

Korea Adopts Social Pact to Battle Low Birthrate

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The government Tuesday adopted a social accord aimed at battling problems arising from Korea's falling birthrate and aging population, while making room for women's breadwinning activities and constructing more public childcare facilities. Labor and business circles, for their part, will attempt to create more job opportunities for women and seniors, according to the accord.

South Korea's fertility rate fell to a record-low last year, with the average number of babies per woman of childbearing age at 1.08, reflecting increased economic activities of women and their tendency to marry late.

The accord results from five months discussion among business, labor, and religious and civic groups. Co-chairing the committee are Prime Minister Han Myeong-sook, Lee Yong-deuk, chairman of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), Kang Shin-ho, chairman of the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI), and Park Young-sook, chairwoman of the Korea Foundation for Women. "The world's worst-level birthrate and the population aging on an unprecedented scale will bring us a reduction in the productive workforce, an increased burden in supporting the aged, and lead to great pains and a crisis in the future," the convention said.

Signing parties to the accord recognize the crisis has developed from a system that puts primary responsibility for childcare and support for the aged on women, and from the economic factors such as the instability of job opportunities and income, it said.

Under the accord, the government will increase the number of public childcare facilities so 30 percent of babies aged 0-3 will benefit by 2010. The government also agreed to continue discussion on ways to extend the retirement age of workers, while labor and businesses will negotiate on how to improve the retirement and wages system.

Discussion sessions on measures to reform the national pension system will be held as early as possible, with people from all walks of society participating, officials said.

While the accord or convention is not legally binding, it is meaningful in that each social and economic group has come up with detailed measures under the spirit of mutual trust and compromise, the officials said.

Editorial: Another Social Pact

Practicable Steps Needed to Cure Demographic Problems

Too few babies and too many elderly people are global issues, but nowhere is this generational imbalance growing faster than here. This is no longer a problem that can be solved by the government alone but one that requires a national endeavor. So the "social pact" agreed to on Tuesday by representatives from various walks of life to cope with the plunging birthrate and growing number of aged was not just appropriate but significant. Yes, the will was there, but less palpable was the practicability of proposed programs.

The agreement contains various steps, ranging from childcare and wage systems to retirement age and pension programs. In terms of the financial resources required to get these programs off the ground, however, they rely too heavily on corporate spending and tax hikes. It is natural that the beneficiaries - businesses and individuals - of the pact, which is focused on beefing up the workforce and latter-life comfort, should chip in more. If, however, burdens exceed benefits too much, the entire pact could be called into question.

Not only management but also unions should change. The former is advised to turn more "pro-family" in such areas as daycare centers, paid maternity and paternity leave, and in extending the retirement age. The latter, now mainly led by young male workers, should be ready to usher in more female and older workers, rather than sticking to their vested interests. The important thing is both employers and employees should accept more flexibility in job opportunities and wage systems.

The success of this pact hinges on how effectively all of society shares the burden of bearing and raising children with female workers. According to a survey by the Japanese government, 98 percent of Swedes said theirs was a good country in which to raise a child: The comparable figure for Koreans was a mere 19 percent. Swedish women's economic participation ratio is 80 percent and their birthrate, 1.71. In Korea, only 51 percent of women are economically active and on average give birth to 1.16 babies.

All this is closely connected to how we can restore a community spirit among different classes, sexes and even races. The shortage in the workforce can be solved to a large extent by the introduction of immigrants if this society is financially and mentally prepared to do so. On the other hand, the extension of the retirement age will go nowhere if management keeps refusing to implement it. Also, increased childcare subsidies could also end up lining the pockets of some daycare center operators without proper supervision.

Once again, the key lies in how willing we are to open our hearts and live together with different groups. If only men were ready to allow women the same treatment they enjoy at their workplaces and acknowledge their female colleagues' disadvantages, more than half of the problem will have been solved.