



## **ANALYSIS OF THE CHILDFREE PHENOMENON IN SOUTH KOREA SOCIETY THROUGH FRANKFURT SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE**

**Putu Oka Astama Adi Putra<sup>1</sup>, Zakharia Billy Aprilius Simatupang<sup>2</sup>, Raynold Matias<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia  
putuokaastama48@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Udayana Univeristy, Denpasar, Indonesia  
zakhariabilly62805@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup>Udayana University, Denpasar, Indonesia  
raynoldmatias@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

Industrialization entered South Korea in 1973 and by 1986 the number of South Korean industrial workers had doubled compared to 1971. This was due to the labor market policies put in place by Park Chung Hee regime, which encouraged the mobilization of the younger generation to big cities. This policy then affects and changes the values of society and families in South Korea. South Korean society, which previously honored family values, has become individualistic for several reasons, such as their orientation towards work. These conditions then create several phenomena in South Korean urban society, such as the emergence of childfree families in South Korea. The purpose of our research is to understand how industrialization can affect family values in South Korea. The research method used is qualitative research with a case study approach, and uses the Frankfurt School perspective with data sources of articles, journals, and news. This study found that industrialization can affect family values because of the labor market and community mobilization that occurs in South Korea. In order to fulfill production activities, not only men but also women enter the labor market. In its development, this study found the change in society's behavior towards childbearing, due to the high cost of raising children, society's orientation towards work, and discrimination against women in the workplace. This condition according to Frankfurt School is then called as irrationality in society and creates childfree phenomena in families in South Korea.

**Keywords:** Industrialisation, Family, South Korea, Childfree, Frankfurt school.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Changes in society are inevitable, particularly in this fast-paced age. There are several issues that affect changes in the mindset of society, and one of them is related to social life. This is evident through the emergence of the childfree mindset, in which childfree can be defined as a social phenomenon where people choose to not have children. Some of the causes are economic factors, such as the high cost of raising children and the

costly budget for education. In addition to that, lifestyle or habits aspects that are oriented towards work and education or other preoccupying routines also affect an individual's decision to have children. This mindset has spread to various countries including in Asia, despite being known to profoundly uphold their respective family values.

One of the Asian countries that has been affected by childfree thinking is South Korea. Since 1950s, the birth rate in South Korea has declined steadily from 5.6 to only 1.1. This is due to changes in the socioeconomic conditions of society that were formed to support South Korea's industrialization process in the 1970s. The said regulation encouraged South Koreans to switch from agricultural life to the industrial sector, which led them to move to urban areas. This situation created a change in family values in South Korean society, formerly it used to be the first child, specifically the son of the household, who had to stay with his family but then it changed as they migrated to the city (AsiaSociety, n.d). In order to create a proficient industry, companies in South Korea also impose strict policies for their employees, some of them involve companies firing employees if they get married or pregnant. These regulations encourage women in South Korea not to have children, to the extent that they don't even bother to develop romantic relationships at all so they can put a full focus on their careers. The shift in society from agriculture to the industrial sector as well as the establishment of lifestyles and habits due to the implementation of regulations based on capitalism led to changes in the mindset of South Korean society to not have children (Childfree).

In this journal, the authors intend to learn about how industrialization can change the mindset of South Korean society. Furthermore, the author also wishes to find out how it affects the country of South Korea itself. In particular, the author uses South Korea as the case study due to the large number of South Koreans who choose to be childfree, despite being the part of countries in Asia and involving almost all families who uphold Confucian values.

With that case, the writers saw two reasons why this case has to be analysed. First did industrialization in South Korea occur and the second the relevance of industrialization and the shifting of family values in South Korea. From these two reasons, the writers expect to find 2 objectives, first is being able to understand how industrialization in South Korea can occur and comprehending the traditional values held by South Korean families and the alteration of values that occur in the families.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The first prior literature relevant to the topic was taken by the authors, Mi Hyang Do and Woon Sun Choi, entitled *Perception of Childbirth and Childrearing among Korean Married Women*. The literature discusses the reasons behind the decline in population numbers is capitalism which affects the economy. IMF in Do & Choi (2013, p. 52) predicts that if this proceeds until 2050, South Korea will experience an economic decline due to 70% of the South Korean population being elderly people. The reason capitalism has quite an impact on the population growth rate in South Korea is because the young people in South Korea, both men and women, are busy working themselves off in the city. As for the research method, this literature used the quantitative method.

The second prior literature relevant to the topic that the authors use is the research of Kate H. Choi and Yue Qian entitled "*The Rise of the Childless Single in South Korea*". The literature discusses the influence of Confucian values on families in South Korea and the social transition that occurs in the current younger generation. The research also explains the trend of the current younger generation of South Koreans who choose not to have children as well as a marriage relationship due to the social conditions that serve as a hindrance to them. The literature used the *Second Demographic Transition* (SDT) theory to understand why there is a rise in the number of childless single individuals. Using the theory, it was concluded that young generations of South Koreans are choosing not to marry because the institution of marriage is perceived as a hindrance to the individual's self-development and self-actualization.

Despite having similar questions to the prior literature, there are several differences that would help to distinguish this study from the prior literatures. In contrast to the first literature's emphasis on the declining birth rate and its impact, and the second study's emphasis on the influence of Confucian values on the family subject in South Korea, the authors seek to explain by combining insights from both previous literature about childfree phenomenon in South Korea, the process of its emergence, and the analysis in using the concepts of industrialization and the Frankfurt School. In addition, the authors emphasize this study on South Korea's industrialization events and the government policies that followed, as well as the impact of industrialization on families and the childfree phenomenon in South Korea. Other differences include research

methods, in which the prior literature used surveys as data and sources, while we used the literature review of previous studies as a research method.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **A. Frankfurt School**

The perspective of Herbert Marcuse in his book entitled “One Dimensional Man” which is better known as One Dimensional Society can be used to understand modern society from the perspective of the Frankfurt School. Marcuse in Fajarni (2022, p. 80) argues that there are three characteristics shown by modern society or industrial society, namely: Society advances the power of technological concept that emphasizes the exertion of maximum effort to facilitate and expand production. Modern society is claimed to be irrational in its entirety because it connects productivity and destructivity which in other words the proceeded actions create destruction for the community itself instead due to the manipulation of created conflict. The last characteristic is that in a society that has one dimension, all existing elements are directed at one goal only, namely maintaining the existing and ongoing system. The last characteristic is that in a society with a sole dimension, all existing elements are directed at only one goal, which is maintaining the existing and occurring system.

With the currently progressing condition, individuals in modern society do have the possibility to fulfill their desires, but individuals or humans are still challenged and hindered from fulfilling their needs due to the restrictive atmosphere. Furthermore, there is a condition called repressive tolerance, which explains the existence of tolerance for the proceeding oppression. Since everything is focused on supporting the production factor, all human joints and freedoms that humans have become tools, and the oppression is carried out subtly so that people tolerate it by assuming that nothing is happening. The existing system is also deemed developed, which further supports society to maintain the existing status quo.

In viewing the institution of the family, Frankfurt School figures, such as Horkheimer, see that the family plays an important role in shaping an individual’s character as they become part of society (Shaw, 1985. Page 192). Family becomes a place of provision and offers the social skills necessary for someone in order to be able to adapt and comply with things that have been regulated by certain authorities, who typically come from bourgeois groups or those determined by the system. The gist is that the family is a place to prepare

someone before they can accept power relations, which is shown by the relationship between parents and children.

The concerning relationship between parents and children focuses on the father who holds power as the head of the family. Therefore in the capitalist society, the Frankfurt School considers the father among the family members with the highest power in the family structure in the capitalist society, which is necessary in order to sustain production activities and distribution of capital. Horkheimer stated that the economic dependence of women or mother figures towards fathers and the forbearance of the patriarchal system in the family would lead to the depletion of their freedom as well as their role in the family, which then strengthened the status quo (Shaw, 1985. p. 194). Hence, the Frankfurt School has a pessimistic view regarding the survival of the institution of the family, for if they put up the struggle against the existing patriarchal system, it will further exacerbate irrationality and strengthen the current authority. Such conditions can lead to the inevitable loss of the family institution.

B. Industrialization is defined as a process of economic modernization covering all economic sectors and sharing connections with industry. The industry is aiming to increase complementary value by pushing the preparation industry sector as the leading sector. In other words, industrial development will raise development in other sectors. (Arsyad, 2004).

In other words, industrialization has been concluded as an obligation from the continuity of a country's economic development process within a long and increasing period of time. Tech development, the shifting from rural to industrial labor, and investment in industrialized manufacturing processes drove social, cultural, and economic change. Mass production occurred along with the establishment of materials such as steel and iron, energy sources such as steam, coal, electricity, and equipment on a large scale. Higher-quality transportation systems and communication systems also contribute to economic transformation. However, this can sometimes lead to increasing pollution and exploitation of labor (Vaidya, n.d).

### C. Childfree Concept

Childfree is the condition when an individual chooses not to have children due to certain conditions. If it is divided based on the cause, childfree can be divided into three

forms, namely: Firstly, childfree by choice, where they implemented a childfree mindset according to the decisions taken by oneself; Secondly, childfree by circumstance, which can be defined as childfree that is done due to problems related to one's fertility; The third one is childfree by chance, which is done when childfree occurs due to certain reasons, typically whether someone don't find any partner or they decided to focus on the career or education that shape someone with a mindset as unable to have children despite having the intentions to bear children (Harrington, 2019. Page 22). In modern society, childfree tends to be implemented based on the individual's choice, which is carried out by the challenges of the prospective parents who are disheartened by the difficulty of having children,

## **METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative method assisted by the Frankfurt School approach. In this study, we analyzed the process of industrialization phenomenon crossing the threshold of South Korea, which impacts South Korean society's economic dynamic, which led to the emergence of childfree phenomenon. The research is conducted through literature studies from secondary data related to the topic and relevant journals as well as both printed and digital articles. The scope and limitation of this research are narrowed to the influence of industrialization on the childfree phenomenon. The results of the analysis will be presented in the form of interpreted descriptions written in a written report.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **A. South Korean Industrialization**

Industrialization crossed the threshold of South Korea in 1973 on January 12, 1973, the former President of South Korea, Park Chung Hee, proclaimed a heavy and chemical industrial policy for defense systems. The Government proceeded to declare a policy on heavy industry and chemicals shortly after, which aims to focus development on the heavy and chemicals industry. Park Chung Hee set a target for export revenue at around 10 billion dollars and a growing 1000 dollar per capita in GDP. This policy was not part of Park's government agenda, and the purpose of this policy was to train workers who have skills in various fields such as science, engineering, and other technologies that require skills, and these skills can be achieved by carrying out a training agenda.

Park made a number of efforts to support this policy, such as creating homeland guard with 2.5 million troops after North Korea launched an attack on the Blue House in January 1968. Park also mandated Kim to create a defense system. On August 16th, 1970, they successfully built *M-16 rifle construction*. About 15 months after the successful construction, South Korea borrowed funds from Japan and United States. South Korea was also amazed by the presentation made by O Wonch'ol, an aristocrat who created the blueprint of South Korea's industrial plan as he fluently explained how the weapon could be produced in as little time as possible and also how the defense industrial system could produce using the framework that developed in the heavy and chemicals industrial field.

Park had ambitious objectives in mind, which he immediately set out by forming 20 divisions in weapons production. On December 16th, 1971, South Korea created a program called "*Lightning Operation*". This program produces 8 types of examples such as M1 carbons, A4 machine guns, and 60mm mortars. On March 3rd, 1972, Park had come to observe the testing and refinement of weapons with one of his ministers. After the trials, the United States put faith in South Korea, therefore they launched a policy regarding their willingness to assist South Korea in weapons production. In addition, the US technology advisors from the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) stepped forward in addition to their policies.

In terms of profit, this industry has a profit of 5.8 billion dollars, which is due to the investment they worked on with the United States. With the existing cooperation between the United States and South Korea, investment began to enter South Korea. From 1973 until 1975, Korea also earned 3.1 billion dollars. They also received foreign investment, if summed up it could reach around 415.3 billion dollars. After that, the government has expectations to get 3.8 billion dollars from domestic opinion. Subsequently, the government put up expectations to gain 3.8 billion dollars from domestic revenue.

In 1986, the number of workers doubled significantly compared to 1971, and with such a huge scale was able to open up the labor market. In a sense, the labor market is a place where workers and employers are brought together. Workers can offer their skills, energy, and knowledge in this place to be recruited by employers. This occurrence is due to the massive number of production that occurred from various aspects of exports,

including wood, glass, paper, textiles, chemicals, iron, and machinery, which required more labor.

Industrialization, if it is associated with the concept of industrialization, carried out by South Korea in the defense sector, where they are pushing weapons and chemical production to be the leading sector in the process manufacturing industry. The defense industry can increase South Korea's foreign-earned income and GDP by up to 1000 / per capita. On the other hand, South Korea also developed other sectors in the industry, such as wood, glass, iron, and others, by utilizing the labor market as the labor resources to increase the industry in South Korea. The existence of a labor market led to a change of value in society. This is due to the industry's requirement for workers and vice versa, so jobs are not solely open for men, but women who can also apply for jobs and earn money to fulfill their needs.

## **B. The Changes in Family Values among the South Korean Society**

The institution of family in South Korea is influenced by Confucian values, which view the family as the most important component in society. Individuals in the family are projected to continue the lineage and contribute honor to the family, the family interest has precedence over personal interests (Choi & Qian, 2023. Pg. 3). Hence, married life is also viewed as a process to produce high-quality offspring and provide great honor from the family and society's perspective.

Confucianism has a strict division of gender roles. In the view of Confucianism, in the family, the compulsion to continue the lineage and bring honor to the family leaned on the son. All matters related to finding work and education are conducted by men, hence they must put aside their individual desires to devote their lives to the family. It is the women's responsibility to support their husbands or the man in the family. It is believed that women are quite capable of creating ideal circumstances for men. Therefore, they would be able to work optimally and produce good offspring. That way, men have a role in supporting their families, while women play the roles of performing menial chores and raising children.

Along with industrialization beginning in the 1970s, there were changes in values occurring within South Korean society. The existing Confucian ideas that forbid men from leaving the family home have shifted due to the mobilization of men into big cities in

search of jobs (Sorenson, n.d). Even so, there are several values of Confucianism attached to it, namely requiring the family to produce superior offspring which would add honor to the family. Due to such values, Parents are obliged to provide exceptional education, which would lead their children to be exposed to the bigger opportunities of prestigious jobs. The separation of gender can also affect the fulfillment of education, as proved by the priority of fulfilling education for men over women.

The notable increase in women's participation in job employment was directly affected by the significant growth in South Korean industrialization that society witnessed in its development. Industrialization encouraged South Korean women to join the traditionally sexist workforce. Women's participation in the workforce is driven by the need to fulfill production, but this does not stop married or pregnant women from getting contract termination as they are no longer considered efficient in the workforce. This situation led to new problems in the employment aspect due to the affluent dismissal of married or pregnant women. This created a new mindset for employed women to delay getting married or having children due to their job requirements.

The shifting perspectives regarding childbearing in modern South Korean society are driven by changes in birth cohorts. The exposure to socio-economic changes after the emergence of the labor market led to the result of the different views on childbearing from birth cohort society. Concerning the significant obstacles and demands placed on family institutions when deciding whether to have children or not, South Korean society is pushing the child-free mindset and focusing on fulfilling the workforce. This perspective has a direct impact on the low birth rate in South Korea.

With such conditions, the occurrence of changes in values of South Korean society to successfully run the activities of production, which can be observed through the critical theory of the Frankfurt school. Referring to Herbert Marcuse's thought, namely "*One Dimensional Man*" regarding the shift in South Korean society from traditional to more modern can be interpreted to run along with the nature of society which turned irrational. This statement implies that the younger generation in South Korean society doesn't favor the view of having a family and children as a rational choice due to the mobilization carried out by the younger generation to fulfill their needs. Therefore, the activity of production that was previously carried out to meet the demand of the family, became

destructive and irrational because this encouraged individuals not to have children to be able to work optimally and adhere to existing targets.

The existence of inequality and other issues experienced by women in South Korea triggered the emergence of childfree mindset. This phenomenon refers to the choice to voluntarily become childless. The concept of childfree is encouraged by the current circumstances that occur in South Korea, such as the shifting views towards the family, the high cost of raising children, and the women's discrimination in the workplace. The concept of childfree is acceptable under these conditions to compromise the rigid choice of the institution of family amidst the difficulty of having children in modern South Korean society.

The childfree phenomenon spreading in South Korean society can also be categorized as a form of repressive tolerance. With the concentration of every aspect to support production activities and the rise of life demand, South Koreans choose to be childless as a solution and they go on with life as if there is no change in their lives or adhered values. In this case, this can be considered as childfree by choice, which is considered a solution to the challenges the couple is facing in South Korea, namely the high cost of raising children and the high cost of education that they must fulfill as a parental responsibility. The actual thing is that childfree is not a solution, but a repressive tolerance that occurs as a response to the oppression directed at them. The freedom they are believed to get from the result of implementing the childfree mindset, like having no limitations in buying anything or being unchained from additional responsibilities, is a fool freedom, which further maintains the existing system and doesn't solve the problem they face.

The Frankfurt School's pessimistic view towards the family is stated to suit the childfree phenomenon happening in South Korea. The patriarchal perspective that has existed since the beginning through Confucian values that put men in the highest position of power holders led to the occurring problems due to the economic dependence solely on them. However, there are changes in South Korean society encouraging women's participation in the workplace thereafter, which only exacerbated the existing irrational belief of this mindset. The willingness of South Korean women to have families and children is even less due to the fear of being terminated from the company they worked in when experiencing pregnancy and so on. This situation poses threat to the existence of the

institution of family, which is starting to come into light because of the childfree phenomenon and the declining birth rate in South Korea.

Industrialization in the defense sector has been developing rapidly and become the leading sector of South Korea. The developing defense sector industry encourages industrial development in other sectors as well as the emergence of labor market. The labor market pushes the fulfillment of industrial needs of labor and workers who require jobs. Men and women enter the labor market to fulfill this demand without exception. This stimulates the labor market as one of the effects of changes in perceptions towards family and childbearing in the modern society of South Korea.

From the delivered explanation, the mobilization of society and the labor market pushed by the existence of industrialization has brought changes in the perspective of the family, which directly impacts the growth of the childfree mindset in modern families of South Korea. The concept of childfree refers to the choice made by the institutions of the family to be childless for various reasons. This mindset serves as contrary to the traditional family concept, which upholds Confucian values and is directly related to the low birth rate in South Korea today.

The uncovering in this paper reveals that the childfree phenomenon is related to the pessimistic view of the Frankfurt School. The patriarchal perspective puts the role of men as the provider in terms of economy and the sole point the family can depend on. The efforts to counter this concept led to the newly formed irrationality problems reflected in South Korean society. Childfree, which is believed to be the society's response to said conditions, can also be classified as the repressive tolerance of the oppression experienced by South Korean society.

## **CONCLUSION**

Industrialization in the defense sector has been developing rapidly and become the leading sector of South Korea. The developing defense sector industry encourages industrial development in other sectors as well as the emergence of labor market. The labor market pushes the fulfillment of industrial needs of labor and workers who require jobs. Men and women enter the labor market to fulfill this demand without exception. This stimulates the labor market as one of the effects of changes in perceptions towards family and childbearing in the modern society of South Korea.

From the delivered explanation, the mobilization of society and the labor market pushed by the existence of industrialization has brought changes in the perspective of the family, which directly impacts the growth of the childfree mindset in modern families of South Korea. The concept of childfree refers to the choice made by the institutions of the family to be childless for various reasons. This mindset serves as contrary to the traditional family concept, which upholds Confucian values and is directly related to the low birth rate in South Korea today.

The uncovering in this paper reveals that the childfree phenomenon is related to the pessimistic view of the Frankfurt School. The patriarchal perspective puts the role of men as the provider in terms of economy and the sole point the family can depend on. The efforts to counter this concept led to the newly formed irrationality problems reflected in South Korean society. Childfree, which is believed to be the society's response to said conditions, can also be classified as the repressive tolerance of the oppression experienced by South Korean society.

## REFERENCES

- Kim, H. A. (2004). *Korea's Development under Park Chung Hee*. Routledge.
- Choi, K. H., & Qian, Y. (2023). The rise of the childless single in South Korea. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*.
- Harrington, R. (2019). Childfree by Choice. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 1, 22–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15240657.2019.1559515>
- Do, M. H., & Choi, W. S. (2013). Perception of childbirth and childrearing among Korean married women. *Asian Women*, 29(3), 51-69.
- Sorensen, C. W. (n.d.). The Value and Meaning of the Korean Family | Asia Society. Asia Society. <https://asiasociety.org/education/value-and-meaning-korean-family>
- Kim, D. I., & Topel, Robert H. (1995). Labor Markets and Economic Growth: Lessons from Korea's Industrialization, 1970-1990. *Differences and Changes in Wage Structures*, 227-264.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Putu Oka Astama Adi Putra, is a fifth semester International Relations student in Udayana University. He had a strong interest in transnational religious, human rights movements, and environmental issues.

Zakharia Billy Aprilius Simatupang, is a fifth semester International Relations student in Udayana University. He had a strong interest in international issues, economy, and environment.

Raynold Matias is a fifth-semester International Relations student in Udayama University. He had a strong interest in environmental issues and its effects on international policies.