

South Korea's fertility rate set to hit record low of 0.96

Drop below one for first time could lead to pensions shortfall and economic decline

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South Korea's fertility rate is expected to fall to an all-time low this year, setting the country up for a host of problems including underfunded pensions, expanding debt and economic decline.

The average number of babies born per woman of reproductive age is due to be as low as 0.96 this year, falling below one for the first time in history, according to a study [commissioned by the Chosun Ilbo newspaper](#).

Such a low fertility rate is normally only seen during wartime, said Lee Chul-hee, an economics professor at Seoul National University and one of the authors of the study.

"There's definitely going to be a psychological shock among the Korean people," he said. "It will likely influence what is considered to be an ideal number of children, and could lead to the rate dropping even further."

Lee Chul-hee warned that social welfare schemes such as healthcare and pensions will face shortfalls as society ages and there are fewer people to pay to support them.

Classrooms could also empty out as fewer children attend schools, and the South Korean military, where all men are conscripted to face the threat of North Korea, could lack adequate troop numbers.

It is a trend facing wealthy nations around the world, but one that has manifested particularly quickly in South Korea. The global fertility rate is expected to be two births per woman by 2100, just below replacement levels, [according to UN projections](#).

South Korea's birth rate has been dropping since the 1960s. Following a baby boom after the 1950-53 Korean war, the government launched a campaign encouraging women to have no more than two children.

The status of women in South Korea, a [deeply patriarchal society](#), is a major driver of the trend, along with worsening job prospects for young people and rising property prices. Women are getting married and having children later in life, if at all, for fear of being denied promotions and facing discrimination at work.

The average age for South Korean women marrying for the first time is 30.2, according to figures from the ministry of gender equality and family, up from 24.8 in 1990. On average, women have their first child at 31.6.

When the [figure was released](#) in March, a researcher at the official body Statistics Korea said: "If a woman has her first child when she is 32, it becomes difficult to have more than two children."

The government has tried to reverse the trend with little success. Authorities spent 153tn won (£106bn) between 2006 and 2018, according to figures from the national assembly, on measures designed to encourage more births. Those efforts include free childcare until the age of five, cash payouts to pregnant women and supporting youth clubs.

Lee Bong-joo of Seoul National University said: "This is approaching disaster levels.

"Focusing only on childcare won't be effective in the future; increasing gender equality in the home and the workplace is the best solution, but that will take time."

He suggested government housing subsidies for young couples, aggressively tackling the gender discrimination faced by new mothers and removing the stigma associated with single-parent households.

But even those measures may not be enough. The total number of babies born last year was 357,000, down from 493,000 a decade ago, and even if fertility rates begin to rise, it will be among a shrinking pool of

women.

Lee Chul-hee said: “The speed in the decline of children born each year is more important than the fertility rate – that will produce real problems in economy and society.”