TA Tomorrow's Affairs

Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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No easy answers as fertility plunges worldwide

The news from Japan that the number of births this year is forecast to fall to the lowest level since records began in 1899 is only the latest evidence pointing to plummeting birthrates worldwide that are causing general consternation and angst, particularly for conservatives.

Should policymakers do more to avert the plunge and get into the business of telling women how to use their bodies? Or should they make plans for economic and social adjustment, such as looking to boost migration to replace young workers and risk more populist opposition?

Statisticians say countries need 2.1 children per woman to maintain a stable population. Below this there is rising pressure on the economy through labour shortages and smaller workforces leading to lower tax revenues and higher infrastructure costs, including on health systems and the need to care for more old people.

On the plus side, there is the potential for higher wages and less pressure on the environment. What is clear is that the demographic doom talk of our planet being unable to bear the pressure of too many people is a thing of the past.

The global fertility crisis

Pro-natalist policies are being enacted around the world, including in the US, where the Make America Great Again movement is a particularly vocal proponent. Soon after Donald Trump assumed his second presidency, he proclaimed himself the "fertilisation president" saying: "We want more babies."

Across Asia, countries have been grappling with how to prevent falling birth rates for a number of years with limited to no success.

In China, the population has been falling for at least three years. After pursuing a one-child policy for more than 30 years, China has spent much of the last decade trying to induce couples to use up the state's permission to have up to three children.

The New Year started with a new 13% tax on condoms and contraceptives, but Chinese social media reacted with derision to this and also to reports that women in some areas were getting phone calls from local government officials asking about their childbearing plans.

> Most of Europe is also struggling to address declining fertility

"Today they require all women to report the time of their period, tomorrow it will be reporting the time of sexual intercourse, the day after tomorrow they'll be calling to urge intercourse during the ovulation period … [this is] mass breeding," said one social media user, according to The Guardian.

Pro-natalists view South Korea as the most alarming case study of demographic collapse. It has the world's lowest fertility rate, while its GDP per capita has fallen to fifth place in Asia despite spending nearly $300 billion since 2006 in a so-far doomed effort to boost births.

Most of Europe is also struggling to address declining fertility. In the UK, the total fertility rate fell to 1.41 children per woman in 2024, down from 1.42 in 2023, and the lowest for the third consecutive year and since records began about 90 years ago.

In September, Greece announced that more than 700 schools would close given the declining population on many islands.

Low birth rates, high political polarisation

It seems more people want to have children but do not because they cannot afford it and/or they cannot find a suitable partner, according to a survey conducted in South Korea, Thailand, Italy, Hungary, Germany, Sweden, Brazil, Mexico, the US, India, Indonesia, Morocco, South Africa, and Nigeria

- a third of the global population - by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

But the agency also warned against a "panicky" response to demographic trends. "Right now, what we're seeing is a lot of rhetoric of catastrophe, either overpopulation or shrinking population, which leads to this kind of exaggerated response, and sometimes a manipulative response," said Natalia Kanem, head of UNFPA.

Political and social divides look unlikely to simmer down in the coming year, with the incentives for baby-making remaining grim

Even Finland has not been able to reverse its declining birth rate despite its robust social infrastructure, including a high-quality education system and generous parental benefits.

Younger people still say they face difficulties in forging relationships and establishing financial stability while pursuing educational and career opportunities.

Nonetheless, experts point to France, which has about 0.3 children above the Western European average alongside tax breaks for families, baby bonuses and strong maternity employment protections.

Such state protections are anathema to right-wingers in the US, who like to focus on banning abortion, reducing subsidies for contraceptives and blaming feminist and woke over-reach.

Tech titan Elon Musk, who reportedly has up to 14 children with four different women, believes "low birth rates will end civilisation." But his critics say he is unconcerned about non-white civilisation and accuse him of pursuing eugenic policies and beliefs.

Liberals also accuse conservatives of wanting to usher in a Handmaid's Tale-like dystopia in which women are reduced to machines for making babies.

Such political polarisation appears to have a direct bearing on birth rates, with surveys in the US and Europe showing that young men are moving right as young women move left, but both groups believe shared political values are an important feature in prospective partners.

But political and social divides look unlikely to simmer down in the coming year, with the incentives for baby-making remaining grim.