

# Silent revolution in South Korea: Meet the women who want neither marriage nor children to fight patriarchy

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*Insadong gil, Seoul, South Korea. - iStock / Cholprapha*  
SAFEGUARD

In 25 years, the number of marriages has fallen drastically, and the country now has the lowest fertility rate in the world. A marriage and belly strike in reaction to the country's patriarchal culture, which weighs heavily on the lives and careers of Korean women.

By Léa Baron

Eun-Jung\* is determined. This cheerful short-haired policewoman almost married one of her boyfriends. But in the end she said "no". "In South Korea, when you get married, your family expects you to have a child. Then you're left alone to look after him and your in-laws," she says.

"Having a child would mean giving up my whole life! At 38, Eun-Jung has other ambitions. She would like to pursue her career abroad. Above all, she doesn't want to reproduce her mother's pattern of "having to take on the whole burden of the family" alongside an absent, spendthrift father.

## THE NEW ERA

Eun-Jung embodies what Koreans call the "Sampo generation", young people who have given up dating, marriage and children. This lifestyle choice is reflected in the [national statistics](#). In 2022, the country had the lowest fertility rate in its history, and in the world. It reached 0.78 last year (and even 0.59 in Seoul). While the decline accelerated in the 2000s with the financial crisis, the rate has fallen below one child per woman since 2018. And it has continued to fall.

## THIS GROWING RELUCTANCE TO MARRY IS A WARNING SIGN THAT THE FERTILITY RATE COULD FALL FURTHER

The number of marriages has fallen by more than 55% over the last 25 years, from 435,000 in 1996 to 192,000 in 2022.

This [growing reluctance to marry](#) is a warning sign that the fertility rate could fall further," warns Kwang-Hee Jun, Emeritus Professor of Demography and Sociology at Chungnam National University. Marriage and fertility are closely linked in Korea, where births outside marriage are still rare" because they are still frowned upon by society. In his opinion, the optimal fertility rate should be above 1.6 births in the absence of immigration.

## WHEN STARTING A FAMILY ISN'T SO SIMPLE

"Our couple is an endangered species!" jokes Heejun. This personable 38-year-old housewife lives in a flat perched on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor of a tower block in Seoul with her husband, an employee, and their four-year-old son. A life that many young Korean women don't want and don't think they can afford. Starting a family here is expensive.

### PARENTS HAVE TO SPEND A LOT OF MONEY TO ENSURE THEIR CHILDREN'S SUCCESS

"The cost of living has gone up a lot, especially housing and children's education," explains Professor Gi-Wook Shin, Director of the Asia-Pacific Research Centre at Stanford University in the United States. "Parents have to spend an enormous amount of money to ensure the success of their children in a very competitive educational environment". Then there's the highly competitive job market that parents don't want their children to face.

### THIS DOUBLE BURDEN OF CUSTODY AND CAREER IS SIMPLY TOO HEAVY

Added to this are some of the longest working hours in the world, according to the OECD: "Once you're married and have a child, this double burden of childcare and career is simply too much," observes Hawon Jung, former AFP correspondent in Seoul and author of "Flowers of fire" (BenBella 2023 edition) on feminism in South Korea.

## THE WIFE, THE PILLAR OF THE HOUSE

Despite the technological, economic and cultural progress made in recent decades, Korean society remains deeply conservative and patriarchal. "It has always emphasised the role of women as guardians of the family and even the extended family (in-laws, editor's note)", stresses Professor Gi-Wook Shin. Today, Korean women like Eun-Jung are beginning to reject this lifestyle in order to pursue their careers. They either marry later (31 instead of 24 in 1990) or not at all.

"This may seem rather extreme," admits Professor Gi-Wook Shin, "but it is also a response to gender-related issues such as the immense importance attached to physical beauty, sexual discrimination in the workplace and spy cameras filming women in public toilets and changing rooms without their knowledge". These images are then posted online. Many Korean women demonstrated against this sexual harassment in 2018. In the end, the government increased the penalties and provided better support for victims.

## FREEDOM ABOVE ALL

In the land of cosmetic surgery, women have also launched the "Escape the corset" movement to challenge Korean beauty diktats by cutting their hair short and refusing to wear make-up. But the shock for many of them came in 2016. A 34-year-old man killed an unknown woman in a public toilet near Gangnam metro station in Seoul. "This high-profile murder really triggered a huge wave of grief and awareness of what it means to be a woman in Korea, a country known as one of the safest in the world," recounts journalist Hawon Jung.

### ALL THESE EVENTS RAISE AWARENESS OF FEMINISM AMONG KOREAN WOMEN

Hawon Jung recounts the turning point of 2018 in his book *Flowers of fire*. The Metoo movement gained momentum with the testimony of elite prosecutor Ji-Hyun Seo, live on television. She explained that she had been sexually assaulted eight years earlier by a colleague. All these events, outspokenness and demonstrations, as well as a higher rate of education for girls than before and social networks, made Korean women more aware of feminism and encouraged them to speak out.

## A FEMINIST AND SENSITIVE WAVE

"We found a language to express the inequalities we were experiencing", says Ju-hee Kim in the hubbub of a Seoul café. At the age of 28, this short-haired, fiery nurse is the founder of the "Haeil" (Korean for "tsunami") feminist movement, which fights against femicide in particular. For some young women, like Ju-hee Kim, not getting married and not having children has become a militant, feminist, political and radical act.

### SAYING NO TO MARRIAGE IS AN ACT OF SURVIVAL

A number of them, difficult to estimate, adhere to the 4B movement: Bisekseu, Bichulsan, Biyeona, Bihon, which means renouncing all sexual relations, having children, dating and marriage. Sometimes, it even means refusing to associate with men. If the word "movement" is used, it's more of a lifestyle choice than an organised group with leaders.

"It's an act of rebellion against a rusty system", exclaims an angry Ju-hee Kim. Her t-shirt reads "rêve doré" ("golden dream") in French. Her dream is to see her country evolve. And she is determined to change things. Ju-hee led several demonstrations during the 2022 presidential campaign, which ultimately saw the conservative, anti-feminist Yoon Suk-Yeol win. "Saying no to marriage is an act of survival in a country that still discriminates too much against women. We want to be respected as human beings, not as baby-making machines.

## SUBJECTS THAT ARE STILL TOO TOUCHY

By taking a public feminist stance, she exposes herself to attacks, harassment and telephone threats. In South Korea, simply calling someone a "feminist" is an insult and remains taboo. But things are changing. A little. "Young men are adopting behaviours that their fathers considered too feminine, such as cooking or cleaning," observes journalist Hawon Jung.

The "Feminism with him" group of feminist men has even been set up in Seoul. Its founder, Han Lee, 31, raises awareness in schools and companies. "We're trying to bring about change, even if it doesn't happen very quickly. It's not really a revolution, but rather an evolution.

### KOREA IS A HOMOGENEOUS SOCIETY THAT HAS ALWAYS BEEN FAIRLY CLOSED TO FOREIGNERS.

Meanwhile, the country's very low birth rate is likely to have economic consequences for the 12<sup>e</sup> world power. This means less labour to fuel the economy and an insufficient number of domestic consumers, according to Professor Gi-Wook Shin. "The younger generation will have to bear a heavier burden to support the growing elderly population," he assures. To compensate, "the state is bringing in immigrant spouses and workers. But Korea is a homogeneous society that has always been fairly closed to foreigners...".

## TOWARDS AN EVOLVING KOREA

The government has also handed out 200 billion dollars over sixteen years in financial aid for new parents and extended paid paternity leave, but without tackling the core societal problems. And in recent years, the gap between generations and between men and women has widened.

Feminists are calling for an end to the pay gap (the widest in the OECD) and the possibility of legalising unions between partners other than marriage (a kind of Pacs). Our interviewees place less hope in the state than in individual action. "Will not getting married or not having children be enough to change Korean society?" asks journalist Hawon Jung. That remains to be seen.

\* The identity has been changed.

By Léa Baron

The logo for ELLE magazine, featuring the word "ELLE" in a bold, serif font, centered within a light gray square.