

# Not just later: why marriage is disappearing in South Korea

Sam Hyun Yoo | March 16, 2026



*First marriage in South Korea has declined sharply over the past three decades. This is not simply a story of later marriage. Even after accounting for delayed timing, Sam Hyun Yoo observes, fewer people are marrying at all, especially men. Pandemic disruptions briefly altered patterns, but the long-term retreat from marriage remains firmly in place.*

## **Marriage is no longer a given**

For much of the late 20th century, marriage in South Korea was close to universal and marriage functioned as the unquestioned gateway to family life. Today, that assumption no longer holds.

A growing share of adults remain unmarried well into their 30s and 40s, and the decline shows little sign of reversal. This shift matters because South Korea remains a society in which marriage and childbearing are tightly linked. Fewer than 5% of births occur outside marriage, one of the lowest shares among high-income countries. As marriage recedes, its demographic implications extend far beyond the institution itself.

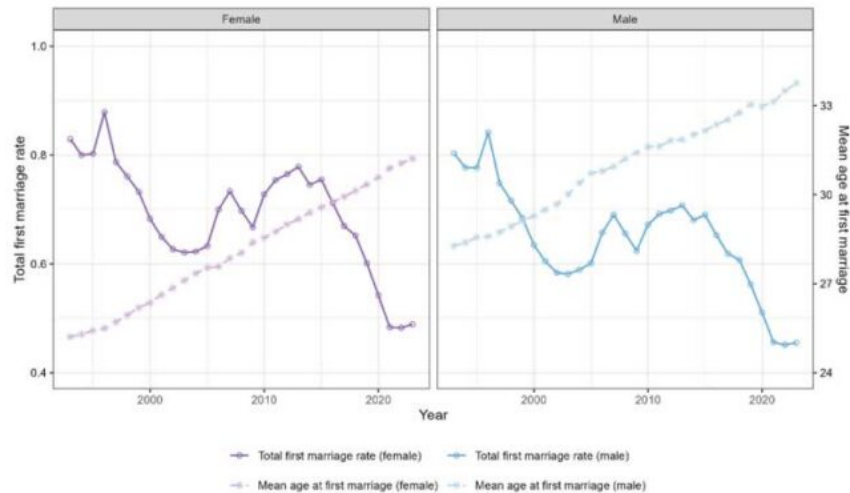
New demographic evidence tracing first-marriage patterns from 1993 to 2023 shows that Korea is not merely experiencing delayed marriage. Rather, it is undergoing a sustained retreat from marriage as a life-course institution, a transformation that began long before the COVID-19 pandemic and has continued beyond it.

## **Later marriage or fewer marriages?**

At first glance, the decline appears to be driven by postponement. The average age at first marriage has risen sharply: women now marry for the first time at around age 31, up from 25 three decades ago, while men marry at nearly 34, compared with 28 in the early 1990s. From

this perspective, marriage seems delayed rather than abandoned (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Trends in total first marriage rates and mean age at first marriage in South Korea, 1993–2023



Source: Yoo (2026), adapted from Figure 2 and 3.

But focusing on timing alone obscures a deeper shift. When we examine the proportion of adults who would ever marry if current conditions persisted, a far more consequential pattern emerges. In the early 1990s, roughly 95% of Koreans could expect to marry at least once. By the early 2020s, that figure had fallen to around two-thirds for women and even lower for men.

## The pandemic shock and its limits

The COVID-19 pandemic delivered a sharp but temporary shock to marriage behavior. First marriages fell abruptly in 2020 and 2021, followed by a modest rebound in 2022 and 2023. This raised the question of whether the pandemic marked a turning point in family formation.

The evidence suggests it did not. The pandemic primarily disrupted the *timing* of marriage rather than its underlying trajectory. Border closures caused international marriages—disproportionately involving older Korean men—to collapse almost overnight. As a result, the average age at first marriage among men temporarily stopped rising, but when restrictions eased, marriage timing resumed its previous path.

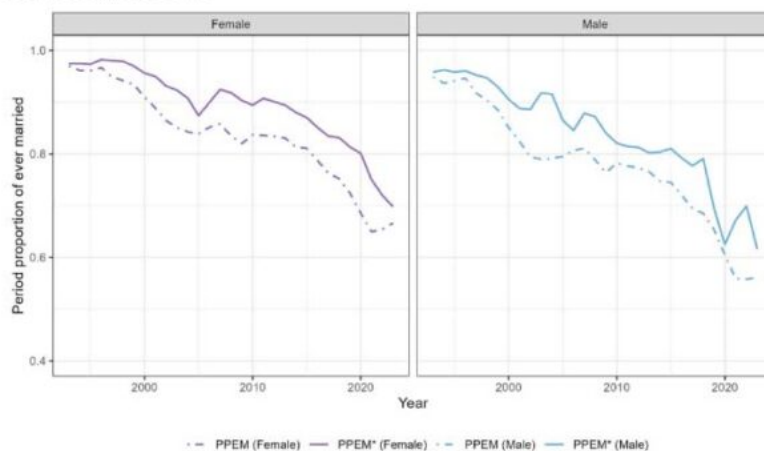
The rebound did not reverse the long-term decline: instead, the pandemic revealed how fragile marriage has become. When marriage is no longer a default life step, even short-term disruptions can leave visible demographic traces. Similar timing shocks, followed by rapid normalization, were observed in other high-income countries during the pandemic period (Sobotka et al. 2024).

## Why men are falling behind

One of the most striking features of Korea's marriage decline is its growing gender divide. Throughout the past three decades, men have consistently been less likely than women to marry for the first time. Their marriage patterns also fluctuate more sharply from year to year as male marriage is more sensitive to timing shifts, economic uncertainty, and demographic shocks.

For women, the decline is largely structural. Adjusting for later marriage timing changes little: more women are not marrying at all, rather than simply marrying later. Marriage has lost its near-universal status in the female life course (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Trends in the period proportion ever married and its tempo-adjusted measure in South Korea, 1993–2023



Note: PPEM refers to the period proportion ever married, while PPEM\* denotes PPEM adjusted for changes in the timing of first marriage.

Source: Yoo (2026), Figure 4.

This pattern echoes broader trends observed across East Asia, where men’s retreat from marriage has been especially pronounced, and men’s marriage rates have declined more steeply and unevenly than women’s (Raymo et al. 2015; Jones and Gu 2023).

Several forces likely contribute to this divergence. Economic insecurity among young and middle-aged men remains widespread, particularly outside stable employment tracks. High housing costs, long working hours, and persistent expectations surrounding the male breadwinner role further complicate marriage prospects. International marriage once offset some of these pressures, but that channel has largely dried up in recent years.

The result is a marriage landscape in which men’s entry into family life has become increasingly uncertain, while women’s retreat from marriage appears slower but no less enduring.

## Why this matters beyond marriage

The decline of marriage is not merely a cultural shift; it marks a demographic turning point. In South Korea, where childbearing still occurs overwhelmingly within marriage, population policies have often approached low fertility through the lens of marital formation. As marriage becomes less common, the demographic leverage of policies centered on marital formation weakens.

South Korea’s experience also offers lessons beyond its borders. Across East Asia, marriage remains institutionally central yet increasingly difficult to attain. When entry into marriage itself becomes less assured, family formation stalls, not simply through delayed parenthood, but also through a growing absence of children (Raymo et al. 2015).

The distinction between temporary delay and long-term retreat matters. In Korea’s case, the evidence points clearly to the latter. Marriage is no longer a near-universal institution, and the demographic consequences of that shift are already becoming visible.

## References

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