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# Fertility rates are falling in the rich world. But there are still plenty of people to go round

[Danny Dorling](#)



A slowdown in global birthrates is a problem for states such as South Korea, but not for humanity and especially women [1044 WORDS]

Sun 3 Mar 2024 08.00 GMT

‘It’s funny, but it’s dark, because we know we could be causing our own extinction.’ That was the sardonic response of one single 30-year-old South Korean, [to a BBC reporter](#),<sup>1</sup> to the data released last week that showed her country has the lowest fertility rate ever recorded. On average, women in South Korea are now having [only 0.72 children](#).<sup>2</sup> For a country to have a stable population, that number needs to be a little over 2. A little over because not all children reach mid-adulthood, anywhere in the world. In [South Korea](#), the fall in babies has occurred despite successive governments spending £226bn over the past 20 years trying to incentivise women to have more children. The BBC story focused on the trade-offs of

having a career or a family, the excessive costs of private education and the competitive misery of growing up in South Korean society. However, not once, in the 2,500-word story, did the words “inequality”, “poverty” or “destitution” appear. It might be that such words are now no longer welcomed in copy for a public broadcaster that represents Europe’s most unequal large country (by income). Or it might just be that we tend to think of these issues as being the aggregate of millions of individual choices not to have children, rather than part of a wider story.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [produces and updates income inequality statistics](#) continuously,<sup>3</sup> the latest of which reports that South Korea is the 11th most unequal country of all those that it surveys. But there is no simple correlation between economic inequality in a country and the number of children people have. Israel (10th) is fractionally more unequal than Korea, yet has a [fertility rate of 2.9](#).<sup>4</sup>

The UK is even more unequal, ranking eighth in inequality, with a fertility rate of 1.6. The USA is the fifth most unequal state in the affluent world, and yet the number of children people have there is higher, at 1.7.

Why, then, is the fertility rate in South Korea so low? [French media suggest](#) that the burden of “carrying out the brunt of household chores” is a key factor.<sup>5</sup> *Al Jazeera* [points to South Korea](#) having “one of the worst gender pay gaps” in the OECD.<sup>6</sup> Reuters [chose to highlight](#) that “Japan’s fertility rate hit a record low of 1.26 in 2022, while China recorded 1.09, also a record low.”<sup>7</sup> And the *Guardian*, a couple of weeks before the latest story broke, [reminded its readers](#) that “Britain’s birth rate is the lowest it has been in two decades”, pointing out that everything from “cultural Marxism” to “millennial narcissism” was being blamed.

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*We do not operate purely in the statistical silos of the borders of nation states*

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What no one said, and what should be said, is that we are not alone on this planet. There are eight billion of us now and yet all these stories repeatedly focus only on events going on within the richest of nations – as if the rest of us, or the rest of nature, did not exist.

The world as a whole passed the dramatic “peak baby” moment a very long time ago, in 1990. The children that those babies produced created a further peak, but it was barely any higher than that earlier one. Today, the United Nations projections show that we will not see such large peaks again. Our total numbers will, from here on, rise ever more slowly, and almost entirely because we are now living longer.

Current projections also suggest that in the year 2086, our number will fall for the first time not due to calamity. This peak human date will be a [momentous point](#) in the history of a very young species.<sup>8</sup>

It is beyond my ability to explain quite how the young women and men of the affluent world know that there are now enough of us on this planet. But clearly most know that there are enough youngsters living elsewhere that if we only stopped trying to “stop the boats”, or dog-whistling about [“poisoning the blood”](#),<sup>9</sup> there would be enough of us to go around, everywhere, for all our futures.

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*We have always expressed shock when births fall. But they have to, for humans, eventually*

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Young adults appear to know we should slow down, at least subconsciously, almost everywhere outside war zones. It is not concerns about climate disaster, artificial intelligence or any other relatively recent existential fears that are causing this. We know this because the slowdown in the number of babies being born in places such as Korea, Japan and Europe began many decades ago. We have always expressed shock when births fall. But they have to, for humans, eventually. South Korea is mostly just the extreme edge of that trend. And it is there, at that edge, because it is almost entirely urban.

We do not operate purely in the statistical silos of the borders of nation states. Our behaviour is affected by everything else happening in the world. The number of babies being born per woman has been falling almost everywhere worldwide, for many decades now; but the number of children we collectively have is enough. There are no new worlds to be populated, and we are more aware today of the implications of trying to settle others' lands than we have ever been.

In short – we are not alone. We live in crowded cities spread over a planet that hosts enough people and does not need a great deal more. We have developed social security systems that, if we are careful, should care for us in old age so we do not need the insurance of an additional child. And, above all else, women, especially in the more affluent countries, are more and more able to say no to what the government, with all their billions of pounds of incentives, might suggest.

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## Story as originally first submitted (on request) as of 1 March 2024, 1pm (1225 WORDS)

South Korea is in the news again. This week the [BBC told the story](#)<sup>1</sup> of 30 year old Yejin responding to reports of the lowest ever fertility rate recorded. She remarked: *'It's funny, but it's dark, because we know we could be causing our own extinction'*. Yejin was reacting to the fact that, on average, women in Korea were now having only 0.72 children each. For a country to have a stable population that number needs to be a little over 2.0. A little over because not all children reach mid-adulthood, anywhere in the world.

In South Korea the fall in babies has occurred despite successive governments spending £226bn over the last twenty years trying to incentivize Korean women to have more children. The BBC story focussed on the trade-offs of having a career or a family, the excessive costs of private education and the competitive misery of growing up in Korean society. However, not once, in the 2500 word long story, did the words 'inequality', 'poverty', or 'destitution' appear. It might be that such words are now no longer welcomed in copy for a public broadcaster that represents Europe's most unequal large county (by income). Or it might just be that we tend to think of these issues as being individual choices not to have children, rather than part of a wider story.

The OECD now [produces and updates](#)<sup>3</sup> inequality statistics continuously, the latest of which reports that Korea is the 11<sup>th</sup> most unequal country of all those that it surveys. But there is no simple correlation between economic inequality in a country and the number of children people have. Israel (10<sup>th</sup>) is fractionally more unequal than Korea, the UK even more unequal. We rank 8<sup>th</sup>. The USA is the 5<sup>th</sup> most unequal state in the affluent world, and yet the number of children people have there is higher. Although the American middle class long ago began to have fewer and fewer.

Some of the most equitable, liveable and happy states in the affluent world also have low numbers of children being born. These include Belgium (4<sup>th</sup> most equal), Denmark (6<sup>th</sup>) and Finland (7<sup>th</sup> and for year after year the happiest country in the world). The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) reported total fertility rates of 1.6, 1.7 and 1.5 children respectively for each country mentioned above in their [latest data](#).<sup>4</sup> Also the mean age of women at the birth of their first child is 29.5, 30.0, and 29.8. All these are fractionally lower than the mean age of women at first marriage (30, 33 and 32 respectively). Which in each case today is exactly two years younger, on average, than men are women they marry there. Marriage matters much less than it once did, but still matters.

Other women in the economically more equitable parts of Europe are having twice as many children than in South Korea. But, still nowhere near having roughly two children each.

Similarly, in Israel, the UK, and USA, the latest total fertility rates that UNECE reports are 2.9, 1.6 and 1.7 respectively. Different official estimates vary, but only slightly. It is possible to be an extremely unequal state and for women to have more children, even in those places where the upper middle class also agonise about how they will afford private education for their children and a home in a respectable area.

Many other factors matter as the statistics for Israel indicate. Importantly, the World Bank suggests a figure of 3.5 children per woman for Gaza and the West Bank as its [most recent](#) (2021) estimate, down from 6.8 in 1990.<sup>10</sup> It is possible to still have children in the most awful of circumstances, and there are times and places where circumstances are so awful that parenthood is not only the greatest experience, but also the only rewarding experience. This results in those few remaining parts of the planet where a near majority of the population are still children or very young adults.

But South Korea is far from Utopia. Why, then, is the fertility rate in South Korea so low? The [French media](#) suggest that the burden of ‘carrying out the brunt of household chores’ is a key factor.<sup>5</sup> [Aljazeera](#) point to South Korea having ‘one of the worst gender pay gaps in the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD)’.<sup>6</sup> [Reuters](#) choose to highlight that ‘Japan’s fertility rate hit a record low of 1.26 in 2022, while China recorded 1.09, also a record low.’<sup>7</sup> And the [Guardian](#), a couple of weeks before the latest story broke, reminded its readers that ‘Britain’s birthrate is the lowest it has been in two decades.’ Pointing out that everything from ‘cultural Marxism’ to ‘Millennial narcissism’ was being blamed.<sup>8</sup>

What no one said – and what I think should be said – is that we are not alone on this planet. There are eight billion of us now and yet all these stories repeatedly focus on events going on within the richest of nations – as if the rest of us, or the rest of nature, did not exist.

The world as a whole passed the most dramatic of ‘peak baby’ moment a very long time ago, in 1990. The children that those babies have gone on to produce, and so managed to create a further peak, but it was barely any higher than that earlier one. Today the UN projections are for a large peak never to be seen again.

Today the human species is rapidly aging. In the year 2086, our species is now set to fall in total numbers for the first time not due to calamity. This will be a [momentous point](#) in the history of a very young species, but something we just [do not seem able to grasp](#).<sup>11</sup> To explain why now is so different requires [drawing a few graphs](#),<sup>12</sup> and people tend not to like graphs. The graphs also show us how uncertain we are of our collective immediate future. The exact year will almost certainly not be 2086.

It is beyond my ability to explain quite how the young women and men of the affluent world know (by innate osmosis?) that there are enough of us on this planet now. But clearly most know that there are enough youngsters living elsewhere that if we only stopped trying to 'stop the boats', or 'keep the race pure', there would be enough of us to go around, *everywhere*, for our all our futures.

Young adults appear to know we should slowdown, at least subconsciously – almost everywhere outside of war zones.

Our media tell stories of individual suffering, of the heart ache of not being able to afford a child. Or, as the [Daily Mail put it last week](#),<sup>13</sup> that an annual income of £100,000 is apparently not enough to bring up a baby in Britain any more. Of course, the reason is not that. The reason has to do with what is [occurring across the whole planet](#).<sup>14</sup>

Our collective future is not decided just between the sheets in our bedrooms, or in the solitude of each our thoughts, or in our individual fears, hopes, joy and sadness.

In short – we are [not alone](#).<sup>15</sup>

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## References

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- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bQdBxfuHFU>

Emeli Sandé - You Are Not Alone

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