

PopulationMatters

Want more babies? Try cutting men's work hours

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Among developed countries worldwide, fertility is, perhaps surprisingly, higher in countries in which women's participation in the labour force is higher.

What lies behind this apparently counter-intuitive phenomenon can help us better understand the problems of low fertility and population ageing in developed Asian countries and shape policies in response to them.

In 2015, total fertility rates, which indicate the number of births per woman, were 1.2 in Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea, and 1.5 in Japan; these rates are among the lowest in the world.

Because of the low birth rates, the populations in these places are also ageing more rapidly than most others in the world.

While it took, or is expected to take, 115 years, 73 years and 69 years for the proportion of people aged 65 or older to double from 7 per cent to 14 per cent in France, Australia and the United States, respectively, the same transition is estimated to occur within 17 years, 19 years, 25 years and 32 years in Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, respectively.

To increase fertility rates and cope with ageing populations, more needs to be done to enable women to reconcile their responsibilities at work with their domestic duties, including childcare, elder care and housework, all of which tend to fall on women's shoulders under patriarchal family traditions still pervasive in East Asian societies.

Among developed countries, the first stage of the gender revolution saw more women entering the workforce. Initially, this shift was linked to lower rates of childbearing. However, since the

1990s, this association between women's employment and fertility has turned positive – that is, more babies were being born even as more women took on jobs outside the confines of home.

What made the difference? A sociological theory proposed by Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegard in 2015 attributes this reversal to the revolution's second stage: when men took on a bigger role in tending to family matters.

Both my own research in South Korea and a study in Japan conducted by Dr Nobuko Nagase from Ochanomizu University and Dr Mary Brinton from Harvard University found supporting evidence for this hypothesis.

The research found that among couples with just one child, there was an approximately 1 percentage point increase in their having a second if the husband spent an extra hour each week on household chores.

And yet, in developed Asian

societies, men's contribution to domestic labour largely remains minimal, both in absolute terms and in relation to the effort put in by their wives.

Among the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, the division of domestic labour between spouses tends to be the most gender unequal in Japan and South Korea, which are the OECD's only Asian members.

This situation seems to differ little from that of other major Asian cities, for which relevant statistics are more difficult to find, although foreign domestic workers might ease some of the burden carried by wives and mothers in Singapore and Hong Kong. The persistent gendered division of labour at home has led scholars to argue that Asian countries remain stagnant in the first stage of the gender revolution and, hence, have failed to reverse their low fertility rates.

How, then, can men in the Asian region be encouraged to become more involved in the family sphere?

Given the strength of societal norms on gender roles, public campaigns on changing them may not be as effective. Instead, further attention needs to be paid to the culture of overwork.

In 2013, South Koreans clocked 2,163 hours at work while the Japanese worked 1,734 hours. In 2011, the data showed 2,287 hours for Singaporeans, 2,343 hours

among Hong Kongers, and 2,144 hours among Taiwanese.

These working hours are strikingly long compared with those in Western developed countries, with the average number of working hours in the OECD club being just 1,770. The shortest number of working hours among the OECD countries was 1,363 in Germany.

During the phase of rapid economic growth in the second half of the 20th century, collective interests were prioritised over those of individuals, and workers took long working hours for granted. These habits have been passed down through generations and continue to underlie the organisational management culture.

Accordingly, a reduction in working hours would help reduce the tension between work and family commitments in the region. Men who work long hours have been shown to spend less time on domestic chores and to interact less with their family members; the idea is that men would spend more time with their family members if they could work fewer hours.

A notable example of a government's direct intervention is South Korea's move to legally mandate a reduction of its work week from 44 to 40 hours. My research with Dr Lee Changjun at University College Dublin and Dr Do Young Kyung at Seoul National University assessed how this

four-hour reduction affected male workers' support for their elderly parents who do not live with them.

We found that, as a result of the reduction, the average male worker visited his parents about four times more per year. The probability of his providing support in the form of, say, clothing and food, also increased by 8.2 percentage points.

To sum up, it is not surprising that fertility rates can be higher even in places where women's labour participation is higher, if there is a family-friendly environment that helps women manage both work and family commitments.

Eliminating the culture of excessive work and subsequently encouraging men to contribute more at home may increase both fertility and familial elder support.

A change in men's use of their time, driven by an official reduction of the work week and strict enforcement of the law, can serve as an effective policy tool to cope with the challenges associated with rapid population ageing in Asia.

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