

# Why young people in South Korea are staying single despite efforts to spark dating

February 12 2019, by Yue Qian

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Recent [reports](#) about a [sex recession](#) among young Americans aside, [the concept of dating and mating](#) is reasonably engrained in daily life in the West. In sharp contrast, in South Korea, 40 per cent of people in their 20s and 30s appear to have [quit dating altogether](#).

Today, many refer to young Koreans as the "[sampo generation](#)" (literally, "giving up on three") because they have given up on these three things: dating, [marriage](#) and children.

Although Confucian culture originated in China, many scholars believe South Korea is even [more influenced](#) by Confucianism. Confucian values emphasize the importance of marriage and [carrying on the family](#) [bloodline](#).

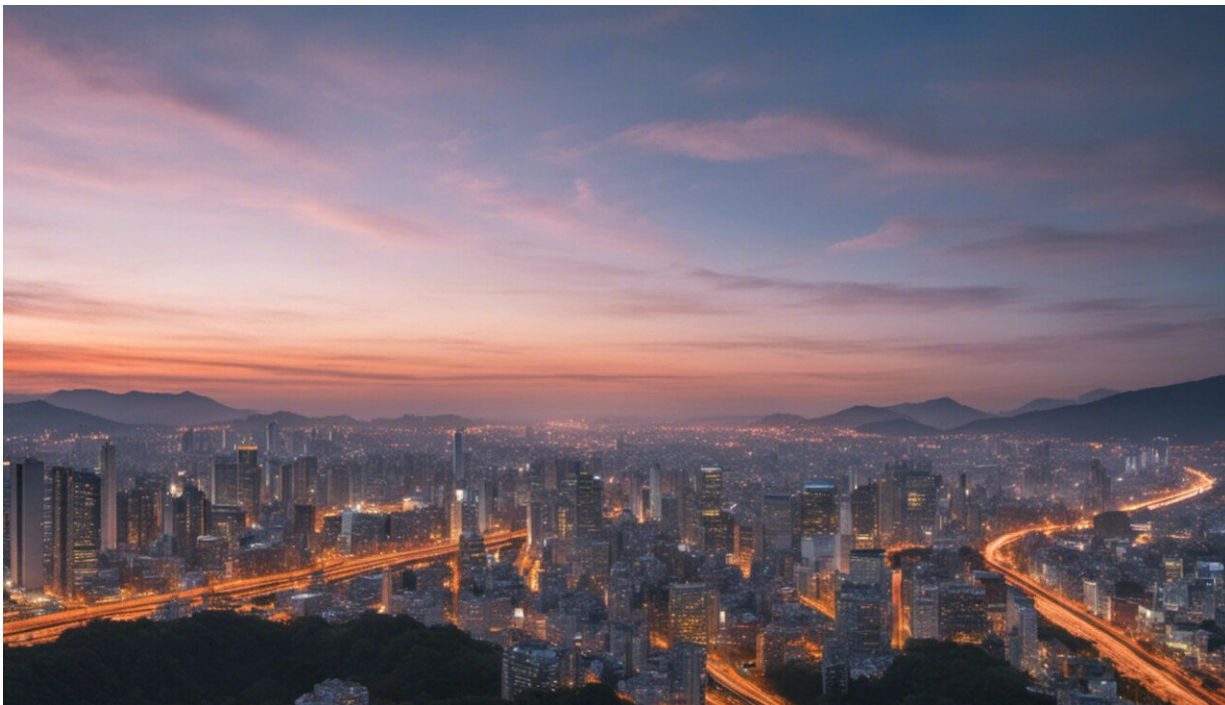
Getting married is considered a social responsibility. But [young Koreans](#) are increasingly leaving marriage behind.

## **The marriage package**

Demographers have used the term "[marriage package](#)" to illustrate the idea that marriage in East Asia entails much more than just a relationship between two people.

In traditional Asian families, numerous intra-familial roles are bundled together, especially for [women](#). Generally speaking, marriage, childbearing, childrearing and taking care of the elderly are linked. Hence, marriage and family roles are a package.

South Korea is no exception to endorsing this cultural idea of the "marriage package."



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Nevertheless, [Western individualistic ideologies are increasingly influencing young Koreans](#). Despite a strong traditional emphasis on marriage, they have begun to postpone and even forgo marriage.

[The average age at first marriage in South Korea jumped five years for both men and women from 1990 to 2013](#). Related to this is the rising number of people who stay single. In 1970, only [1.4 per cent](#) of women between the ages of 30-34 were never married. In 2010, that percentage increased to almost [30 per cent](#).

## **For women, marriage is not an attractive option**

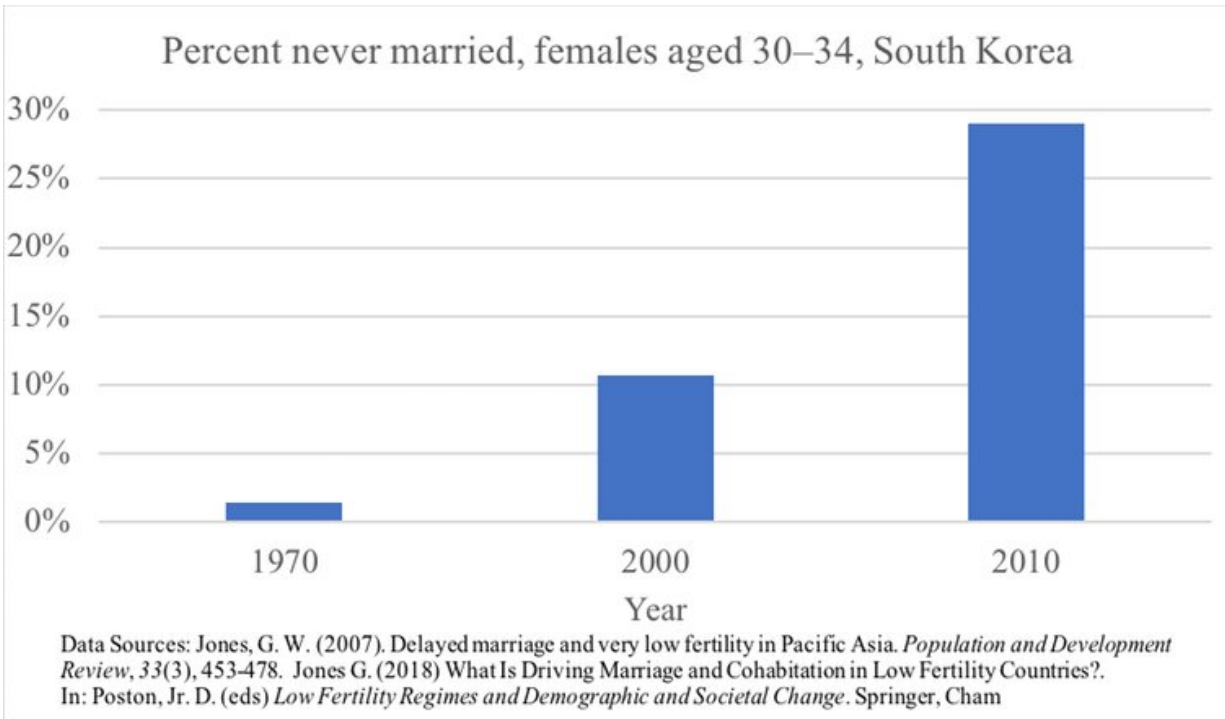
In the last decade, *The Economist* has published articles about the decline

of Asian marriage. One of them from 2011, "[Asia's lonely hearts](#)," discussed women's rejection of marriage in Asia and looked to [gendered family roles and unequal divisions of housework](#) as culprits.

Once women decide to get married, they are generally expected to prioritize familial responsibilities. Women take on a much greater share of the housework and childcare burden and are chiefly responsible for their children's [educational success](#).

My research shows that in 2006, [46 per cent of married Korean women between 25 and 54 were full-time housewives](#); Korean wives, many of whom are working outside of the home, did over 80 per cent of the housework, whereas their husbands did less than [20 per cent](#).

Women have gained more opportunities outside marriage, but within marriage, men have not correspondingly increased their contribution to housework and childcare. As a result, for many women, being married is no longer an attractive option. With diminishing returns to gender-specialized marriage for highly educated women, they are likely to delay or forgo marriage.



Since 1970, the number of singles in South Korea has increased 20-fold. author provided

## Precarious economy and the overwork culture

Another [important reason](#) young Koreans are giving up on dating, getting married and raising kids is the growing economic uncertainty and financial hardships. Many young Koreans work at [precarious jobs](#), with low pay and [little job and income security](#).

Moreover, the culture of long working hours prevails in South Korea. Among the OECD countries, South Korea has the [longest work hours](#).

In 2017, [Koreans worked an average of 2,024 hours per year, 200 hours less than they did in the previous decade](#). To put this number into

perspective, Canadians worked 300 hours less a year than Koreans and the French, who are even better at [work-life balance](#), worked 500 fewer hours.

Recently, the South Korean government has [passed a law](#) which cut the maximum weekly hours to 52, down from 68, hoping that Koreans could still have some personal life after work.

## Lowest fertility rate in the world

It is rare for single women to have children: [1.5 per cent](#) of births were to unmarried mothers in Korea, as compared to the overall OECD average of 36.3 per cent. Therefore, there are real consequences of marriage forgone.



In Korea, the average births per woman were slightly above one in 2016, down



from 6.1 in 1960 and 4.5 in 1970. Author

South Korea is among the countries with the [lowest fertility](#) in the world. Countries need about 2.1 children per woman to sustain their population. In Korea, the average births per woman were slightly above one in 2016.

Birth rates are extremely low. However, people are living longer. South Korean women will likely soon have the highest female life expectancy; South Korean women born in 2030 are expected to live [longer than 90 years](#). Therefore, the Korean population is ageing rapidly.

A shrinking population will create a labour crisis, limiting economic development. *The New York Times* called this demographic doom "[South Korea's most dangerous enemy](#)."

The Korean government, attempting to increase birth rates, enforced a [policy that all the lights in the ministry's building should be turned off at 7 p.m. sharp](#) once a month, with the hope that employees would get off work early and go home to make love and more importantly, babies.

But will forcefully switching off lights work? Maybe changing the culture of long working hours and abolishing gendered work and family roles would be more effective.

There are like additional reasons behind the rise of the *sampo* generation in Korea, but young people's job precarity, the overwork culture and a lack of equal divisions of labour at home are vital issues.

In South Korea, [Valentine's Day is generally a big deal](#), and it is one of many holidays celebrating love. It would be great if young South Koreans could "afford" dating and family lives so they can get into the

celebrations.

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Citation: Why young people in South Korea are staying single despite efforts to spark dating (2019, February 12) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-02-young-people-south-korea-efforts.html>

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