

Perception of Baby Boxes and Anonymous Childbirth among Female College Students in South Korea*

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Abstract

This study aimed to provide basic data for government legislation and implementation of the anonymous childbirth system by investigating the perception of baby boxes and the anonymous childbirth system among Korean female college students. The study participants were 460 female college students from eight colleges in Seoul, Gyeonggi, Chungcheong, Jeju, Gyeongsang, and Jeolla. We observed that awareness of baby boxes was high among female college students, while awareness of the anonymous childbirth system was low. Most female college students supported this system; however, they provided various opinions on the target group(s), methods of information provision, scope of the birth mother's information disclosure, and age limits for children to access information. In addition, a large number of female college students responded that children's right to know their birth origin was more important than "women's right to anonymous childbirth." Finally, there were differences in opinions regarding baby boxes and the anonymous childbirth system according to school type and affiliated university. Implications for practice and policy are discussed.

Key words

baby boxes, anonymous childbirth, female college students

Introduction

The "baby box," a secure location where women can leave their unwanted newborn babies, is a relatively new phenomenon in South Korea. Although the first baby

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box was established in December 2009 by a church minister in Seoul, it has become widely known to the public since 2011 with the amendments to the Adoption Law (“Act on Special Cases Concerning Adoption”). This law, which came into effect in August 2012, drastically changed South Korea’s adoption practices. The new adoption law requires birth registration of the baby before the commencement of the adoption process, which places a considerable burden on birth mothers—mostly young, unmarried women—experiencing unwanted pregnancy and childbirth. Before the amendment, it was a customary practice, although illegal, for birth mothers to leave their babies with an adoption agency without birth registration, and for adoptive parents to register them as birth children after adoption. This traditional practice provided the opportunity for anonymous birth in South Korea (Lee, 2017). However, the new adoption law requires that permission be sought from the Family Court as part of the adoption process and the child’s birth certificate is one of the documents that must be submitted to the Family Court.

Owing to the social stigma associated with births out of wedlock in South Korea, unmarried mothers are reluctant to reveal their pregnancies and child-births, even to their family and friends. Registering the child’s birth may endanger their secret. Thus, desperate mothers abandoned their babies instead of entrusting them to an adoption agency. The number of babies found in the baby box has increased significantly since 2012. In March 2010, the first baby was found in the baby box and four babies were submitted during the entire year. This increased to 37 in 2011 and 79 in 2012, peaking at 280 in 2014 as the baby box received media attention in 2013, and another church in Gunpo, Gyeonggi, set up a second baby box in 2014 (Lee, 2017). The total number of children found in the first baby box between March 2010 and June 2016 was 1,186 (Hyun, Lim, & Ahn, 2017). However, baby boxes in South Korea lack a legal basis; several debates exist surrounding them, with local government repeatedly warning the church to stop running them. Baby-box supporters insist that it protects children’s lives by protecting the anonymity of the mothers and saves desperate mothers from the stigma related to birth out of wedlock. In contrast, those opposed to the baby box criticize the fact that it aids or induces the abandonment of babies and infringes upon the child’s right to know their origins.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Children (UNCRC) recognizes that a child should be registered immediately after birth and has the right to know and be cared for by their parents (Article 7). The UNCRC (2014) has expressed its serious concerns about the baby-box program and urged nations that run such

schemes to shut them down. However, closing down baby boxes without legitimate alternatives may endanger the children's lives, which violates the children's right to survival and development expressed in the UNCRC (Article 6). Additionally, an inordinate emphasis on children's rights to know their origin may conflict with the right of women to choose anonymity regarding their births.

Given the insufficient support afforded single mothers, it would be impractical to compel all young unmarried mothers to rear their children. Furthermore, the requirement of birth registration for the adoption process imposes a psychological and emotional burden on unmarried mothers. Thus, a balanced consideration of both children's and women's rights is needed to appropriately protect both groups' rights.

Historically, baby boxes and anonymous births have been used worldwide as measures to help women in similar situations, usually those undergoing an unwanted pregnancy and wanting to relinquish their child after birth. In South Korea, the baby box has been a matter of contention since its establishment in 2009 and a universal birth registration system and anonymous births have been suggested as alternatives.

Under the universal birth registration system, also called the birth notification system, health care professionals must register babies born in hospitals with the national birth registration system. Since birth registration is a parental responsibility, several newborns remain unregistered in the system and abandoned by their parents. If a universal birth registration system were introduced, it would be impossible for parents to leave a baby in a baby box. There are also concerns that a universal birth registration system would prevent unmarried women from opting for hospital delivery so as to avoid having the child's birth registered, possibly endangering the lives of both mother and child. Thus, several attempts to legislate for anonymous births have been made in the last decade in South Korea's National Assembly (Hyun et al., 2017),¹ but these bills failed to pass because of a lack of social consensus regarding the necessity and validity of the anonymous birth system. To establish a legal system that safeguards vulnerable groups of mothers and children, agreement among members of society is required as a prerequisite. Although some countries have already established similar baby-box programs or anonymous birth systems, differences in cultural background mean some countries' perceptions of

¹ For more detailed information about the bills submitted to the National Assembly, see Hyun et al. (2017)

childbirth out of wedlock may differ (Lee & Kim, 2019). Thus, it is necessary to understand social perceptions of baby boxes and anonymous births before formulating relevant policies.

Few studies have examined social perceptions of baby boxes and/or anonymous births in South Korea or other countries. One study examined the social perceptions of baby boxes and infant abandonment among young people in Korea and found that positive perceptions of baby boxes were slightly higher than negative perceptions; however, toleration of infant abandonment was generally low (Lee & Kim, 2019). Attitudes toward infant abandonment differed by respondents' age, education level, marital status, and employment status, with older, highly educated, married, and employed persons less tolerant of the practice (Lee & Kim, 2019). Similarly, a survey of professionals (staff members or researchers in the field) was conducted in 2017. The majority agreed on the necessity of an anonymous birth system, with some preconditions such as counseling for the mothers, ensuring children's access to birth information, and expanding support for single mothers (Hyun et al., 2017). Although the target groups in both cases were limited, these studies are nevertheless significant in that they attempted to reveal the social perceptions of baby boxes and anonymous births.

Once an anonymous birth system is introduced, the largest potential user group would be young unmarried mothers. Examining the opinions of the people most concerned with the issue would help discern the possible strengths and weaknesses of the system. This study therefore aimed to provide basic data for government legislation and implementation of an anonymous childbirth system by investigating perceptions of baby boxes and the anonymous childbirth system among Korean female college students.

Question 1. How do female college students perceive baby boxes?

Question 2. How do female college students perceive the anonymous childbirth system?

Question 3. Do perceptions of baby boxes and anonymous childbirth system vary depending on the general characteristics of female college students?

Literature Review

The history of infant abandonment goes back further than expected, even as far as ancient Greeks and biblical times (Choi, 2017). Depending on a country's cul-

tural and historical background, diverse societal measures have been developed to solve the problems of unwanted pregnancy and baby abandonment. The most common types of measures have been the baby box and anonymous birth programs, although the name and operational system of such programs may differ by country.

Although the main subject of this study is societal perceptions of the social measures tackling infant abandonment, few studies have addressed societal perceptions of baby boxes and/or anonymous births. This could be because of the long history of these programs, which were established based on religious values or ideas of the sanctity of life. Thus, the laws and programs of countries with established systems dealing with these issues were examined in this section, with reference to the stance of the UNCRC. Three countries—France, Germany, and the United States—with heterogeneous programs are examined for comparative purposes. France has a long tradition of an anonymous birth system, still in use today, and Germany has developed both an advanced anonymous birth system, termed “confidential birth,” and a baby-box program (*Babyklappe*). The United States has a legalized baby-box program called “Safe Haven.”

France

Historically, France is the only Western country that has granted full anonymity to mothers, and where anonymous free births have been legally guaranteed (Choi, 2017). With the legalization of anonymous births, baby boxes were naturally removed. Thus, the anonymous birth system is France’s only solution to baby abandonment.

In France, any pregnant woman who requests secrecy in the hospital can leave their child at the hospital without any identifying information under the Act of *Accouchement sous X* (Anonymous Birth) enacted in 1941. However, these women are required to be fully informed of the legal consequences of their decision by law and are encouraged to keep the child. Since the changes in the law in 2001, mothers who opt for anonymous birth must be informed of the importance of knowing one’s origins and history and provided with counseling about the services available to raise their child during and after relinquishing their child (Bartels, 2012). They are also invited to provide information about the birth and their details in writing and to deposit this information in a sealed envelope. This information can be provided or supplemented at a later date. However, they are subject to very little coercion and can remain anonymous, at least during their lifetime, if they wish to

(Hadžimanović, 2018). Despite the reinforcement of counseling and efforts to make the search for origins easier by law, opinions on the desirability of anonymous birth are divided in France, as they are in other countries allowing anonymous birth. Opponents of anonymous birth emphasize the child's right to know their origin and insist that not knowing one's roots causes great suffering, which can affect one's identity formation (Choi, 2017; Lefaucheur, 2004). Conversely, supporters of anonymous births argue that it protects both the mother and the child (Choi, 2017; Lefaucheur, 2004). They also insist that the mother's rights supersede those of the child, since the survival of infants is solely dependent upon the mother's decision during the early stages of life (Choi, 2017).

Despite these controversies, the European Court of Human Rights approved the French system of anonymous births in 2003 in the famous case of *Odièvre v. France*. According to the European Court of Human Rights, the French system of anonymous birth legitimately balances the rights of the mother and child since the mother is encouraged to leave non-identifying information for the child and is entitled to reveal her identity at a later date (Simmonds, 2013). In addition, the French *Conseil Constitutionnel* decided in its judgment on May 16, 2012, that the legal provisions of January 22, 2002, allowing anonymous birth in France, are not unconstitutional (Hadžimanović, 2018). However, the UNCRC takes a different stance and recommends that state parties remove the requirement of the biological mother's consent to reveal her identity and increase efforts to prevent anonymous birth by addressing the basic causes of parents' choices (Hadžimanović, 2018).

Germany

Germany operates both a baby box and confidential birth (a modified form of anonymous birth) program. The anonymous birth system became a confidential birth in 2014 with the passing of related legislation.

The first *Babyklappe* (baby box; plural *Babyklappen*) was established in 1999 by Bayern e.V., a Catholic organization in Amberg, as part of the Moses Project to prevent pregnant women from committing infanticide. Although the first *Babyklappe* was shut down because of prolonged disuse, the idea spread to other regions of Germany, resulting in the establishment of about 80 *Babyklappen* as of 2009 (Shin, 2015). In addition to *Babyklappen*, an anonymous birth system also existed in Germany whereby the mother could leave the hospital after giving birth without providing any personal information (Choi, 2017). *Babyklappen* and the anonymous birth system in Germany have been surrounded by controversy be-

cause they violate the children's right to know their parents and could possibly encourage child abandonment. Questions were also raised about the effectiveness of *Babyklappen* in reducing the number of infanticides. In response to these arguments, the German government eventually passed a Confidential Birth Law (*Geburt vertraulich*) in 2013 as a better alternative to the *Babyklappen* and anonymous birth system.

Unlike an anonymous birth system, in a confidential birth, mothers are required to reveal their identity in a sealed envelope and their identity may be revealed to their child under certain conditions. When the child turns sixteen, they can request permission to inspect the birth documentation kept in the Federal Office for Family and Civil Society (*Bundesamt Für Familie und zivile Gesellschaftliche Aufgaben*). The mother is entitled to express her opposition to the child's access to documentation when the child turns 15. Then, the family court decides whether to grant the child the right to inspect the birth documentation, weighing the mother's interest to stay anonymous against the child's right to know its parentage.

Confidential birth in German law also emphasizes the importance of counselling. Mothers' participation in counseling sessions is mandatory for confidential births (Choi, 2017). Even if the mother is admitted for delivery without counseling, she can choose confidential birth as long as she completes counseling afterward. The entire process of confidential birth, which includes counseling, pre- and postnatal care, and delivery, is funded by the federal government (Shin, 2015).

The confidential birth law in Germany is a significant attempt to find a compromise between the competing interests of mother and child. In that sense, the UN Committee favors confidential birth over an anonymous birth system because confidential birth does not require the biological mother's consent as a prerequisite for the child's access to their identity information (Hadžimanović, 2018). However, the UN Committee regrets the absence of regulation and the ongoing use of *Babyklappen*, which violates Articles 6 to 9 and Article 19 of the UNCRC².

The United States

The US has a baby-box program called "Safe Haven," whereby the mother can be exempted from the penalty of child abandonment if she relinquishes her baby under certain conditions prescribed by law.

² <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G14/411/26/PDF/G1441126.pdf?OpenElement>

The US is one of the countries that struggles with a high incidence of out-of-wedlock births and the ensuing problem of infant abandonment (Choi, 2017). The media's highlighting of a series of infant abandonments, some of which were found dead, led to the first enactment of the Safe Haven law in Texas in 1999 (Dreyer, 2002). Over the next five years, another 47 states passed similar laws. Currently, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have legislated some form of Safe Haven law to deter mothers from engaging in illegal abandonment or infanticide (Choi, 2017).

Although the detailed provisions of each law vary across states, the main components of a Safe Haven law consist of exemptions from liability for baby abandonment and the granting of anonymity to the mother (Seo, 2014).³ To be exempted from prosecution, the relinquished baby should be within the age limit prescribed by the law, and the baby should be surrendered in a legally designated place (such as a hospital) and should not have been intentionally harmed.

The granting of anonymity to mothers deprives the child of their right to know their parent or parents; it may also impede the father's parental rights, and they may not be aware of the birth of their child (Seo, 2014). Furthermore, there are concerns regarding abuses of the law. Since some states allow non-parental figures to drop off an infant but do not investigate for a missing child, the possibility of an infant being a victim of kidnapping is not negligible (Choi, 2017). Furthermore, the majority of states do not request medical information, which may be significant for the child's health at a later stage.

Therefore, the Safe Haven law has drawbacks and these relate to several interconnected issues. The effectiveness of the Safe Haven law in reducing illegal child abandonment or infanticide is not clear, and its success can vary by state and its specific regulations (Kunkel, 2007). However, most states maintain a Safe Haven law because there is a chance of saving children from infanticide (Choi, 2017). To date, more than 4,000 infants have been safely surrendered to Safe Havens nationally (Save Abandoned Babies Foundation, n.d.).

Although the US has not ratified the UNCRC, the UN Committee's stance on the baby-box program in other countries such as the Czech Republic is clear. The baby-box program is in clear violation of Articles 6 to 9 and Article 19 of the UNCRC and should be discontinued as soon as possible. The Committee also urg-

³ The state of Georgia is the only exception, since it does not guarantee anonymity of the mother and requires the mother to provide proof of identity (Seo, 2014).

es the State Party to increase its efforts to address the root causes that lead to the abandonment of infants, including the provision of family planning as well as adequate counseling and social support for unplanned pregnancies and the prevention of high-risk pregnancies (UNCRC, 2014).

Sub-conclusion

Implications were found through the investigation of policies responding to unwanted birth and infant abandonment in the countries examined.

Anonymous birth has been used as an alternative to baby-box programs in two of these three countries. Anonymous birth has some advantages over the baby-box program in that it can provide medical support and counseling services to mothers considering relinquishing their child. When the confidential birth system was first introduced in Germany, the German government actively publicized the counseling service to ensure the anonymity of pregnant women, and the majority of women chose a traditional birth or adoption instead of a confidential birth after counseling (Han, 2019). This means that the counselling services provided for prospective mothers are quite effective.

In South Korea, a church running a baby box changed its name to “Baby Room” in 2015 and started providing counseling services to mothers if they requested them. Through counseling, information on support for child-rearing and adoption was provided. These services, however, have no legal grounds, as is the case for the baby-box program itself. Legal and institutional systems need to be provided in response to unwanted childbirths and infant relinquishment in South Korea.

The confidential birth system in Germany is generally regarded as a fair compromise between mothers’ and children’s conflicting interests. The UN Committee and many researchers support a confidential birth system for anonymous births (Han, 2019; Seo, 2014; Simmond, 2013), although there are concerns regarding the introduction of a confidential birth system in Korea. If a child can access their birth document after a certain age, biological mothers who dread being found out might not choose a confidential birth (Hyun et al., 2017). What South Korea needs is an anonymous birth system that considers both the reality of unmarried mothers and their children’s right to know their origin (Han, 2018; Seo, 2014). To institute such a system, an infrastructure for the provision of counseling services for women experiencing unwanted pregnancies should be prepared (Seo, 2014; Shin, 2015). Furthermore, child-rearing support for single mothers who want to keep their children should be reinforced (Han, 2018) so that the choice of

anonymous birth would be considered as a last resort.

The most appropriate system for Korean society should be devised based on the reality of birth mothers and the consensus among members of society. Furthermore, public awareness campaigns are important for the effective utilization of these options by young mothers (Bartels, 2012; Grylli et al., 2016).

Method

Data Collection and Analysis

This study conducted offline and online surveys of female college students attending eight colleges in Seoul, Gyeonggi, Chungcheong, Jeju, Gyeongsang, and Jeolla from October to December 2019. Although the sample is not nationally representative, it comprises respondents from diverse regions in Korea. In addition, considering the country's high college enrollment rate, the respondents may not be significantly different from the average young women of their age. Lecture breaks were used to explain the purpose of the study with the cooperation of the professors in each college. Subsequently, a survey was conducted with those female students who volunteered to participate in the study. Simultaneously, an online survey was conducted using Naver Form. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed, and 463 (92.6%) were retrieved. Three participants were excluded for insincere responses, leaving 460 (92.0%) for inclusion in the analysis. This study was conducted without obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, as the questionnaire did not include any personal data aside from school type, year of college, or academic division.

To achieve the research objectives, frequencies and percentages were first calculated from the collected data to determine female college students' perception of baby boxes and the anonymous childbirth system. Next, a chi-square test (χ^2 test) was performed to examine differences in perception according to year, school type, and academic division.

Study Participants

Table 1 shows the sociodemographic characteristics of the female college students participating in this study. Most of the participants were juniors (32.8%), followed by freshmen, seniors, and sophomores. Overall, 84.8% were attending four-year universities, and the other 15.2% were attending junior colleges. By aca-

demic division, most (67.8%) were studying humanities and social sciences, followed by the natural sciences and engineering (20.2%), art, music, and physical education (8.3%), and other (3.7%).

Table 1
Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Variables	N	%
<i>Year</i>		
Freshman	109	23.7
Sophomore	99	21.5
Junior	151	32.8
Senior	101	22.0
<i>School type</i>		
Four-year university	390	84.8
Junior college	70	15.2
<i>Academic division</i>		
Humanities and social sciences	320	69.6
Natural sciences and engineering	95	20.6
Art, music, and physical education	38	8.3
Other	7	1.5

Results

Perceptions of Baby Boxes

Table 2 shows female college students' perceptions of baby boxes. Of the participants, 48.0% responded that they knew exactly what baby boxes were, and 40.7% had heard about them in the news. Only 11.3% responded that they had never heard of baby boxes. The result indicates that awareness of baby boxes was high among female college students.

Table 2
Perceptions of Baby Boxes

<i>Questionnaire items</i>	N	%
Never heard of them	52	11.3
Heard about them in the news	187	40.7
Know exactly what they are	221	48.0

Next, 66.3% of female college students approved of parents leaving their child in a baby box, whereas only 33.7% disapproved. The reasons for approval were as follows: 53.6% of the participants who approved did so because it prevented child abandonment, 39.1% because the child should be raised by someone ready to be a parent, and 5.3% because the mother could be free of the social stigma attached to giving birth outside marriage. Conversely, the reasons for disapproval were as follows: 54.5% of the participants who disapproved did so because baby boxes encourage child abandonment, 21.8% because putting a child whose birth is not registered in a baby box will keep the child from knowing about his or her birth parents, and 9.6% because it is illegal to raise children at an unauthorized facility.

Table 3
Approval or Disapproval of Baby Boxes and Reasons

<i>Questionnaire items</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Approve	305	66.3
Disapprove	155	33.7
<i>Reasons for approval</i>		
Can prevent child abandonment	163	53.6
Can be free from social stigma	16	5.3
Better for the child to be raised by someone ready to be a parent	119	39.1
Other	6	2.0
<i>Reasons for disapproval</i>		
Encourage child abandonment	85	54.5
Because it is illegal to raise children at an unauthorized facility	15	9.6
Because it keeps the child from knowing about their birth parents	34	21.8
Other	22	14.1

As for the reasons children are abandoned in baby boxes in Korean society, 43.5% of the students in this study responded that it is because the parent cannot raise the child alone because of financial difficulties, 31.1% because the parents gave birth without being mentally ready, 17.6% claimed that it was due to the social stigma attached to giving birth outside marriage, and 4.8% responded that the mother may be in a situation where she cannot carry out a birth registration.

Table 4
Reasons for Abandoning Children in Baby Boxes

<i>Questionnaire item</i>	N	%
Financial difficulties	200	43.5
Social stigma	81	17.6
Not mentally ready to be a parent	143	31.1
Situation where the mother cannot register the birth	22	4.8
Other	14	3.0

Of the female college students, 33.7% responded that if they became pregnant without getting married, they would raise the child alone, 23.5% indicated that they would marry the father and raise the child together, 21.5% responded that they would give the child up for adoption, and 6.7% claimed they would leave the child in a baby box. A further 11.1% said they would get an abortion, and the remaining 3.5% responded that they would decide after discussing the situation with their parents or that they did not know what they would do.

If the participants were to give birth without getting married and raise the child alone, most (71.5%) said that the support they wanted most from the government was financial aid, followed by vocational training and access to a job connection service (16.7%), prior claim over facility use (4.3%), a family relationship enhancement service (3.0%), and a housework service (1.5%). Others included anti-bias education to improve awareness of single mothers and single-parent families.

Table 5
Coping with Non-Marital Pregnancies and Government Support Services

<i>Questionnaire items</i>	N	%
If pregnant and unmarried		
Raise the child alone	155	33.7
Give the child up for adoption	99	21.5
Leave the child in a baby box	31	6.7
Marry the father and raise the child together	108	23.5
Get an abortion	51	11.1
Other	16	3.5
<i>Government support services</i>		
Financial aid	329	71.5
Prior claim over facility use	20	4.3
Housework service	7	1.5
Family relationship enhancement service	14	3.0
Vocational training and job connection service	77	16.7
Other	13	2.8

Perception of Anonymous Childbirth

Regarding perception of the anonymous childbirth system among the participants, 78.9% said that they had never heard of it, 16.1% that they had heard about it in the news, and only 5.0% said that they knew exactly what it was. This indicates that female college students have an extremely low level of awareness of anonymous childbirth.

Table 6
Perceptions of Anonymous Childbirth

Questionnaire items	N	%
<i>Perception of anonymous childbirth</i>		
Never heard of it	363	78.9
Heard about it in the news	74	16.1
Know exactly what it is	23	5.0

If the participants were to give birth without getting married and could not raise the child themselves, 77.4% responded that an anonymous childbirth system would be required, while 22.6% said it would not be necessary. Of those who felt such a system would be necessary, 33.1% said that the mother's pregnancy might be unwanted and that giving birth would therefore place her in a difficult position, 24.1% that the birth mother and the child could be protected from social stigma, and 24.1% that the system could guarantee women's right of choice. Additionally, 17.9% responded that the system could protect the child's safety by preventing abandonment. In contrast, those who were opposed to such a system gave their reasons as follows: 43.7% said that the system could become a tool whereby parental responsibility could easily be avoided, 32.0% that the system could be misused, and 18.4% suggested that it violated the child's right to know about their origins. Other responses included that such a system would make it difficult to confirm the real father's intention and thus his rights would not guaranteed, or that the system might make the parents feel less guilty about giving up their child.

Regarding appropriate users of the anonymous childbirth system, most participants (92.4%) cited victims of sexual violence, followed by single mothers younger than 19 years (75.4%), and women with non-marital births (45.2%). However, only 39.3% responded that all women who wanted to opt for anonymous births should be included within the scope of the system.

Furthermore, for information provision and operational procedures in case a

Table 7
Attitudes Toward an Anonymous Childbirth System and Reasons.

<i>Questionnaire items</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Need for the anonymous childbirth system		
Necessary	356	77.4
Unnecessary	104	22.6
<i>Reasons why it is desirable</i>		
To guarantee women's right of choice	86	24.1
The birth mother and child can be protected from social stigma	86	24.1
If the pregnancy is unwanted, giving birth might place the mother in a difficult position	118	33.1
Can protect the child's safety by preventing abandonment	64	17.9
Other	3	0.8
<i>Reasons why it is undesirable</i>		
Violates the child's right to know about their origins	19	18.4
May become a tool to easily evade parental responsibility	45	43.7
The system may be misused	34	33.0
Makes it difficult to confirm the real father's intentions and thus his rights are not guaranteed	2	1.9
Other	3	2.9

child born to an anonymous mother wanted to obtain information about his or her birth mother when they become an adult (at 18 years), most participants (54.5%) responded that “information regarding the birth mother must only be provided for the child born to an anonymous mother if the birth mother agrees.” Other responses included “information must be provided without conditions when the child reaches a certain age (18 years) and requests information about his or her birth mother” (27.4%) and “if the birth mother refuses to disclose information, the child must be able to ask for a court hearing” (17.8%).

Regarding the age limit at which the child born to an anonymous mother might be eligible to obtain information about their birth mother, 50.2% responded that 18 years would be appropriate, and 27.8% that it should be possible at any time regardless of age. Other responses were that this should be possible when the child is mentally mature, or when the birth mother agrees, regardless of the child's age, while 20% said they did not know.

Regarding the scope of information disclosure when providing information about the birth mother for a child born to an anonymous mother, 33.9% re-

Table 8
Opinions Regarding the Implementation of Anonymous Childbirth

<i>Questionnaire items</i>	N	%
<i>Application scope (multiple responses)</i>		
Single mothers younger than 19 years	347	75.4
Victims of sexual violence	425	92.4
Women with non-marital births	208	45.2
All women who want to give birth anonymously	181	39.3
<i>Information provision and operation method</i>		
The information must be provided without conditions when the child reaches a certain age (18 years) and requests information about his or her birth mother	126	27.4
The information regarding the birth mother can be provided only if the birth mother agrees	251	54.5
If the birth mother refuses to disclose information, the child must be able to ask for a court hearing	82	17.8
Other	1	0.2
<i>The child's age limit to access the birth mother's information</i>		
Age 18 years	231	50.2
Anytime regardless of age	128	27.8
Don't know	92	20.0
Other	9	2.0
<i>Scope of information disclosure when providing information about the birth mother</i>		
Name, date of birth	122	26.5
Name, date of birth, address	55	12.0
Name, date of birth, contact number	45	9.8
Name, date of birth, address, contact number	156	33.9
All information about the birth mother requested by the child	70	15.2
Other	12	2.6

sponded that their mother's name, date of birth, address, and contact number must be disclosed; 26.5% that only the birth mother's name and date of birth must be disclosed; 12.0% that the birth mother's name, date of birth, and address must be disclosed; and 9.8% that the birth mother's name, date of birth, and contact number must be disclosed. A further 15.2% responded that all information about the birth mothers should be provided. Other responses included that only the information that the birth mother wishes to disclose must be provided or that it is not right to provide the birth mother's information at all.

Table 9
Importance of Rights

<i>Questionnaire items</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Whose rights are more important?</i>		
The child's right to know about his or her origins	269	58.5
The woman's right to keep the birth a secret	191	41.5

Table 10
Differences in Opinions about Baby Boxes According to School Type

School type	Approval-disapproval of baby boxes		Total	χ^2
	<i>Approve</i>	<i>Disapprove</i>		
Four-year university	266 (68.2%)	124 (31.8%)	390 (100.0%)	5.131*
Junior college	38 (54.3%)	32 (45.7%)	70 (100.0%)	

Note. * $p < .05$.

Finally, regarding which is more important, “the child’s right to know about his or her origin” or “the woman’s right to keep the birth a secret,” 58.5% of the participants responded that the former is more important, 41.5% the latter.

Differences in the Perception of Baby Boxes and Anonymous Childbirth according to General Characteristics

A χ^2 test was conducted to examine whether there was a difference in the perception of baby boxes and the anonymous childbirth system according to the general characteristics of the female college students, such as year, school type (four-year university or junior college), and academic division. The results of the analysis showing statistically significant differences are as follows:

First, the results of examining approval or disapproval of baby boxes depending on participants’ school type show that in cases where parents who cannot raise their children because of unavoidable circumstances leave them in a baby box, the students attending four-year universities were more likely to approve, to a statistically significant level, than those attending junior colleges.

Next, as a result of examining different opinions about the need for an anonymous childbirth system depending on academic division,⁴ it was found that a sig-

⁴ Since only a few cases were classified as “Other” in the χ^2 test that examined the difference in perception depending on academic division, the “Other” category was excluded from the analysis.

Table 11
Differences in Opinions about Anonymous Childbirth Depending on Academic Division.

Academic division	Need for the anonymous childbirth system		Total	χ^2
	<i>Desirable</i>	<i>Undesirable</i>		
Humanities and social sciences	238 (74.4%)	82 (25.6%)	320 (100.0%)	8.227*
Natural sciences and engineering	79 (83.2%)	16 (16.8%)	95 (100.0%)	
Art, music, and physical education	35 (92.1%)	3 (7.9%)	38 (100.0%)	

Note. * $p < .05$.

nificantly higher ratio of students in the humanities and social sciences considered the anonymous childbirth system undesirable compared to those in other academic divisions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess perceptions of baby boxes and the anonymous childbirth system among female college students in South Korea, seen as potential users of the system, with the aim of providing basic data for future governmental legislation and implementation of the aforementioned system. The main points based on the results of this study are discussed below.

First, this study showed that awareness of baby boxes was high among female college students in South Korea, possibly because of the continued media controversy about them since 2013. By contrast, most of the students were unaware of the anonymous birth system. Although the Korean government announced the introduction of birth notification (a universal birth registration system) and an anonymous birth system in the “Children’s Policy for an Inclusive Nation” in May 2019, our findings suggest that an effective process for gathering the opinions of members of South Korean society—including women—and arriving at a social consensus is still lacking. Therefore, before the implementation of an anonymous childbirth system, the public must be made aware of the program. Further, extensive discussions on its necessity and feasibility are required before the system is introduced.

Second, although most of the study participants (78.9%) had never heard of the

anonymous birth system before the survey, the majority (77.4%) were in favor of it for reasons such as “childbirth may be due to unavoidable circumstances,” “protecting the mother and children from social stigma,” and “guaranteeing women’s right to choose.” In Korea, controversy persists over baby boxes and they are not legally approved. The simultaneous introduction of both a birth notification system and an anonymous birth system may be an effective alternative to baby boxes. If only the birth notification system, which requires medical staff to report births to national or public institutions, were introduced, single mothers who are reluctant to report their children’s births might avoid giving birth in those medical institutions. This might endanger the mothers’ and children’s lives, whereas the anonymous birth system, which permits the anonymous birth of children on condition that the mothers receive counseling, would facilitate a safe delivery.

Third, the majority of students who participated in this study believed that children are abandoned in baby boxes because of “financial difficulties.” They also cited financial support from the government as the most urgent requirement. However, at the same time, the reference to “social stigma” as the main reason for child abandonment was lower than expected (17.6%). This may reflect the changing perception of childbirth outside of marriage in Korean society. The stigma remains but has become less harsh with changing public perceptions. Furthermore, if they were to become pregnant as single mothers because of unavoidable circumstances, the majority of the participants (57.2%) responded that they would raise the child themselves or marry the father to raise the child together. In contrast, only a small number of participants said that they would leave their children in baby boxes or get an abortion. As the main objective of the anonymous childbirth system is to encourage and help mothers to give up their anonymity and raise their children (Han, 2018), policies authorizing governmental support for single mothers must be strengthened significantly, and soon. Currently, governmental support for single mothers is limited to initial support for childbirth and hospital expenses, childcare, counseling for psychological and emotional help, and paternity tests. Thus, realistic and ongoing support must be provided for raising children and achieving economic independence. If financial difficulty is the main reason for infant abandonment and is a more important issue than the social stigma associated with childbirth out of wedlock, the need for baby boxes or anonymous births should diminish, if not completely disappear, with the strengthening of support for single mothers.

Fourth, a significantly higher proportion of those participating in this study felt that the anonymous childbirth system is appropriate for victims of sexual violence

and single mothers under the age of 19, rather than for all unmarried pregnant women and any woman wanting to give birth anonymously. This finding may suggest disagreement over the intended target group of the anonymous childbirth system, based on beliefs that the system may be abused to avoid the responsibility of raising children. Therefore, further consideration and discussion are required regarding which groups should be allowed to avail of this system.

Fifth, although more than half of the study participants (58.5%) responded that the child's right to know about their origin was more important than the woman's right to anonymity, a majority also stated that it was appropriate to "provide information about the birth mother to the child only if the birth mother consents." A higher proportion of respondents disagreed with the idea that children could request such information through the court system or upon reaching a certain age. If children can access information about their birth mothers (without their consent) after reaching a certain age, such mothers may conceal their whereabouts by avoiding going through the anonymous childbirth system (Hyun et al., 2017). Therefore, the introduction of the German confidential birth system in Korea may raise concerns about women's reluctance to choose it. The anonymous childbirth system should seek a balance between the right of single mothers to keep deliveries confidential and the right of their children to know about their mothers. The resolution of this conflict of interests is not easy, and the system has been repeatedly revised even in countries where it has been introduced for some time. However, the problem remains unsolved, and the solution will differ according to the social environment and cultural characteristics of each country. One possibility is that intermediary institutions that can mediate contact between mothers and children may be considered instead of directly disclosing the mother's personal information to the child.

Sixth, perceptions of baby boxes and anonymous childbirth differed according to school type and academic division. This suggests that there may be differences of opinion among women, indicating the necessity of collecting views from various groups and discussing them sufficiently before introducing the system.

Finally, counseling services must be systematically organized by specialized agencies for women who experience difficulties with unwanted pregnancies. In Germany, counselors provide single mothers with detailed information about various means of support for childrearing, adoption, anonymous childbirth procedures, and the rights of birth mothers and children, as well as legal considerations (Choi, 2017). In addition, pregnancy counseling centers provide follow-up support after childbirth (Ahn, 2017). Similarly, in Korea, the implementation of the anony-

mous birth system requires appropriate procedures and contents for counseling services and the establishment of counseling institutions (e.g., single-mother counseling facilities). Additionally, an extensive public awareness campaign on the anonymous birth system is needed so that women suffering unwanted pregnancies may consider it as one of their options.

Currently, the Korean government is preparing legislative measures to address the issues of unwanted pregnancy and abandonment. An anonymous childbirth system could be one such measure. Upon introduction of the system, its operational details, such as the target group and the requirement for counseling services, should be delineated in line with stakeholders' opinions, society in general, and the cultural characteristics of that society. Furthermore, the system should consider the rights of both women and children and seek a balance between them.

This study provides basic data for government legislation and the implementation of an anonymous childbirth system. However, it does suffer from some limitations. First, the study participants were limited to female college students, who constitute only a portion of the potential users of the system. They also belong to a very specific age group and represent a highly educated social group. Thus, their opinions do not represent all potential users of the system or the general public. Second, the majority (78.9%) had never heard of the anonymous childbirth system. Thus, their opinions may be based on the restricted information provided by the researchers and without due consideration. There is a chance that they will change their opinions with the availability of more information. Lastly, data on their personal characteristics were not collected, making it impossible to investigate the variables affecting their opinions. A more thorough survey with a broader and more representative sample would give a much more accurate view of what may constitute a social consensus among the South Korean public.

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