Teenage Pregnancy and Its Support System in Korea: Transition from “Abortion or Adoption” to “Childbirth and Childrearing”

Naoko Sōma, International Graduate School of Social Sciences, Yokohama National University, Yokohama, Japan

Jiyoon Park, Institute of Human Sciences, Toyo University, Bunkyo, Tokyo, Japan & The Monitoring Center for Children’s Rights, Seoul, Korea

Sun-Hee Baek, Seoul Theological University, Gyeonggi-do, Korea

Akemi Morita, Toyo University, Bunkyo, Tokyo, Japan

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the vulnerability of teenage families by focusing on teenage pregnancy and its support system in Korea, and to discuss how the families are facing uncertainty and insecurity as well as the direction in developments in family policy in so-called “family centered welfare state” of Korea. Teenage pregnancy is an issue widely discussed in both developing and developed countries. Especially in developed countries, the number of teenage mothers has been increasing and finds welfare support for such mothers has been developed. Recent research into teenage pregnancy in developed countries finds that young mothers and fathers tend to have multi-layered problems of welfare, education, and the labor-market. In Korea, which is categorized as “family centered welfare regime,” the number of teenage pregnancies is increasing in the context of a very low fertility trend. Most teenage pregnancy has historically ended with “abortion” or “adoption,” and the issue has been branded by stigma. However, recently the number of teenage mothers who choose to undertake their own childcare is increasing. They are facing multi-layered insecurities, for example, insecurities of education (as drop-outs), poverty, labor insecurity, and the issue of the development of their child. This paper focuses on young families at risk through the lens of teenage pregnancy in “familialistic” welfare regime of Korea and considers possible directions for a very low fertility society.

Keywords: Adolescent Single Parent, Family Policy, Family Risk, Korea, Poverty, Social Support, Teenage Pregnancy, Unmarried Teenage Mothers

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Aims of this Research

Viewing the international situation, in Europe and America some time has passed since the increase in teenage single mother households emerged as a social problem. Although not to the extent of Europe or America, East Asia, in particular Japan and Korea are now showing an increase in the birthrate among teenagers. Korea, even more than Japan, sees the rapid decrease in its birthrate as a critical problem, and the problems arising from “teenage pregnancies, childbirth and childrearing,” have been overlooked in the countermeasures dealing with the declining birthrate. The problems of “teenage pregnancies, childbirth and childrearing,” however, are involved further with issues concerning poverty among women and children, the provision of education for women extended to mothers, employment, and child development. Thus, it can be assumed that in the near future it will be increasingly necessary to develop policies to meet them.

Until recently, the major portion of cases in Korea involving pregnancies and births among unmarried mothers have been resolved by either choosing “not to give birth (abortion)” or “delivering the child but not raising it (giving the child up for adoption).” In Korean society, where enthusiasm for education is high, the stigma placed on teenagers who choose to become parents rather than live up to social expectations that assume they ought to be receiving an education is strong, more so than in Japan. Even before the option to “go the full term of pregnancy but not raise the child (choosing adoption)” was available, there was no choice except “not to give birth/unable to give birth (abortion),” and it has been pointed out that the number of teenage abortions is greater than official statistics have indicated.

While the situation in which “not to give birth/unable to give birth (abortion)” and “delivering the child but not raising it (giving the child up for adoption)” were the common choices, in recent years there is an increase in teenage parents who have chosen to “give birth and raise” their own children, leading to claims that a great change is seen in the behaviour of Korean teenagers concerning childbirth and rearing. A question can be raised as to why in recent years Korean teenage parents choosing to “give birth and raise” their own children have increased. In conjunction, one needs to ask what the primary factors in the background of this change are.

To explain the change, it becomes necessary to address the multifaceted aspects of the changes occurring around teenage parents, namely, (1) institutional changes in areas such as welfare policies, (2) change in social consciousness towards what is considered stigma, and (3) the consciousness and social relationships of the teenage parents themselves. The aim of this article is to gain an understanding of the actual conditions of teenage parents through the use of qualitative investigation, and to examine the situation brought about by institutional reforms involving teenage parents, giving special attention to the activities in private organisations that have provided major support, and the characteristics of this change involving teenage parents in recent years.

1.2. Review of the Literature Concerning Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting

1.2.1. Influence of Teenage Pregnancy on Social-Economic Consequences

Berthoud and Robson (2001) compared teenage pregnancies in 13 EU nations using the European Community Household Panel (ECHP). This research examined the consequences for women, who gave birth for the first time in their teens and twenties, and their families. Although variations existed between each country, they found that for all of the EU (excepting Sweden) the circumstances for women who had given birth in their teens were relatively worse in comparison to women who had done the same in their twenties. Also, the percentage of their partners
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