

# Single moms: In South Korea, adoption remains priority, but attitudes are shifting

In South Korea, societal pressure still leads most unwed mothers to give up their children for adoption. But more are keeping their kids, sparking a debate about how to offer support.

By Ben Hancock, Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor | NOVEMBER 25, 2009

Seoul, South Korea

When Kim Ji-hye rides the bus with her 7-month-old daughter, she often draws stares and overt expressions of concern for the child.

That's because Kim is only 18 – and looks it. Being a young unwed mother in South Korea means defying a set of values instilled in this society over the course of centuries.



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Kim, who asked that her real name not be used, became pregnant in her senior year in high school. Instead of having the abortion her parents demanded, she and the child's father ran away. Still, she says, "I wondered if it was going to be like everyone was saying, that after I gave birth I would have to live on the street like a bum."

The reality has not been so bleak, thanks in large part to Aeranwon, a private center that offers pre- and postnatal support and educational services. But Kim's future is uncertain. She lives with her daughter's father, but has been cut off from her family and does not qualify for state support because she is still a minor.

### Slow to change attitudes

Her plight is familiar to Korea's unwed mothers, who are slowly becoming more visible and demanding more rights. In 2007, there were nearly 8,000 births out of wedlock. About 2,300 of those children were put up for international or domestic adoption, while nearly 2,500 stayed with their mother – a sharp rise from the 472 who stayed with their mother in 1991, which saw a similar number of out-of-wedlock births.

Yet cases like Kim's are also at the heart of a debate over how best to offer support. Advocacy groups say the government should give more financial aid to allow unwed mothers to keep their children, thrive, and drive social change. But officials and adoption groups say the priority should be finding homes for kids.

One area of disagreement is just how much attitudes have changed.

Kwon Hee-jung, of the Korean Unwed Mothers Support Network, says the 1968 movie "Love Me Once Again" indicated attitudes at the time. It depicts an affair between an unmarried woman and a wealthy married man, and ends with her giving up her illegitimate son to the father's family. "Everyone cried but understood," Ms. Kwon says, "They said, 'It has to

be like that. How can a woman raise a child alone?' "

In recent decades, greater individualism has shifted Korea's Confucian value system, she says, leading to a slow change in the way unwed mothers are viewed and how they view themselves. Still, Kwon acknowledges that a stigma remains.

An opinion study early this year by the state-funded Korean Women's Development Institute revealed mixed feelings. The majority of Koreans felt unwed mothers showed poor judgment. Most were also against childbirth outside wedlock, but even more were opposed to abortion. "Right now it's changing slowly," says Kwon. "[T]he social welfare structure is not friendly. There are a lot of women who want to raise their children, but because ... discrimination is so extreme, they end up giving their child away."

#### Low domestic adoption rates

Adoptee Stephen Morrison, who founded a group promoting domestic adoption in Korea, paints a different picture. "More often than not," he says, "it's the mothers themselves who cannot live with the shame."

According to a government survey in 2005, about 38 percent of women who sent their child for adoption said they would not have done so under better financial circumstances.

The government is seeking to expand the number of state-run, single-parent support centers to 16 nationwide from the current six. But it has gotten flak for its perceived emphasis on domestic adoption.

Adoptive parents receive about \$86 per month. Unwed mothers can receive only half that, depending on income level and only if they are not already on state welfare.

Paik Soo-hyeon, an official at the Welfare Ministry, says the government is trying to provide incentives for people to raise those children that unwed mothers cannot support. Korea has one of the world's lowest birthrates, and domestic adoption has long been shunned here due to a strong emphasis on bloodlines and stigmas surrounding infertility.

South Korea has sent more than 162,000 children overseas since 1953, when the Korean War ended. Even after 1991, when it was clearly a developed democracy, the number of kids adopted domestically did not surpass those put up for international adoption until 2007 – 1,388 and 1,264 children, respectively.

#### Social pressures on mothers

Unwed-mothers advocacy groups allege that adoption agencies sometimes pressure women into giving up their children by citing social stigma, and perpetuate it in the process.

Jane Jeong Trenka, a Korean-American adoptee who has pushed for a clear record of Korea's adoption history, says women are often coerced in counseling offered by adoption agencies. Kim, the mother, says she experienced such pressure.

Adoption agencies and advocates vehemently deny such accusations.

Susan Soon-keum Cox, spokeswoman for Holt, the world's largest international adoption agency, says it's key that birth mothers understand "that they have options."

Mr. Morrison says he has "never heard of a case" of coercion.

Mr. Paik, the Welfare Ministry official, stresses that social change cannot be made through policy alone: "Asking which direction change should come from is like debating the question of the chicken or the egg. Both society and the government need to move together."

Han Sang-soo, head of the Aeranwon unwed mothers shelter, says that attitudes will only really begin to shift when people see unwed mothers can be successful.

Kim is working toward her high school diploma equivalent and hopes to become a nurse. "They don't need to worry. I have a good life," she says.