Like so many Koreans in their mid-to-late twenties, Chae-hee is single and lives alone in a small studio apartment. As a teacher, after the pandemic began, she completely transitioned to online instruction, all from her small space.

The housing market in Korea favors this living arrangement. In fact, there is a name for this popular type of apartment which is borrowed from English (원룸) literally pronounced “one-room.” It is so common that, as of 2020, the percentage of single-person households is at an all-time high at 31.7%. This illustrates a much larger social issue that is enveloping the country.

Today, Koreans rarely get married or raise children.

In fact, in 2020, Korea’s fertility rate dropped to 0.84, making it the lowest of any major country worldwide and less than half that of the United States (1.74). This means that less than half the necessary babies are being born to replace the current population.
Chae-Hee, who previously worked at a daycare, laments that “There aren’t many children in Korea. Schools are disappearing and sometimes they even merge.”

In many countries, there are two factors that slow the effects of the birth rate on the overall population numbers: First, the vast improvements in life expectancy mean that people are contributing to the total population count for a longer period than before. Second, an increase of immigrants (frequent in economically robust nations) also influences the total population numbers of a country. Even so, in Korea’s case, the birth rate has dropped so precipitously that the overall population has already started declining.

This has never happened before.

Even worse, according to the Korean government, over the next 50 years, the overall population is projected to continue to decline—from 51 million to under 38 million—and shows no sign of stopping.

This issue is coupled with the problem of an increasingly elderly population. The current
elderly population is 14% but is likely to grow to 40% in the next 20 years. This means there will be a drastic shortage of young people to support the elderly and contribute to the overall economy. Chae-Hee explains that many people among the elderly, after refusing to have children themselves, are now hypocritically pressuring young people to solve the problem.

The question remains: Why aren’t Koreans choosing to raise children?

Actually, there are many factors influencing the choices of prospective parents.

First, many people simply find themselves financially incapable of sustaining a family. While the Korean economy has made a truly remarkable and historic leap in the latter half of the 20th century (an achievement known as the “Miracle on the Han River,”) recent years have proven troublesome. Not only has the GDP growth slowed substantially (even
declining during the pandemic), but economic inequality has taken the bottom out from under the middle class. In fact, income inequality is so severe that over 1 of 6 citizens is below the poverty line.

The economic disparity is clearly reflected in the housing prices. For example, a 1,000-square-foot home in Seoul costs over 1 million USD. Yet, the average income is only $32,960 (well below the U.S. average of $64,530). Also, just like in the U.S., South Korea is facing the issue of many single-family homes being bought up by corporate investors.

According to Chae-Hee, “In my parents’ generation, if I worked hard, I could buy a house and build a family. But in my generation, it’s hard to even think about buying a house. As a result, more and more people have given up on marriage itself.”

These financial difficulties are especially harsh on women, as South Korea’s gender pay gap (31.5%) is nearly twice that of the U.S. and the largest among the 38 OECD member countries. The country is historically male-dominated and remnants of this way of thinking continue to this day, often in the form of workplace discrimination.
Second, the Korean societal expectations are very high, and one group that faces perhaps the most pressure is, again, young women. They are culturally expected to both have a successful career and marry by the age of thirty. But they are often priced out of the housing market and can’t meet society’s unrealistically high expectations. This problem is compounded by the heavy demands of work-life, which often supersede the demands of raising a family.

Chae-Hee describes a stifling atmosphere of constant social pressure, “pressure related to social status, having a good job, getting good grades” and the experience of never measuring up to these demands. This has become so widespread that many people have become socially withdrawn. In fact, by one estimate, up to 40 percent of young adults have simply given up on dating altogether.

Some people just want an escape. As Chae-Hee notes, “for a long time, Korean culture was male-dominated and there was a strong preference for men. But now that women have
started to work, women’s status has noticeably increased.” She describes that modern career women often reconsider whether marriage is actually the life they want. In fact, even many couples who get married don’t necessarily choose to raise children.

In *South Korea: The Price of Efficiency and Success* author John Gonzales explains that “some Korean couples view themselves as incapable of measuring up to these socio-cultural expectations and are opting not to have children rather than become parents at the risk of being unable to provide the necessary financial support for their children.”

The government has taken notice and President Moon Jae-In has even instituted various cash incentives to assist parents of newborns. But it is unlikely that this will significantly improve the situation.

Another problem facing prospective parents is negative memories of their own childhood. It’s no secret that Korea is very harsh on the young. High-school-aged students face massive expectations related to school, especially the expectation to get high marks on the college entrance exam.
As Chae-Hee describes, “when I was a student, I was forced to stay at school for more than 12 hours a day to study for the college entrance exam. You try your best for your entire life just to take this one test. Sadly, there were always students on the news who had committed suicide after taking it. From their perspective, because of their low scores, their lives had become meaningless.” Her personal experience is reflected in the numbers, as South Korea has the highest suicide rate in the OECD, and it is the leading cause of death for teens.

Simply put, South Korea is not a good place to raise children.

For Chae-Hee-and for all Koreans-the population crisis isn’t just a number on a chart. It is a daily reality.

At this point, it’s unclear if Korea can change its course. But one thing is certain-without a strong middle class, affordable housing, and a social support system that reinforces the
choice to raise children, it’s no wonder the population crisis persists.