

Baby blues hit Korea

Choi Eun-hee's day starts before dawn with a feverish rush to get her 17-month-old son ready to drop off at her parents before she commutes to work in Seoul.

She and her husband of six years decided despite the long commute to move to Suwon, Gyeonggi Province, from Seoul so they could be nearer her parents who agreed to care for the boy.

Moving, earlier mornings and the 90-minute drive were among the sacrifices she and her husband are making in order to have a family. But the couple has decided they will only have one child.

Choi's difficulties are common for most married couples in Korea as they face the tough challenge of managing both their careers and families. Many Koreans feel the sacrifices are too much, state support is too little and as a result fewer are having babies.

"Korea is probably the worst country to raise a child in," said Choi, 29.

South Korea's birth rate in 2002 plunged to the lowest in the world with women having an average of 1.17 children, according to the National Statistical Office. In Japan the rate is 1.33, the United States 2.13 and Britain 1.64.

Lower fertility means a more aged society, which creates more social problems such as a declining working population and a heavier social and tax burden to maintain the pension system, experts say.

According to the Korea Development Institute, 14 out of 100 job applicants in year 2050 will be over 65 years old, while only 49 percent of the total will be in the age group of 25 to 49. It was 66 percent in 2000. Statistics indicate women must have at least two children to maintain the current population. But all indications are women now are not as interested in having children as their mothers were.

As women's education level increases and more enter the workforce, fewer are deciding to have children in what they feel is a poor environment to raise them in, Sociology Prof. Chung Sung-ho of Kangwon National University.

"It is extremely hard for working mothers to balance their work and raise a child, as the government and companies fail to give any support or benefits," Choi Eun-hee said.

The current law obliges a company to give two months of paid leave and another unpaid month off for an employee having a baby. The leave cannot be extended to more than a year.

A recent survey of Ewha Womans University students shows a growing avoidance to have children. Of 200 respondents, about 31 percent said they do not plan to have children after they are married.

Kim Min-ah, 36, who got married in 1999 and went back to work after she had a baby in 2002 said, "Having a child means having to give up your career and suffering greater financial difficulties with only the husband putting the bread on the table."

Kim hired a live-in nanny to take care of her son. That costs her 1.2 million won a month, about half of her salary.

Kim Min-ah and Choi Eun-hee both wanted to keep working after becoming mothers, explaining they have just as much right as men to move up in their careers as they put as much effort into getting a good education and finding decent jobs.

South Korea's welfare system for working mother, which amounts to almost nothing, does not encourage women to have babies.

The country is now playing catch up after the government shifted its focus in 2002 to "encouraging birth" from the birth control policy that had been in effect since the early 1960s.

The central government and each municipality are starting to provide incentives for women to have babies but the process remains sluggish. The government in January proposed a plan to give women 200,000 won for every baby they had with a monthly childcare subsidy as of 2006 for a second child.

But the Health and Welfare and the Ministry of Planning and Budget ministries have yet to discuss how much of a budget they would need to implement the system.

"It is not a stage to discuss the details yet," a health ministry official said on condition of anonymity.

The Seoul Metropolitan Government announced in January it would bear all daycare expenses for children until they turn six but then last month abruptly scrapped the plan, citing strong opposition from preschools, which were to be excluded from the benefit.

The government also does little to help those who wish to have a baby but unable to conceive, others said. None of the tests and infertility treatments are covered by insurance.

Korea's efforts to fight low birthrate are snail-paced compared to countries such as Singapore.

Announcing its birth rate dropped to a historic low of 1.26 children per woman last year, Singapore said measures to boost the baby pool would be a top national priority with a plan in place by August.

Singapore has been operating a so-called baby bonus scheme since 2000, giving financial incentives to Singaporeans to start having children. About \$59 million has been paid out so far.

But some analysts say financial incentives are not the way to go.

Programs for mothers and nursing children are more pressing and efficient than money incentives in order to bring up the birthrate, said the Korean Development Institute in its report, "Aging Society, the Economic Repercussions and Countermeasures."

Measures such as establishing public nurseries and giving longer leaves would work better to prevent a further decline in fertility, stated the report, which was released last month.

"Developed countries that adopted the financial incentive system years ago are starting to question the usefulness of the scheme," said KDI's Dr. Choi Kyung-soo.

"It is more efficient to liberate burden and inconvenience that comes from giving birth as well as improving the nursing environment."

Not everyone agrees.

Chung Sung-ho of Kangwon National University said, "The only thing the government can do at the moment is give financial incentives.

But it must also come up with long-term plans such as cutting pension in order to prevent national bankruptcy that would follow the low birthrate."

However, mothers touch on more sensitive issues.

"What needs to be changed is the way the Korean society looks at pregnant women," said Choi Eun-hee.

"It is a known fact that when a female employee starts showing up at work with her stomach bulging, the company frowns and mutters 'go home and take care of your housework instead.'"

Kim Min-ah agrees, saying while it is true the social perception of gender roles has changed, it is still considered the mother's job to take care of children.

Demography Prof. David Coleman of Oxford University said during a debate in Seoul in October on low fertility and rapid aging arranged by the Population Association of Korea that what is needed is a drastic change in the gender role.

South Korea needs to come up with a detailed solution to resolve the irony women face in family policies, which aim both at expanding labor participation and the number of children, he said.

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