

PERSPECTIVE

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Thailand's Ageing Society and Young Thais' Changing Views and Expectations

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Patients taking part in a group exercise while waiting to see doctors at Siriraj Hospital's clinic for the elderly. Bangkok Post Photo/SEKSAN ROJJANAMETAKUL (Photo by Seksan Rojjanametakul/POST TODAY/Bangkok Post via AFP).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Thailand is facing a historically low birthrate which could negatively impact the country's economy in the near future.
- According to recent surveys, the main causes of low fertility are people's aversion to the high costs of care and pessimistic outlook on Thailand's economic and political future.
- Traditional cultural values also encourage adults and children to take care of their parents, making the working population even less likely to start families to add to their current care responsibilities. At the same time, young people are expecting that the responsibility of care will be shifting from private citizens to state-funded social welfare.
- The government's proposed solution is to increase access to fertility services. These measures are unlikely to fully reverse the trend of falling birthrates, as they do not address the root causes of the problem, namely the burden of care, and economic and political uncertainty.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most imminent problems facing Thailand today is its rapidly ageing population. Depending on measurements, Thailand is either the oldest or second oldest country in Southeast Asia, with Singapore being the other contender.¹ Thailand's birthrate has been steadily dropping for decades, hitting a record low at 1.16 children per woman in 2023.² According to the World Bank, Thailand is currently experiencing its highest age dependency ratio since 2000 at 44%.³ That same year, the Thai labour force shrank for the first time, showing a higher number of retirees (aged 60-64) than new entrants (aged 20-24).⁴ Indeed, demographer Prof. Dr. Kuea Wongboonsin estimates that if the current trend persists, Thailand's population will be halved within the next 60 years. In 2083, the projected number of children will have fallen from 10 million to 1 million, the working population will decrease from 46 million to 14 million, and the number of elderly rise from 8 million to 18 million.⁵

This would have profound negative effects on Thailand's economic outlook, from labour shortages, rising healthcare and pension costs, and falling productivity and aggregate demand. Thai scholars and economists have identified demographics as one of the factors affecting the country's slow growth.⁶ Similarly, the World Bank has forecasted that Thailand's economy will only grow 3% over the next two decades, the lowest in ASEAN, due to low levels of private investment and the ageing population.⁷

The new government under Prime Minister Sretta Thavisin has described this demographic change as a "crisis," and is proposing various health-related policies to increase fertility rates. This paper argues that these measures are insufficient to alleviate the crisis, and do not adequately address the main causes of the problem. According to surveys from 2023, major concerns behind people opting to be childless are the pessimistic outlook for Thailand's economic and political future, coupled with the high costs of care driven by cultural expectations of filial obligations. At the same time, younger generations of Thais seem to worry less than their predecessors about who would take care of them in old age, reflecting a shifting perception of familial obligations and expectations of state support. A more effective means to increase fertility rates would be for the Thai state to meet young people's higher expectations of government assistance, expand social welfare, as well as work to improve their perception of Thailand's economic and political prospects.

WHY IS FERTILITY DECLINING?

People of child-rearing age in Thailand currently are the older Gen-Z (aged 18-27) and Gen-Y or millennials (aged 28-43).

Their decision to refrain from having children is primarily driven by political and economic concerns and is closely related to their pessimistic outlook on Thailand's future.

These sentiments are clearly presented in opinion polls from late 2023. In a September survey conducted by the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), only 44% of childless adults in Thailand indicated that they want children someday. Among the 334 respondents who do not want children, the primary reasons cited by 38.32% were the reluctance to incur child-rearing expenses, and concerns about the social and political environment's

negative impact on their children. The second most common reason (37.72%) is that they do not want the burden of childcare, while 33.23% indicate a preference for maintaining their current lifestyle and personal freedom. Other respondents cite concerns about their own parenting abilities (17.66%), prioritisation of careers (13.77%), and health issues (5.39%) as contributing factors.⁸ Other scholarly studies offer similar findings: the additional costs of having a child are the main reasons young people do not want children, coupled with poor economic outlook, demanding jobs, unemployment, and the spread of COVID-19.⁹

Childcare expenses stand out as one of the most important deterrents, which is unsurprising given the extremely high cost of raising a child in Thailand. In 2022, a Bank of Thailand study showed that the cost of raising a child from birth to finishing an undergraduate degree in Thailand was roughly 1.6 million baht per person, roughly 6.3 times higher than GDP per capita.¹⁰ Furthermore, the “child penalty” on wages is significant, especially for women. While the gender wage gap in Thailand has been decreasing over the past few decades, workers with children experience salary setbacks. A 2019 study from the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce found that, on average, men and women with children respectively earn 17% and 22% less than their childless counterparts. The main reason for this is the time constraints associated with raising young children.¹¹ It is thus understandable that many young people choose not to have children, as doing so would not only increase their expenses but also negatively affect their earnings.

The other main deterrent to having a child is people’s pessimism towards Thailand’s future. This sentiment is reflected in a separate poll from December 2023 from NIDA, which surveyed Thai people on their expectations of quality of life and political landscape. Regarding political stability, 45.65% of respondents anticipate that the situation would “still be chaotic,” 28.40% predict “things to be more chaotic,” and only 14.34% responded that it would be “less chaotic.” Thai people’s outlooks on the country’s economic future are mixed, with 35.65% anticipating improvement in 2024 and 31.22% responding that the economy will “remain bad.” Similarly, while 31.98% of respondents believe that their quality of life will improve in 2024, 31.76% feel that it will “remain bad.”¹² If young people perceive bleak economic and political prospects for themselves and the nation, they will likely refrain from having children. While these data offer meaningful insights into why Thai fertility is declining, they do not paint a complete picture. There is an additional cultural factor to this demographic change.

“WHO WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU IN YOUR OLD AGE?”: A CULTURAL SHIFT

When young people say that they will remain childless, they are often asked, “Who will take care of you in your old age if you do not have children?” However, Thai youths do not seem to be concerned about this question, which signifies a shift in young people’s perception of their duties and relationship to their families, as well as their changing expectations of the state.

This question is asked with the assumption that children would take care of their parents when they grow old. It is rooted in the Asian concept of filial piety. The traditional Thai value of *katanyu katavedi* has no direct translation in English but it conveys a deeper meaning of gratitude towards parents for their sacrifice and hard work, and implies an obligation to reciprocate. It is thus a reasonable expectation of the older generation that their children be *katanyu katavedi* and care for them financially, physically, and emotionally in their old age.

It has been remarked that Thailand “got old before it got rich”; the country’s GDP per capita is far lower than that of other ageing societies in Asia like Japan and South Korea.¹³ Without readily available social security that requires a high GDP and the expectation of *katanyu katavedi*, parts of Thailand’s rapidly ageing society might not have thought about how to take care of themselves in their old age. The elderly’s plan after retirement was simply to rely on their children or the young people in their families. It is estimated that in Thailand, one working person is responsible for the care of 6 elderly people.¹⁴ This has put further financial strain on the working population and offers further insights into the findings of NIDA’s surveys. Adding expenses for children on top of these financial obligations has been almost unthinkable, making many people less likely to have children.

Furthermore, many young Thai people have started to move away from this traditional expectation. Some young people have begun questioning *katanyu katavedi*. For instance, they argue that as it was their parents’ decision to have children, they should not be obligated to repay them, causing much alarm and confusion among the older population, who in turn label such questioning as “ungrateful.”¹⁵ Furthermore, due to economic demands and competitive labour markets, many parents have had to leave their children in the care of grandparents in the countryside or babysitters in urban areas, further weakening *katanyu katavedi*. However, this does not mean that young people intend to abandon caring for their parents. Rather, much of the working population do not have the same anticipation to be cared for in their old age, lifting the obligation of *katanyu katavedi* from the children they may or may not have. This can be interpreted as the import of the Western conceptualisation of family and parental relationships, in which parents tend to encourage children to be independent, sometimes as soon as they are of legal age. Young Thais have begun to plan for their childless retirement, with options for retirement and pension plans, care homes, and elderly communities becoming more available.¹⁶ This independent retirement plan aligns with young people’s mixed outlook for Thailand’s economic and political future. They do not need to incur the financial costs of children or worry about the negative impact of society on their children, while making arrangements to take care of themselves in their old age.

Yet, the issue of *katanyu katavedi* bears more social weight than just a generational shift away about familial relationships, but also informs us of what young people expect of their societies and governments. Some have argued that *katanyu katavedi* was a means for the state or society to push the responsibility of social care to private citizens. In an ideal world, *katanyu katavedi* would not be obligated as there would be an adequate system of social care and safety net for the old, sick, and vulnerable. Indeed, while no government policy can be a substitute for loving familial relationships, it can alleviate some of the burden on the working population and perhaps encourage them to have children if their environment was emotionally less obligatory and financially less stressful.¹⁷

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING BIRTHRATES

The best approach to Thailand’s ageing demographic is for the Srettha government to alleviate care expenses, and enhance public confidence in the nation’s economic and political future. The Thai state is however promoting measures that do not engage with the root causes of the problem and which are likely to be insufficient.

The Ministry of Public Health (MOPH) has announced that increasing Thailand's fertility rate as one of its top 12 priorities and one of the "national agendas." Dr. Cholnan Srikaew of Pheu Thai Party, the Minister of Public Health, has stated that the government aims to increase the birthrate to 2.1.¹⁸

To assist in this national agenda, the government's 13th National Economic and Social Development Plan¹⁹ (2023-2027) includes three slightly vague measures to assist in this national agenda: First, to create an "enabling environment" to have children by offering financial assistance to raise and care for children. Second, to change the attitude and values of people to recognise that "all births are important," as well as to support diverse forms of family. Third, to give comprehensive support to those who decide to have children, such as fertility services and offering assistance to promote the growth and development of children.²⁰

The Thai state appears to be making progress in the latter two measures. The MOPH launched a "Give Birth, Great World" campaign and announced that it is setting up fertility clinics at public hospitals to promote having children, and offer consultancy services and infertility treatment.²¹ There are currently 800 fertility clinics in Thailand, but most are concentrated in urban areas. The MOPH aims to expand this number and establish at least one state-funded fertility clinic in every province.²² It has announced that it will provide cheaper and easier access to reproductive technology for single people who want to be parents, or couples who have trouble conceiving, such as intrauterine insemination (IUI) and in-vitro fertilisation (IVF). The government is also working on legislation to make these services available to members of the LGBTQIA+ community.²³ Thailand is on track to pass a marriage equality bill within the year, expanding the definition of "family" and making it easier for people of diverse sexualities to have children.²⁴

While these efforts are commendable, especially to make fertility services more accessible to a wider range of people, they are unlikely to reverse the trend of falling fertility rates. It is true that these services might be beneficial to certain subsets of the population, such as older individuals or those who are struggling to conceive, but the main concerns for people who decide against having children are not health related, and thus these measures do not address the causes of the fertility crisis. The government should instead focus on the first strategy of its development plan to create an "enabling environment" by alleviating some of the burden of care and improving the country's economic and political stability.

This argument has been echoed by academics. For instance, Assoc. Prof. Napaphorn Atiwanichayapong argue that "social factors in all aspects" that have accumulated for many years are now the causes for declining fertility, including political instability and a highly competitive capitalist environment that has produced a poor economic outlook. To make young people more optimistic about society and their futures, the government will need to make "comprehensive" changes to Thailand and many of its systems.²⁵

Expanding social welfare programmes and state-mandated benefits for both child and elderly care would directly address many of the deterrents to having children. In March 2024, the Thai parliament accepted a proposal to expand maternity leave to 180 days and paternity leave to 90 days. In the same session, however, it rejected a labour protection bill that would limit working hours to 40 per week, increase minimum wage to match inflation, allow for 15 days of leave

per year for familial care, and mandate that workplaces accommodate breastfeeding mothers.²⁶ Increasing the minimum wage could have been the first step towards alleviating the financial strain on the working population, as well as improve their outlook for their own well-being. Similarly, the 15-day leave especially could have helped the Thai labour force care for their aging parents and family members. After the vote, many Thai netizens expressed their frustration with the Thai state for campaigning for people to have more children but remain unwilling to expand social welfare or assist working mothers. Some even say sarcastically that “extinction” seemed like a good option if the state failed to provide necessary benefits, while others imply that not having children is an appropriate punishment for a state that cannot protect or help its people.²⁷ Thai parliament’s actions are seemingly out of step with young people’s changing perception that the state should expand social welfare to support vulnerable members of society, rather than relying on personal obligations such as *katanyu katavedi*.

Another possible avenue would be to enhance public’s confidence in Thailand’s economic and political future. As it is, the Sretta government has inherited a stagnant economy due to the COVID-19 crisis, low exports, diminished private investment, and tourism spending below initial projections.²⁸ The government is still struggling to overcome legal and political hurdles to deliver its flagship stimulus policy of giving certain Thai citizens 10,000 baht (roughly 280USD) in digital wallets.²⁹ At the same time, political tension in Thailand escalated after the coalition government was formed under Sretta.³⁰ More charges are being brought against activists and academics.³¹ Move Forward Party, the main opposition party that won the most votes in the 2023 general election, faces dissolution by the constitutional court.³² Expanding medical access is largely insufficient to increase birth rates in the face of such low levels of confidence in the economy and political instability.

CONCLUSION

Without a doubt, Thailand will face an economic crisis if the trend of falling birthrates is left unchecked. However, the Sretta government does not seem to fully grasp the root causes of this problem. Their proposed policies of making fertility care more accessible, while commendable and could make a difference to the lives of poor or LGBTQIA+ people, are largely going to be ineffective in increasing fertility to meet its current goals. The majority of people are not deciding to be childless because they have no access to fertility treatment, but because they cannot afford the additional expenses of childcare and because they feel pessimistic about their future.

Understanding the cultural context and changes in expectations towards familial relationships and the state’s obligations towards its citizens is a good first step. Poll data and academic studies all concur that expanding social welfare to assist in the costs of caring for both infants and the elderly would alleviate some of the burden borne by Thailand’s working population. The state should also work to convince young people that it can improve the Thai economy and political stability, and create a good environment for future children. Without these measures, Thailand can expect the falling fertility rate to only worsen.

ENDNOTES

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