

Was Fertility Decline in Korea Driven by Educational Expansion? A Cohort Analysis

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Abstract

South Korea has experienced rapid fertility decline and an equally striking expansion in women's education in the late twentieth century. This study aims to understand how educational differentials in fertility have evolved through the fertility transition and whether an improvement in women's education was the main driver for fertility decline in South Korea. Using census sample data for the period 1970 - 2010, I analyze completed cohort fertility for 1926-1970 birth cohorts. This study finds that educational differences in fertility have almost disappeared over the last 40 years of birth cohorts. Despite its remarkable change, expansion in women's educational attainment accounts for just a fifth of fertility decline during the transition. The extraordinary fertility decline in South Korea was mainly due to falling fertility in all social groups, until the cohorts reached the replacement level of fertility. This study discusses possible explanations for variation in the evolution of educational differentials during the transition.