

Causes and Effects of Waithood and Youth Mobility: Comparing the Youth in South Korea and the Middle East

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Abstract:

Waithood, as a social phenomenon, has emerged in this complex, contentious, and uneven global political-economic environment. This paper discusses the phenomenon of waithood faced by youth in Egypt and South Korea. Waithood describes the inability of young people to achieve true economic or social independence at the expected age, resulting in restricted social mobility. This period is often viewed as “waiting for adulthood.” Through a comparative study, this research systematically elucidates the specific manifestations of waithood among Egyptian and Korean youth. Economically, they struggle to find suitable formal employment and are heavily involved in informal activities. Politically, they express their political demands and participate in political activities in various ways within their respective countries. Additionally, this study examines and compares the causes of waithood in both nations, identifying commonalities. Based on these findings, the paper proposes relatively feasible policy recommendations to mitigate the waithood phenomenon, offering insights for future research.

Keywords: Waithood; youth; sampo generation; mobility.

1. Introduction

Amid an increasingly complex international landscape, there are social transformations of various types in countries and regions. Notably, after nearly half a century of neoliberal dominance, some areas have been confronted with a setback in terms of economic achievements. Such economic hindrances give rise to pressures and impacts on contemporary youth globally, which is especially evident in youth mobility.

Waithood, as a social phenomenon, has emerged in this complex, contentious, and uneven global political-economic environment. At first, waithood described the involuntary delay of independence among youth in the Middle East and Africa during their transition from adolescence to adulthood. This phenomenon is driven by multiple factors that influence their opportunities to achieve socially recognized markers of adulthood (primarily economic and social independence) and, thereby, widens social gaps. Waithood has increasingly been applied to broadly encompass delays in various aspects of the transition of youth to adulthood (such as economic independence and independent social status). Waithood does not merely represent individual failure or result from poverty, unemployment, or marginalization. Instead, it reflects the major social upheaval and the discrepancies between the education

and upbringing of youth, which, in turn, motivate youth to challenge structural inequalities. However, there are odds that they may exhibit feelings of frustration. As a result, waithood reinforces stereotypes about youth being “idle, dangerous, or violent” and “uncertain” [1, 2].

Existing research on waithood has focused on two regions: Africa and the Middle East. Singerman explored how youth in Egypt and the Middle East experience disproportionate adverse effects due to neoliberalism and the demographic youth bulge [1]. In this context, youth in Egypt are confronted with high unemployment rates and unstable informal sector jobs, political exclusion due to authoritarianism and state repression, and social pressures from the forced delay of marriage and economic independence. As a result, they are positioned in a state of “waithood” before they reach adulthood. Howana notes that due to economic and social pressures, as well as prevalent political marginalization, youth have undergone a shift from fragmented and unorganized social and political actions to street protests of organized forms [3]. Youth in Egypt, for instance, have taken to the streets in protest against the government.

However, this theoretical phenomenon has rarely been connected to youth in Asian countries. Research on youth in Asia often remains at the theoretical level, mainly attended by domestic scholars or public opinion within

those countries. For instance, Yoon discussed how, under the neoliberal economic context, an increasing number of youths in South Korea are delaying their transition to adulthood and, instead, turn to long-term travel in order for “global experiences” [4]. Many college students pause or stop their studies college before graduation, a phenomenon in South Korea referred to as the NO Graduation. They attempt to enrich their resumes through these actions to gain a competitive edge. However, due to extended working hours and limited resources, they find it not as straightforward as anticipated to improve their English skills and gain work experience.

2. Waithood and Its Causes among Youth in Egypt

2.1 Status Quo of Waithood Among Youth in Egypt

Waithood was introduced by Singerman in his study of youth in the Middle East, particularly in Tunisia [1]. Yousef later incorporated this concept into his research on social mobility among youth in Egypt, noting that dissatisfaction with the government and anger over the economic collapse in Egypt have driven their expression of frustrations and demands through protests and violence. However, these actions have not translated into tangible political gains; instead, they have worsened social and economic uncertainties, with many young Egyptians prevented from transitioning into adulthood and gaining economic and social independence. The challenges confronting youth in Egypt are primarily reflected in the following areas:

Economic Marginalization: High unemployment rates and unstable informal jobs have economically marginalized youth in Egypt. They suffer difficulties in employment; university graduates, in particular, struggle to secure stable jobs that match their education levels. Young women, who exhibit higher unemployment rates, often exit the labor market after marriage, which limits their economic independence and social participation. Young men also delay marriage due to economic pressures. As a result, both young men and women in Egypt are increasingly forced to undertake informal work to make ends meet, leading to a higher proportion of informal employment.

Political Marginalization: Youth in Egypt in a state of waithood often lack the capacity and legitimate means to participate in politics. Waithood also manifests in unbalanced educational and employment resources. In Egypt, educational advancements have not corresponded with adequate employment opportunities. As a consequence, many youths with high educational qualifications fail to find suitable jobs, with their personal expectations shattered. The neoliberal-driven urbanization has led to a

surge in migration of rural populations to cities, causing informal housing and urban sprawl. This makes it increasingly hard for youth to find affordable housing in urban areas.

Economic Pressures Related to Social Identity and Recognition: In Egypt, marriage is often seen as one of the markers of adulthood. However, as per Singerman, marriage in Egypt cost an average of 20,194 Egyptian pounds in 1999 (about \$6,000 at the time) and rose to about 36,789 Egyptian pounds in 2006 (around \$6,400) [5]. For many youths in Egypt below the poverty line in rural areas, marriage can cost up to 15 times the annual per capita household expense, requiring many years of savings by grooms and their families. These factors, in combination, ultimately reduce youth mobility.

In this context, youth in Egypt have taken action to express their demands and seek civil rights. For example, many participated in the 2011 Egyptian uprising, which was part of the Arab Spring. They joined social movements and organizations, such as the April 6 Movement and Kefaya (meaning “Enough”). These movements adopted a non-hierarchical, collective action model that adapted to the extensive informal and underground networks already present in Egyptian society. They called for political reforms, an end to corruption, and respect for human rights and dignity. Youth in Egypt transformed their dissatisfaction with waithood into a major political force, which, to some extent, contributed to the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and the change of regime.

2.2 Causes of Waithood Among Youth in Egypt

The Egyptian uprising represents a climax of the waithood among youth in Egypt. It enables their involvement in politics in informal, uncertain forms and transforms them into a powerful force. The causes of this phenomenon can be summarized as follows:

Economic Pressures Caused by Neoliberalism: Neoliberal policies have worsened economic inequality and widened the wealth gap. Marketization and privatization reforms have reduced employment opportunities in the public sector, while the private sector has failed to create enough jobs. Both factors, in combination, result in increased youth unemployment rates. Moreover, although the expansion of the informal economy under neoliberal policies has created jobs for youth, these jobs are often unstable without social security. This gives rise to uncertainty and restricted youth mobility.

The Sociocultural Factors Contributing to Youth Social Pressure: The expectations associated with different gender roles and the values surrounding marriage and family have the greatest impact. In Egyptian society, women are

pressed to marry as early as possible and withdraw from the labor market, while men are expected to take on the financial responsibilities of the family. Marriage is considered a milestone of adulthood in Egyptian society; there are high social and familial expectations for youth to marry and establish a family. This creates social pressure for those unmarried or hard-pressed to bear the costs of marriage. Additionally, personal social networks and connections (Wasta) play a crucial role in employment and daily life and create significant disadvantages for youth without strong social ties. The dependence on family structures and the clash between traditional and modern cultures also contribute to the radical changes confronted by youth. The conflict between traditional values and the influences of modernization and globalization in Egyptian society leads to confusion and challenges for youth as they seek to define their personal identities and social roles.

The Loss of Political Voice and Social Status among Youth Due to Policy Failures and Under-developed Mechanisms: The Egyptian government's Open Door Policy and the globalization process, although driving economic neoliberal adjustments, has ultimately proven to be a failure, at least for the majority of the youth. This has resulted in the shrinkage of the public sector and the development of the private sector, exacerbating social stratification. Moreover, the Egyptian education system may not align with the labor market, with much educated youth being hard-pressed to find suitable employment [5].

3. Waithood and Its Causes among Youth in South Korea

3.1 Waithood among Youth in South Korea

The mobility issues and delayed economic and social status independence among youth in South Korea are reflected in various aspects, including education, employment, social structure, and culture. Firstly, it is highly difficult to achieve employment independence; youth in South Korea are subject to a severe employment situation. According to Statistics Korea, the number of unemployed youth (ages 15-29) has reached 1.26 million, with over half with bachelor's degrees or higher [6]. Many youths, despite their high educational qualifications, struggle to secure desired jobs. This has led to educational inflation: job seekers must obtain higher degrees to qualify for positions that previously required lower educational levels. The South Korean labor market exhibits polarization; there is less opportunities for high-paying professional jobs, making many young people to prefer unemployment to low-paying jobs in small and medium-sized enterprises. Employment difficulties are causing a delay in the economic independence of youth in South Korea. Even with

jobs, youth still face issues related to low wages and overwork. Although the Minimum Wage Council Republic of Korea raised the minimum hourly wage to 9,860 KRW (about 51.67 RMB) in 2024, this minimum wage fails to cover basic living costs for the majority of youth. A common solution to the low-wage issues is more part-time and informal jobs. As a result, there is a higher proportion of South Korean youth in informal employment rather than in new formal jobs. According to the Korea Development Institute, working hours in South Korea far exceed the OECD average and rank among the top three in OECD countries [7]. However, this is contrasted by extremely high living costs, particularly in housing prices; many youths cannot afford property. In 2020, the median price of an apartment in Seoul approached 912 million KRW [8]. High housing prices deter many youths from independent life and even impact their marriage and childbirth plans.

Moreover, delayed social status independence is equally significant. South Korean society exhibits the Effects of the Glass Ceiling: it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to transition from undesirable jobs to more respectable ones. This invisible barrier traps youth, who are thus unable to move into suitable employment and thereby fail to achieve social status through work. Additionally, gender inequality in South Korea impacts the social status independence of youth, especially young women. Despite improvements in educational attainment among South Korean women, there are rare opportunities to fulfill personal values in the workplace. The burden of household chores and childcare on women is largely overlooked. Women are exposed to more challenges and discrimination in the workplace, with 80% reporting sexual harassment or assault by colleagues during or after work. On the other hand, some attribute their failure to achieve social revenge or spiritual satisfaction to changes in women's status. They oppose feminism, claiming that women have already received excessive preferential treatment. This has given rise to serious misogyny in South Korea [9].

Additionally, youth in South Korea are subject to issues such as excessive competition and low fertility rates. Excessive competition, or "involution," is common among youth in South Korea: efforts and diligence do not yield proportional rewards in a highly competitive environment. For better employment opportunities, many young people pursue further education, even at prestigious foreign universities; however, this has not significantly improved their job prospects. This excessive competition not only drains their energy but also leads to a loss of mobility. The high-pressure social environment and employment result in tremendous mental health issues among youth. According to statistics, South Korea's suicide rate ranks among the top in OECD member countries [10]. Similarly, the

total fertility rate in South Korea was at the historically lowest level of 0.78 in 2022 [11].

3.2 Causes of Waitthood

The causes “waitthood” among youth in South Korea can be analyzed from various perspectives, including economic structure, neoliberal policies, socio-cultural background, and government regulatory measures.

Firstly, the dual economic structure in South Korea, marked by the chaebol system, significantly impacts the dilemma facing youth. These large conglomerates control a substantial part of the national economy but employ only a small fraction of the workforce. This leads to an unbalanced labor supply and demand. Youth, in their effort to work for these major corporations, often remain unemployed for a long time as they are preparing for exams. Chaebols’s control of 80% of industries in South Korea gives rise to oligopolistic market conditions across various sectors. In such a context, it is challenging for youth to achieve job mobility and economic independence through entrepreneurship. Oligopolistic market conditions and the dual economic structure both delay economic independence among the youth.

Secondly, neoliberal policies have profoundly impacted “waitthood” among youth in South Korea. Neoliberalism weakens state intervention and emphasizes individual competition. Reduced state intervention and the existing oligopolistic conditions contribute to exploitation by companies. This is particularly evident in how informal employment, such as part-time jobs, is perceived by Korean businesses and society. Because of companies’ willingness to offer unstable informal jobs rather than formal ones, youth in South Korea must compete for the rarely supplied formal jobs, thereby reducing corporate costs, and exacerbating educational and employment competition. Similar to Japan and China, Korean society places emphasis on background, specifically the economic and social status of their family. For stable formal employment, better-off youths find it easier to secure desired jobs. This phenomenon widens social gaps and further restricts youth mobility.

Policy failure also affects adulthood among youth in South Korea. From a macro perspective, policies related to education, housing, employment, and market regulation by the South Korean government are characterized by inconsistency and discontinuity due to the constitutional stipulation that the Korean government operates on four-year terms with no consecutive re-elections. This indicates that policies initiated or drafted by the previous administration often end up with disruption or discontinuation. Even when presidential candidates promise to address certain issues, they frequently suffer backlash from conservative

political factions. These conservative factions are often composed of chaebols, as in the case of South Korea’s 17th president, who was a senior executive in Hyundai Engineering & Construction, one of the chaebols in South Korea. The close integration of government and chaebols indicates that it is unnecessary for the government to place importance on public support during policy formulation. This indirectly explains policy failures. Additionally, the lag in societal reforms in South Korea and the failure to adapt to new challenges in globalization and the information age also contribute to policy misalignment.

4. Similarities and Differences of Waitthood in South Korea and Egypt and Its Impact on Mobility

4.1 Similarities and Differences

Waitthood among youth in South Korea and Egypt, though different in manifestations and causes, reflects the challenges facing the youth in both societies. Economically, youth in both countries find it difficult to be employed. There are high unemployment rates. Youth exhibit heavy reliance on informal jobs to cover daily necessities; both countries feature income inequality. However, youth in South Korea are primarily confronted with intense competition for employment and educational inflation caused by oligopolistic dominance and a dual economic structure, as well as low wages and working hours. In contrast, youth in Egypt mainly suffer the mismatch between the job market and the education system due to sluggish economic growth. They are also exposed to the inequitable distribution of social resources, exacerbated by government neglect of the youth and lower-income populations.

In terms of social change and political participation, youth in Egypt tend to drive social transformation through radical methods. This partly explains the political instability and revolution in Egypt. In contrast, youth in South Korea, despite demands for social change, particularly in areas such as gender equality and educational reform, are generally focused on their lives and resort to a more moderate approach due to the stable political environment. They disseminate their actions and calls for change on the internet. For example, they label themselves as the “Sampo Generation” to moderately push for social reforms. They also participate in the political process.

From the perspective of social mobility and personal development, youth in both countries are subject to reduced social mobility. They feel hard-pressed to achieve upward social mobility through education and employment. In South Korea, the glass ceiling effect and the social emphasis on personal background, along with Egypt’s political and religious restrictions, make things worse. Gender

inequality, which reduces mobility for young women and contributes to waithood, remains in both countries, despite differing causes. In South Korea, this inequality can be traced back to the long-standing influence of Confucian culture and feudalistic ideas, while in Egypt, it is rooted in religious influences. Additionally, youth in both countries are increasingly unwilling to have children in response to waithood, though the issues brought about by the low birth rate are more serious in South Korea as opposed to Egypt.

The primary cause of waithood, in terms of its most prominent characteristic, is that both countries have been influenced by neoliberal policies. In other words, the failure of neoliberal policies should be held largely responsible for waithood among the youth in both countries. Despite different social, historical, and cultural backgrounds, it is precisely due to neoliberal policies, which to some extent reduced state intervention, that the youth in both countries have ultimately found themselves subject to waithood. Policy failure has also posed a hindrance to the economic and social status independence among the youth in both regions. Lastly, in terms of social culture, the youth in both countries have been influenced by the social atmosphere determined by their own national cultures. Such influence has transformed into pressure on youth forced to compete for political, economic, and social status. Youth in Egypt are mainly exposed to human rights intervention, while Korean youth are weighted by pressure from long-term social competition.

4.2 Policy Recommendations

Many challenges faced by the youth in Korea and Egypt can be addressed through policy intervention. Overall, it is reasonable to mitigate the influence of neoliberalism on areas outside the market. Cohesive political groups that represent youth should play a significant role in social change and policy participation in both countries [12].

Given the shared issue related to waithood among youth in both Korea and Egypt, the following policy recommendations have been adopted by both governments: (1) governments can encourage job creation, provide employment training and career guidance services, and encourage entrepreneurship to facilitate job hunting for youth; (2) it is urgent to implement educational reform in both countries. In Egypt, the education system should be adjusted to the demands of the labor market. In South Korea, educational inflation and excessive competition in education must be reduced by offering relevant courses and training programs. Specifically, policy support for diversified vocational education can be provided; (3) both countries should promote gender equality policies to enhance female independence and mobility by providing equal op-

portunities for career development. For informal employment, both countries should implement policies to offer welfare and safety support so that the informal economy brings economic benefits to the youth. When it comes to political instability in Egypt, it is crucial to formulate moderation to increase political participation among youth. For South Korea, which features a stable political environment, it is crucial for successive governments to address the moderate political demands proposed by the youth; and (4) to address the issue of policy discontinuity, both countries should advocate the long-term protection of youth interests through legislation.

5. Summary

Political and social transformations bring not only risks but also often challenge or even overturn existing conceptions and conclusions. This study, which examines issues related to waithood and mobility among the youth in Egypt and South Korea, recognizes several limitations, such as insufficient detailed statistical data that substantiate the severity of economic problems among the youth in both countries. However, the data in this study can demonstrate the issues among the youth in these countries. This study discusses the manifestations and causes of youth issues in both regions, finding that the status quo of “waithood” among the youth in both South Korea and Egypt manifests in high unemployment rates and a large proportion of informal employment.

However, youth in South Korea suffer from greater pressure caused by employment and education competition, while their Egyptian counterparts are exposed to mismatched education and employment systems and unreasonable resource allocation. Politically, youth in both countries choose to express their demands and increase political participation, but they take different approaches: moderate and radical. Culturally, youth in both countries find it hard to promptly improve their social status or achieve social independence, although the causes differ due to distinct social and cultural conditions. The study identifies the impact of neoliberalism, which fundamentally delays their economic and social maturity, as the primary cause of “waithood” among youth in both countries.

Additionally, the failure of national policy interventions and the unique socio-cultural backgrounds also serve as contributing factors. To address these issues, the study proposes several reasonable policies based on the social, governmental, and cultural contexts of both countries, such as job creation and educational system reforms. For future research on youth mobility issues, this study also holds certain significance, given that it incorporates the social and cultural differences of the geographical loca-

tions of youth in both regions.

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