Solving the Low Fertility Rate with Technology?

: Population Policy and Woman’s Right to Health

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South Korea's total fertility rate (TFR) in 2009 was 1.15, the lowest in the world (as known so far), and this figure has continued to fall steadily since reaching the population replacement level of 2.1 in 1983. The South Korean government has invested a total of 19.7 trillion won (US$ 18 billion) of public funds in the five years from 2006 to 2010 to deal with the low fertility rate.

Most of the literature discussing ‘low fertility’ in Korea starts from the astonishment at how things have rapidly changed since the government initiated the National Family Planning Project around the 1970s. There is an impression that the reality surrounding fertility has changed drastically in just a few decades. However, the thing that has never changed is the way they treat women and children as mere numbers and not as human beings whose health and bodies deserve respect.

This paper aims to analyze the “National Supporting Program for Infertility Couples” (hereinafter the “Program”), started in 2006 as one of the measures taken by the South Korean government to deal with low fertility in Korea, in terms of the health of women and children and in terms of the actual effects. Specifically, this study is to clarify the following research questions:

First, did the “Program” start with a comprehensive consideration for women’s health? Or
rather, has the “Program” caused the concept of women's health (including reproductive health) to change or deteriorate?

Second, can the “Program” be an effective measure to deal with low fertility? How much of the low fertility rate results from infertility and can infertility be solved through IVF subsidies? And does this “Program” not cause internal contradictions with other low fertility policies (especially the subsidies for premature and congenital anomaly infants)?

Third, does the “Program” live up to its name and actually really help couples with infertility? Are the actual beneficiaries the infertile couples or in fact the drug companies and medical institutions?

This study attempts to answer these questions by analyzing the documents published by the government regarding the "Program" and low fertility. In addition, it will analyze how national policy deals with women's health in conjunction with the amendments of the "Maternal Health Act" implemented since 2009, and previous analysis on the "Maternal Health Program". Moreover, an in-depth analysis of the background behind the establishment of this policy and the actual implementation process will be conducted through interviews with the main agents of the "Program" and the subjects supported by the “Program” (infertile couples self-help community).