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Taiwanese birth rate plummets despite measures

By Cindy Sui BBC News, Taipei



Taiwan has the lowest fertility rate in the world

Taiwan's government has acknowledged its birth rate declined last year, even as it introduced a series of measures to encourage people to have babies.

These included stipends for giving birth and childcare subsidies.

Taiwan's total fertility rate - the average number of children women have during their childbearing years - dropped to 0.9 last year, down from 1.03 the previous year.

That gives Taiwan the lowest fertility rate in the world, the statistics show.

Some Taiwanese women are reluctant to have children.

"We think it's not suitable to raise children, especially in Taiwan. In Taiwan, when a girl gets married she has to sacrifice a lot," one says.

"Once she reaches a certain academic level she can't just stay at home and take care of kids and her parents-in-law, but that's still what the older generation expects from them."

Another says: "Taiwan's work hours are really long. That makes it difficult to get married and have kids. You might not have much free time and it's hard to relax."

These women's views reflect those of many Taiwanese people. Wages here are considered low compared to the cost of childcare and property prices.

Many couples still live with their parents or in-laws. Many Taiwanese women also delay getting married to pursue academic degrees or careers.

Some complain it is hard for them to find a husband once they reach 30 because of old-fashioned views about women.

In addition, many employers frown upon female workers taking extended maternity leave, and

expect mothers to work the same amount of overtime as they did before they gave birth.

Baby boom?

The government, however, blames the lower birth rate on superstition.

The year 2009 was considered an unlucky year to get married, and 2010 - the year of the tiger - a bad year to have children.

However, officials say this year is considered a lucky one as it is the country's 100th anniversary.

Between January and July, the number of marriages rose more than 12% compared to the same period last year, and the number of births also shot up.

Next year, the year of the dragon, is especially auspicious for having children.