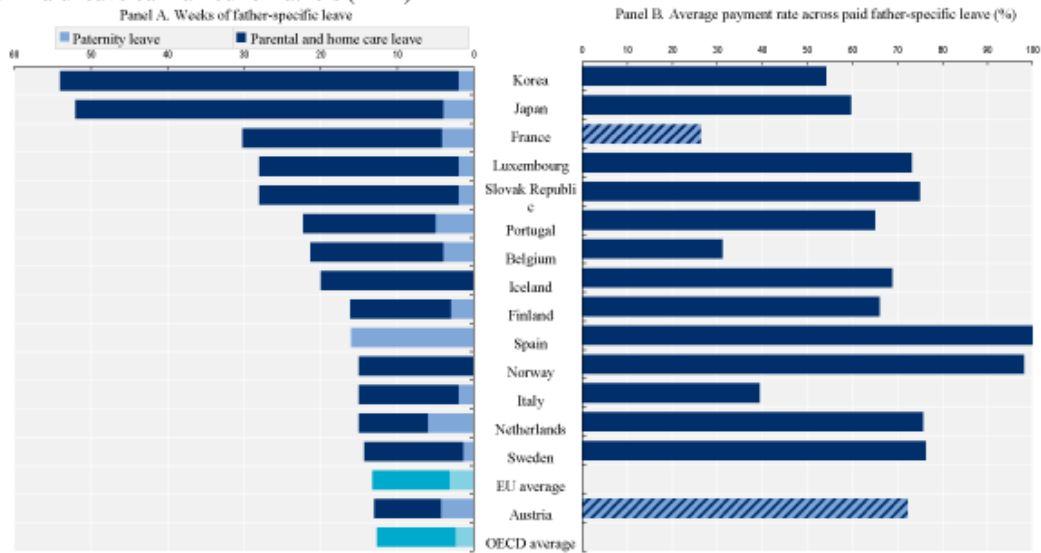
**Figure 3** Parental Leave Usage Rates by Company Size (% , 2023)



Korean Statistical Information Service(KOSIS)  
[https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=1018&tblId=DT\\_CC2024D003&conn\\_path=I3](https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=1018&tblId=DT_CC2024D003&conn_path=I3)

## Gender Issue in Employment

**Figure 4** Paid leave earmarked for fathers (2024)



[https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/data/datasets/family-database/pf2\\_1\\_parental\\_leave\\_systems.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/data/datasets/family-database/pf2_1_parental_leave_systems.pdf)

## Policy Interventions to Promote Male Participation in Childcare

- **Fathers' desire to participate in childcare** has increased compared to the past.
  - The government should set higher target utilization rates for childcare-related leave policies.
- Active, **government-led initiatives** are needed to ensure continued growth in male uptake of parental leave.
- **Much Stronger policy interventions** are required to promote male participation in childcare.

## Transformations of Industrial Structure and Work-Life Balance

- Korea's industrial structure is undergoing significant transformations,
  - with the rise of information and communications technology (ICT).
- Non-regular, platform-based, and small-scale self-employment are on the rise.
- As of August 2023:
  - Non-regular workers: 8.12 million (37.0%) of 21.95 million wage earners (Up from 33.0% in 2018)
  - Special employment (artists, delivery workers, golf caddies, etc): 553,000 persons (6.8%)
- Industrial diversification increases employment flexibility
- Parents' work-life balance patterns are changing,
  - requiring greater adaptability in ECEC services.**

## Need more Childcare Support Policies related to Diversified Working Hours

- Childcare support policies should be **diversified by employment type**, allowing parents to choose options suited to their circumstances
  - **Customized policies** are needed for varying work arrangements
  - **Full-time wage-earning dual-income parents**: Support for parental leave & reduced working hours
  - **Self-employed/non-wage-earning dual-income parents**: Improve accessibility to part-time childcare support
  - **Part-time wage-earning dual-income parents**: Often not covered by *Employment Insurance* → need alternative support measures
- As employment structures diversify, parents' **occupational status** and **work environments** are becoming more varied.
  - Requires **flexible childcare support policies**

## Aging of the Working Population

- As the working-age population declines, labor market conditions are rapidly evolving.
- The 30–44 age group is expected to shrink from 10.7 million (2025) to 6.83 million (2050).
- Securing sufficient ECEC personnel will remain challenging, with continued workforce aging.
- In 2013, the 26–30 age group made up the largest share (33.7%).  
In 2019, those aged 40+ became the largest group at 44.1%.
- Many childcare workers are nearing retirement → shortage of manpower is expected
- Childcare now requires higher expertise → lack of workers with specialized education and experience is inevitable
- Younger teachers adapt better to digital/customized education → aging workforce should be carefully observed.

## Trends in Child Health

- Beyond population size, trends in child health require close monitoring.
- As of Dec 2022, 9,234 infants and young children with disabilities were registered.
  - 2,738 enrolled in kindergartens
  - 2,022 attended childcare centers
  - the number of registered children with disabilities utilizing such institutions has been steadily increasing
- Attention needed for **children at risk of developmental disabilities**—those without a diagnosis but potentially vulnerable without appropriate educational service.
- In a teacher survey, 67.5% reported an increase in such cases, across both kindergartens and childcare centers.
- Therefore, teachers need minimal training on special care for disabled infants and toddlers.
- Moreover, we need to make more efforts to train teachers who can provide special care to disabled infants and toddlers.

## Securing Sufficient Government Budget for ECEC and Ensuring Its Efficient Allocation

- In line with the government's direction to strengthen public responsibility for child-rearing, policy development will continue at both central and local government levels.
  - As a result, **government financial support** in this field is expected to **expand**.
- Socioeconomic changes have reshaped perceptions of children's value—**fewer children, higher quality care**
  - Despite a declining child population, **demand for high-quality ECEC services** remains strong.
- To meet parental expectations, enhancing the **professionalism of teachers and staff** is essential.
  - Securing and efficiently allocating funding for ECEC will be critical.

## Conclusion

- Expanding **institutional childcare support** is crucial amid rising dual-income households.
- Need to increase Male participation in childcare
  - **Fathers' desire to participate in childcare** has increased compared to the past.
  - The government should set higher target utilization rates for childcare-related leave policies.
- Equally important to create a societal culture where parents who wish to care for their children can:
  - Freely use childcare policies
  - Access **flexible working hours**
- This approach supports a shift away from Korea's long working hour culture, promoting a more **balanced work-life environment** for all.

## Conclusion

- Low birth rates across APEC economies → ECEC is key to securing high-quality human capital
- More active exchanges among APEC economies → share childcare and education curriculum
- Current lack of personnel exchange in early childhood education
- Future efforts needed: intergovernmental efforts to promote educator training and student exchange

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Thank You!