

DEMOGRAPHY

Denatality emergency, South Korea becomes 'sterile'

CULTURE

17_05_2024

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During a **speech** in a press conference on May 9, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol unveiled plans to set up a new ministry to tackle his country's low birth rates and have the minister in charge double as the deputy prime minister in the Cabinet. "I ask the

parliament's cooperation to revise government organization to set up the Ministry of Low Birth Rate Counter Planning," Yoon said. "We will mobilize all of the nation's capabilities to overcome the low birth rate, which can be considered a national emergency," he **said**, as quoted by CNN.

Besides, the president also outlined plans to hire a new senior secretary to promote natalist policies, as per local media **citing** his spokesperson on May 13. The spokesperson from Yoon's office declared: "I believe the problem of low fertility is undoubtedly the most serious problem in South Korean society over the matter of sustainability."

In 2023, South Korea recorded a birth rate of 0.72, with speculation that the birth rate would drop even further as time goes on. Moreover, a decreasing birth rate shrinks the size of a country's workforce, possibly giving rise to slower economic growth, higher dependency ratios, and enhanced pressure on public services and pension systems, according to **Newsweek**. The rate fell far beneath the rate of 2.1 per woman required for a steady population and well behind the rate of 1.24 in 2015, according to media **reports**.

"The issue of low birth rates requires us to take the situation more seriously and contemplate on the causes and solutions from a different dimension than before," Yoon admitted in December, as per *Yonhap News Agency*.

Additionally, South Korea has hitherto predicted its fertility rate would probably drop further to 0.68 in 2024, with Seoul, which has the country's highest housing costs, having the lowest fertility rate of 0.55 last year, *The Inquirer* **reported**.

Newsweek also quoted private firms in trying to encourage more births among South Koreans, including Construction giant Booyoung Group that is **offering employees \$75,000** for each baby born. "If Korea's birth rate remains low, the country will face extinction," Lee Joong-keun, the company's chairman, told workers.

Furthermore, the proportion of youth to the elderly continues to fall, sparking worries about the "sustainability of economic growth and competitiveness" *Newsweek* posited, adding: "In the early 1990s, young adults between the ages of 19 and 34 comprised nearly a third of the population. By 2020, this had fallen to just one-fifth of the country's 51.8 million people, with projections showing **a further decline to 5.21 million by 2050**, according to national statistics."

Such has been the dwindling situation of child births in South Korea that the

country is also reeling from a paucity of pediatricians, partly due to low birth rates. Consequently, the number of pediatric clinics and hospitals in Seoul **dropped** by 12.5% over the five years to 2022, to just 456.

In February this year, the BBC featured a report detailing reasons why some South Korean women decided not to have children. Some of the reasons cited by the BBC interviewees included a desire to pursue careers, cost of living concerns, high childcare expenses and the lack of suitable marriage partners. Qatar-based Al Jazeera **cited** a report from South Korea's Central Bank depicting the root causes behind South Korea's plummeting fertility rates, including "challenges around employment, housing, and childcare". Al-Jazeera also attributed South Korea's declining birth rates to challenges faced by many South Korean women due to the country's "workaholic culture and ultra-competitive pressure in the workspace", implying that "taking time out to have a baby is too much of a risk".

On its end, the South Korean government has tried to use monetary incentives to spur the country's falling birth rates. Since April 2022, the government has given out **vouchers worth 2 million won** (around \$1,500) to parents after their first child, with another 3 million won provided for every additional child. Parents can receive an **increased monthly stipend** for a newborn's first year in 2024 to a million won (around \$740) from 700,000 won last year.

"It's just so much simpler to go to the cash incentive, to use that policy tool," Jisoo Hwang, associate professor of Economics at Seoul National University, told Time. "I think for any government, that has been the easier way to address the low fertility problem." Nonetheless, observers have claimed that using money to address South Korea's low birth rates has been largely ineffective.

CNN illustrated Yoon as admitting in 2022 that despite **more than \$200 billion** being spent trying to increase the country's population over the past 16 years, the trend has not been reversed. To boot, initiatives like increasing paid paternity leave, offering monetary "baby vouchers" to new parents, and social campaigns urging men to contribute to childcare and housework, have not been effective in their overall aims at increasing birth rates.

Hwang told *Time* that while government handouts can alleviate the challenges of child-raising, a better approach would be to enhance "broader quality-of-life issues". "It maybe actually more efficient to, instead of giving out small increments of cash subsidies, if we can actually invest in public education or public childcare, and to enhance the quality and accessibility of that throughout the country," Hwang said.

What is generally underestimated, however, is the spiritual factor, or in particular the correlation between religious affiliation and openness to life. It is a correlation partially illustrated by a **recent Pew Research Center survey**, conducted between 2 June and 17 September 2023 and published last April, concerning the attitude towards life of East Asian men and women. While the strong culture of women's right to self-determination emerges in general, a question on women's social duty to have children reveals that for South Korea, the responses of "Buddhists, Christians, and those who say they are not affiliated with any religion vary (...). About four in ten Korean Buddhists (43%) say that women have a social obligation to have children, compared to 33% of Christians and 22% of people not affiliated with any religion'.