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Marriage in Korea: Trends and Changing Values

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Korea's marriage rate has increased since 2022 after many years of decline, driven primarily by an increase among those aged 30-34. Meanwhile, the age at first marriage continues to rise for both men and women, with a more pronounced increase among women. The actual age at first marriage remains higher than the perceived ideal age, suggesting that this gap reflects unintended delays.

The view that marriage is essential has declined, particularly among those born in the 1990s. In surveys, unmarried individuals who wish to marry cite a lack of suitable partners, housing costs, and employment instability as key reasons for remaining unmarried. Those unwilling to marry report perceiving little need for marriage.

These findings suggest a need to shift policy toward improving employment conditions and housing availability for young people, expanding opportunities to meet potential partners, and providing targeted support for individuals born in the 1990s—the primary marriage-age group.

Introduction

Korea has recently been facing its most severe low-birthrate crisis. The decline in the marriage rate has been identified as a key factor behind the prolonged drop in the total fertility rate [Kim, E. J. et al., 2025; Lee, C., 2023]. To better understand the long-term trend of low birthrates in Korea and to inform policy responses, it is necessary to analyze the factors underlying the decline in marriage [Lee, S. et al., 2019; Lee, C., 2018; Lee, C. et al., 2023].

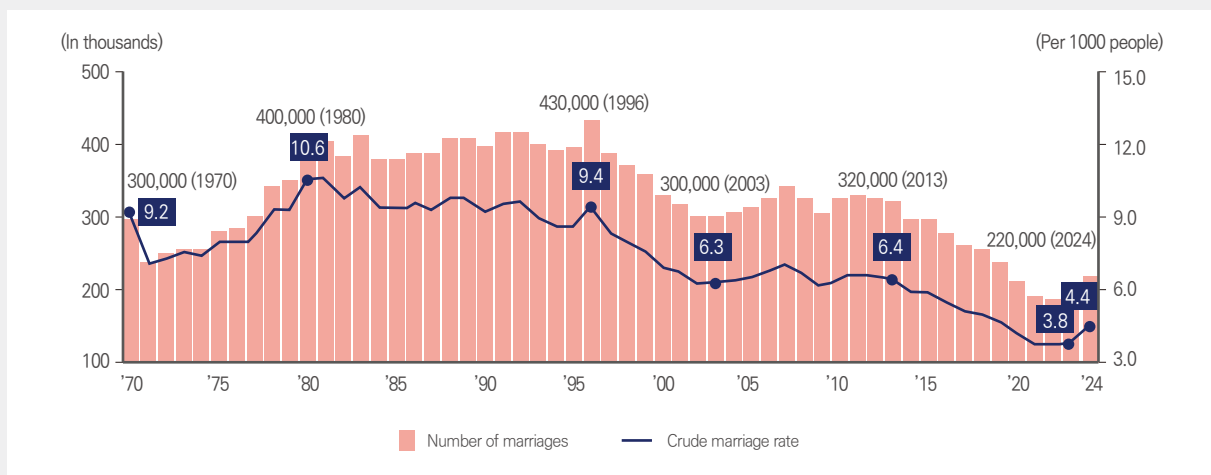
This study¹⁾ examines the current state of marriage in Korea, changing views on marriage as an essential life milestone, and the causes of the decline in the marriage rate, drawing on various sources of evidence and data. First, the “Population Trends Survey” (Ministry of Data and Statistics) is used to assess trends in marriage, particularly changes in the marriage rate and the age at first marriage. Changes over time in perceptions of marriage as essential are analyzed longitudinally using the “Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Families.”²⁾ The causes of the decline in the marriage rate are explored based on findings from a public perception survey and an expert Delphi survey.³⁾



Current state of marriage in Korea

In 2024, with 222,000 marriages, Korea recorded a crude marriage rate (number of marriages per 1,000 people) of 4.4. The marriage rate declined overall, with a sharper drop after 2015. Between 2010 and 2015, the total number of marriages fell by about 23,000, and the marriage rate by 0.6 points. In 2020, compared with 2015, there were 89,000 fewer marriages, and the marriage rate was 2.0 points lower. In 2022, however, the crude marriage rate rebounded for the first time in a decade to 3.7 (190,000 marriages), continuing to rise for two consecutive years through 2023 (194,000; 3.8) and 2024 (222,000; 4.4).

[Figure 1] Number of marriages and crude marriage rate



Source: Cited from “2024 Marriage and Divorce Statistics” [press release], Ministry of Data and Statistics, March 20, 2025, p. 1.

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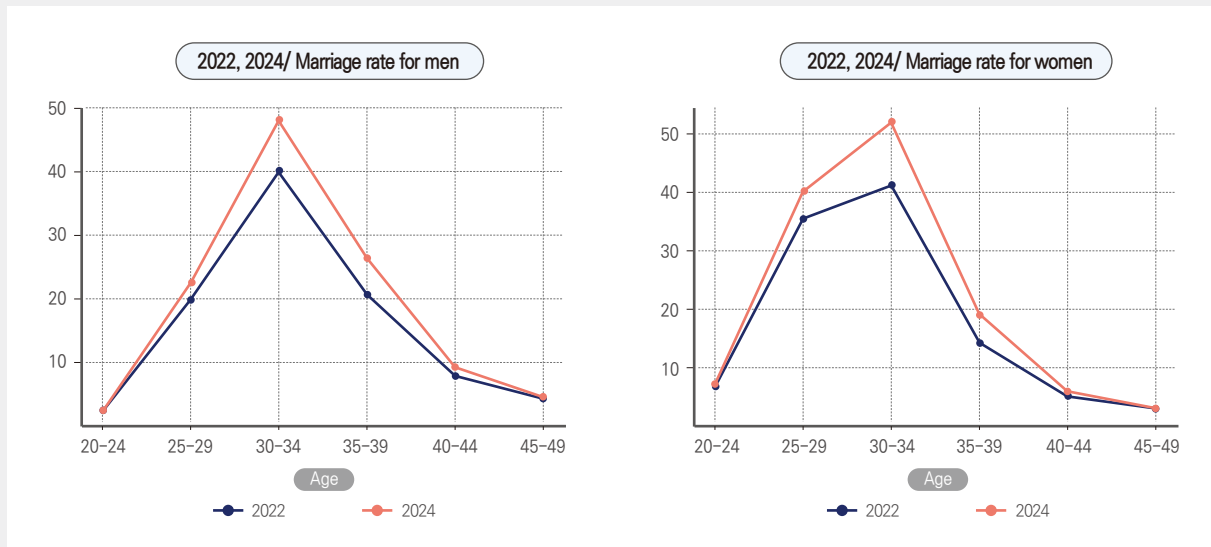
1) This article presents a synthetic analysis of some of the findings from Kim, E. J. (2024), Kim, E. J. et al. (2025), and Cho, S. M. et al. (2025).

2) Based on Cho, S. M. et al. (2025).

3) The perception survey is from Kim, E. J. (2024) and the expert Delphi survey is from Kim, E. J. et al (2025).

The marriage rate by age group—the number of marriages per 1,000 people in each group—increased across all age groups, with those aged 30-34 showing the largest rise and therefore contributing the most to this rebound [Ministry of Data and Statistics, 2025b].

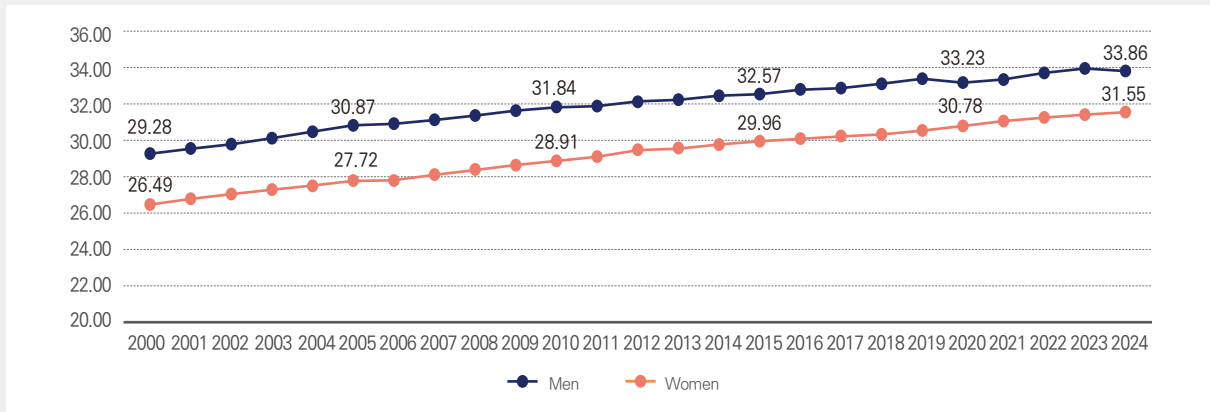
[Figure 2] Marriage rate by age group (2022; 2024)



Source: Average age at first marriage by province/city, "Population Trends Survey," Ministry of Data and Statistics, 2025b.

The age at first marriage has risen for both men and for women, but more sharply for women. In 2000, it was 26.49 years for women and 29.28 years for men; by 2024, it had risen to 31.55 and 33.86 years, respectively. Over this period, the rise amount to 5.06 years for women and 4.58 years for men [Ministry of Data and Statistics, 2025c]. However, the pace of increase has slowed in recent years. Between 2000 and 2005, the average age at first marriage rose by 1.59 years for women and 3.03 years for men, compared with smaller increases of 0.66 years and 0.82 years, respectively, between 2015 and 2020.

[Figure 3] Age at first marriage, for men and women

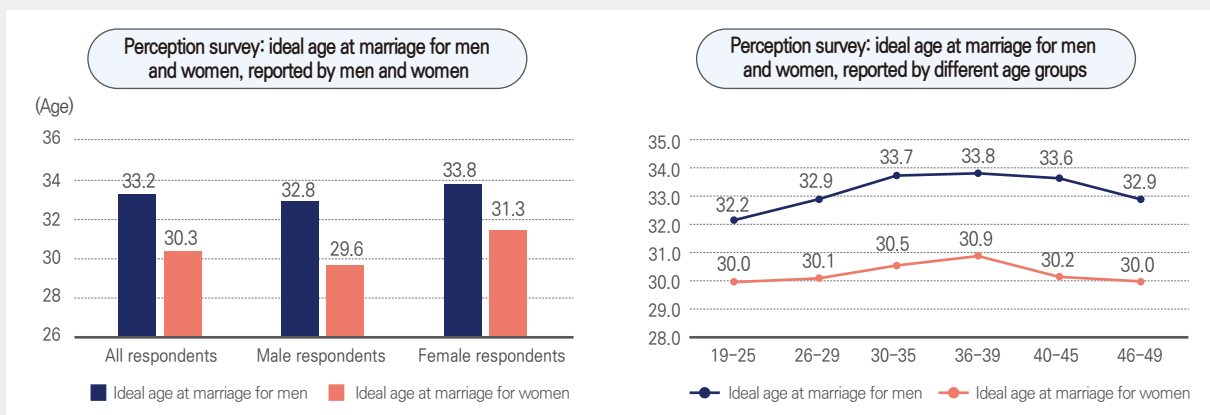


Source: Average age at first marriage by province/city, "Population Trends Survey," Ministry of Data and Statistics, 2025c.

Meanwhile, a 2024 survey found that the perceived ideal age at marriage was 30.3 for women and 33.2 for men—both lower than the actual average ages at first marriage recorded in 2024 [Kim, E. J., 2024]. The gap was larger for women, at 1.3 years. This discrepancy suggests that the trend toward later marriage may be attributed more to unintended delays due to structural constraints than to individual choice.

Female respondents reported higher ideal ages at marriage (31.3 for women and 33.8 for men) than male respondents. By age group, respondents aged 36–39 reported the highest ideal ages at marriage (30.9 for women and 33.8 for men). Overall, the perceived ideal age at marriage increased with respondents' age, but declined among those aged 40 and above.

[Figure 4] Ideal age at marriage reported by men and women and by different age groups



Source: Figure reconstructed based on "Public Perceptions and Perspectives on Marriage, Childbirth, and Family Formation," Kim, E. J. (2024) presented at the 36th Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs Population Forum, p. 26.

Changing perspectives on the necessity of marriage

We examine changes in the perceived necessity of marriage among women of reproductive age (19-49) between 2008 and 2024. Value scores, which reflect individuals' expectations and preferences, allow for an in-depth longitudinal analysis of evolving perspectives on marriage.

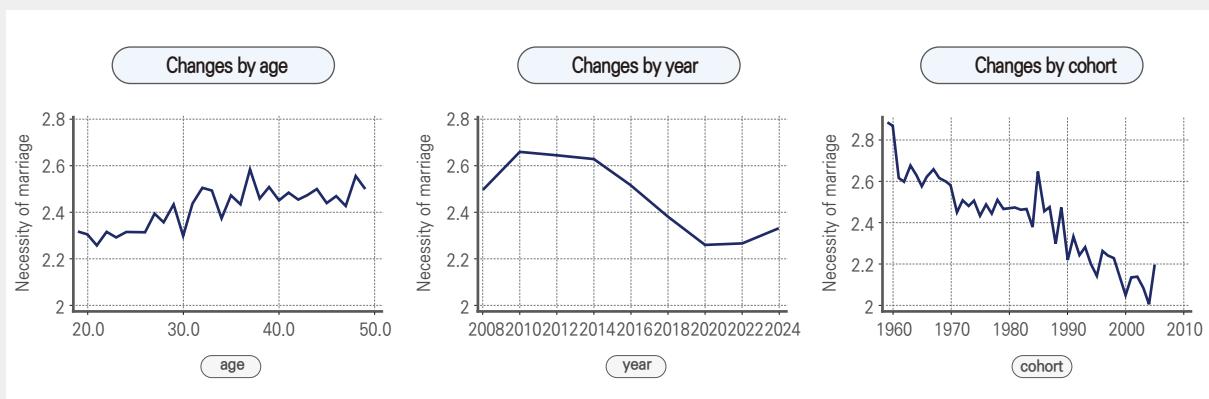
While older women were more likely to view marriage as essential, a sharp recent increase in the perceived necessity of marriage among women in their early 30s (a prime marriage-age group) suggests the influence of shifting social norms and peer effects.

The perceived necessity began declining in 2014, fell sharply thereafter, and reversed course in 2022. This trend mirrors changes in the overall marriage rate over the same period.

Between 2014 and 2022, the perceived necessity declined by 16.7 percent in the 20-24 age group, 21.1 percent in the 25-29 group, 17.6 percent in the 30-34 group, 8.5 percent in the 35-39 group, 8.7 percent in the 40-44 group, and 14.2 percent in the 45-49 group. Measured on a one-to-four scale, this indicator reversed in 2022 and continued to rise through 2024 in every age group except the youngest (20-24). The increases were 0.12 points for the 25-29 group, 0.02 points for the 30-34 group, 0.12 points for the 35-39 group, 0.001 points for the 40-44 group, and 0.06 points for the 45-49 group.

The perceived-necessity scores varied across cohorts by decade. More recent cohorts reported lower scores: 2.65 for the 1960s cohort, 2.49 for the 1970s cohort, 2.46 for the 1980s cohort, 2.23 for the 1990s cohort, and 2.10 for the 2000s cohort. The decline is particularly pronounced between the 1980s and 1990s cohorts. This 0.23-point gap is substantially larger than the 0.03-point observed between the 1970s and 1980s cohorts. Compared to earlier cohorts, those born in the 1990s appear to favor less traditional relationships, viewing marriage—and childbirth—as optional rather than essential life choices.

[Figure 5] Perceived necessity of marriage among women of reproductive age (19-49), 2008-2024



Note: "Marriage is essential" (4-point scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree).

Changes by cohort refer to the average score of perceived necessity of marriage for each cohort between ages 19 and 49. For cohorts that have not yet reached age 49, the average is calculated based on values observed up to 2024.

Source: Cited from [Figure IV-2] (p. 236) in "Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Families 2025," Cho, S. M. et al., 2025.

[Figure 6] Perceived necessity of marriage among women of reproductive age (19-49), by age group, period, birth decade



Note: "Marriage is essential" (4-point scale: 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree).
The red box indicates the primary age range for marriage.

Source: Cited from [Figure IV-3] (p. 237) and [Figure IV-4] (p. 239) in "Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Families 2025," Cho, S. M. et al., 2025.

The causes of late marriage and non-marriage

We examine the factors underlying late marriage and non-marriage in Korea, drawing on both a public perception survey⁴⁾ and an expert survey. The perception survey asked individuals without a spouse—single, divorced, or widowed—whether they were willing to marry. Those who were willing were asked why they remained unmarried, while those who were unwilling were asked their reasons. Among all respondents, 47.3 percent reported being willing to marry, 27.6 percent unwilling, and 25.1 percent unsure. Respondents unwilling to marry were more likely to be women (32.8 percent), in their mid-to-late forties, living in non-urban areas (31.3 percent), having a high school diploma or less (32.9 percent), working in non-regular or daily-paid employment (31.4 percent), or belonging to the lowest income quintile (32.2 percent).

4) This is based on a 2024 survey of 4,000 individuals aged 19-49 nationwide. Among them, 1,251 were unmarried.

[Table 1] Public perception survey on individuals without a spouse (single, divorced, or widowed) and their marriage intentions (in %, individuals)

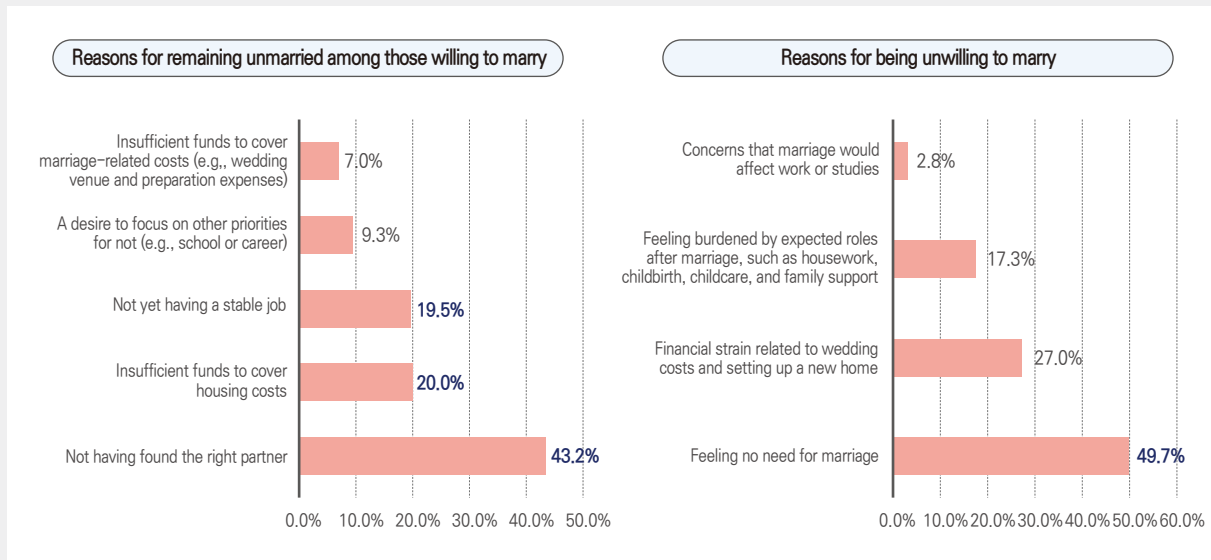
Classifications		Yes, I would like to get married eventually	No, I have no intention to get married, ever.	Not sure	Total
All		47.3	27.6	25.1	1,251
Sex	Men	55.2	23.0	21.8	665
	Women	38.3	32.8	28.9	587
Age	19~25	58.5	23.7	17.8	253
	26~29	51.6	24.6	23.8	346
	30~35	44.7	24.1	31.2	258
	36~39	42.3	31.5	26.3	127
	40~45	35.3	35.0	29.8	193
	46~49	37.7	41.0	21.3	74
Residence	Large cities	48.3	25.4	26.3	634
	Small and medium cities	47.2	29.4	23.4	485
	Rural areas	42.8	31.3	25.9	133
Education level	High school or below	43.0	32.9	24.0	293
	Junior college	43.3	28.3	28.4	195
	Four-year college	50.1	25.8	24.0	684
	Graduate school or higher	48.0	21.2	30.8	79
Employment status	Regular employee	51.6	24.1	24.3	676
	Temporary/daily worker	50.4	31.4	18.2	198
	Self-employed (no employees)	43.8	18.7	37.5	38
	Self-employed (with employees)	44.3	20.6	35.1	20
	Unpaid family worker	29.7	43.3	27.0	10
Total household income	Quintile 1	38.5	32.2	29.3	354
	Quintile 2	46.2	28.2	25.6	317
	Quintile 3	46.2	28.9	25.0	254
	Quintile 4	60.9	21.0	18.1	166
	Quintile 5	56.3	21.0	22.6	161

Source: Figure reconstructed based on "Public Perceptions and Perspectives on Marriage, Childbirth, and Family Formation," Kim, E. J. (2024) presented at the 36th Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs Population Forum, p. 26.

Respondents who were willing to marry reported that they remain unmarried because they have not found the right partner (43.2 percent), are not able to afford housing (20.0 percent), do not have a stable job (19.5 percent), or want to focus on other personal goals—in studies or work—first (9.3 percent). When asked why they remain unmarried, those unwilling to marry cited “not seeing the need for marriage” (49.7 percent), “the economic costs associated with a wedding ceremony and securing a new place to live” (27.0 percent), “the responsibilities associated with housework, childbirth, childrearing, and family support” (17.3 percent), and “concerns that marriage would affect work or school life” (2.8 percent).

Among those willing to marry, remaining unmarried is primarily linked to practical conditions—such as partner availability, housing costs, and job or income stability—whereas among those unwilling to marry, it more strongly reflects value-based considerations.

[Figure 7] PReasons for remaining unmarried; reasons for being willing to get married



Source: Figure reconstructed based on content cited from “Public Perceptions and Values on Marriage, Childbirth, and Family Formation,” Kim Eun-jung, December 20, 2024, presentation material from the 36th Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs Population Forum, p. 27.

A separate expert survey⁵⁾ was conducted to further explore factors and mechanisms underlying declines in marriage. The three highest-ranked factors were: (1) labor-market duality and a lack of opportunities for decent work; (2) rising housing prices and the associated cost burden; and (3) changes in values regarding marriage. One mechanism through which, for example, labor-market duality and limited opportunities for decent work⁶⁾ contribute to declining marriage rates can be understood in terms of Korea’s cultural context, in which life milestones are strongly expected to follow a progression from completing education to securing a job, getting married, and having children. Labor-market dualism has lengthened the time required to obtain stable employment, leading some individuals to postpone or forego marriage. In 2025, the time taken from graduation to first employment was 11.3 months on average, and for college graduates, it was 8.8 months, the longest since records began in 2006.

5) This is based on a Delphi survey conducted in September 2025 with 19 population experts.

6) Due to space limitations, this article focuses only on the top-ranked factor, “dualization of the labor market and the shortage of quality jobs.” For other ranked factors, please refer to Kim, Eun Jung et al. (2025).

Labor-market dualism, as further noted, increases the opportunity cost of marriage and childbirth in the early stages of a career, creating a structure such that it is difficult for individuals who leave the workforce due to marriage or childbirth to return to their previous jobs or to continue along their career paths. While in the past the expectation of having a stable job was centered around male spouses, now that dual-earner couples have become a widespread norm, stable employment is now widely expected of women as well in marriage considerations.

[Table 2] Expert survey: factors behind the decline in marriage (10-point scale)

Factor	Average points
1. Dualization of the labor market and shortage of quality jobs (difficulty for young people in finding employment, increase in unstable jobs, etc.)	8.26
2. Rising housing prices and increased housing cost burden	8.11
3. Changing values toward marriage (weakened perception of marriage as essential, increased acceptance of cohabitation, etc.)	7.53
4. Difficulty balancing work and family (constraints on parental leave, difficulty returning to work after career breaks, long working hours, etc.)	7.16
5. Unequal distribution of housework and caregiving labor disadvantaging women (e.g., women bearing primary childcare responsibility)	7.00
6. Strengthening preference for prioritizing career building	6.84
7. Gender discrimination in the labor market related to marriage and childbirth, and risk of career interruption (gender wage gap, discrimination in hiring and promotion, etc.)	6.79
8. Concentration in the capital region (regional gender imbalance due to increased migration of young people to metropolitan areas, etc.)	6.63
9. Increasing uncertainty about the future (economic instability, etc.)	6.58
10. Higher levels of education (increase in educational attainment such as graduate school enrollment)	5.89
11. Financial burden of marriage (wedding expenses, housing costs, etc.)	5.05

Note: 1 point (no impact at all) to 10 points (very large impact).

Source: Quoted from "Population Dynamics and Total Fertility Change", Kim, E. J. et al., 2025, Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, p. 105.



Concluding remarks

This article analyzed trends and shifting values related to marriage and examined the causes of its decline, yielding three policy implications.

First, while 43.2 percent of those willing to marry attributed their remaining unmarried to “not having found the right one”—seemingly a matter of personal choice—this may actually stem from a complex interplay of structural factors, including declining opportunities to meet potential partners and changing socioeconomic conditions. Previous research has observed that in the formation of dating relationships, individuals’ economic markers, especially men’s income and stable employment with large firms, matter greatly [Cho, Sungho, 2014; 2018]. Rising labor-market instability and widening wage gaps may constrain opportunities for relationship formation and increase mismatches in the marriage market [Kye et al., 2021]. The problem of not having found the right partner therefore should be understood more as a structural issue—reduced opportunities for relationship formation and deteriorating conditions that make marriage possible—rather than an outcome of individual choice or perception. In this light, policy interventions should do more than encourage marriage; they should aim to expand opportunities for singles to meet and ease what are considered necessary conditions for marriage.

Second, policy considerations must address the issue of housing costs and job insecurity. Jobs and income, key determinants of marriage decisions, are becoming increasingly insecure for young workers. The structure of the current labor market is such that young Koreans are increasingly removed from opportunities to access stable jobs, raising income uncertainty and delaying their transition into marriage. Prohibitive housing prices, especially in the capital region, continue to be economic barriers to marriage and family formation. Promoting marriage among young Koreans must therefore involve mending the structure of the labor market, increasing the supply of decent jobs, and reducing the burden of housing costs.

Third, while there was little difference between the 1970s- and 1980s-born cohorts in perceived necessity of marriage, the 1990s-born cohort saw marriage as much less essential. This indicates a growing generational divide in values regarding marriage and suggests the need for tailored policies. The importance of the 1990s-born cohort as a policy target is underscored by its size: those born between 1990 and 1994 (700,000) far outnumber both the late-1980s cohort (600,000) and the 2000s-born cohort (400,000-600,000) [Kang, 2025]. Tailoring support in housing, employment, and family formation to those born in the 1990s, now aged 26 to 36 as of 2026 and in their prime marriage years, would likely maximize policy impact on marriage and childbirth outcomes.

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