

Falling total fertility rate should be welcomed, population expert says

Figures showing declining birth rates are 'cause for celebration', not alarm

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China was well known for its one-child policy, but now even there the authorities are concerned about falling fertility. Photograph: Frederic J Brown/AFP/Getty Images

Declining fertility rates around the world should be cause for celebration, not alarm, a leading expert has said, warning that the focus on boosting populations was outdated and potentially bad for women.

Recent figures revealed that, globally, women now have on average 2.4 children in their lifetime a measure known as total fertility rate (TFR). But while in some countries that figure is far higher – in Niger it is more than seven – in almost **half of countries**, including the UK, Russia and Japan, it has fallen to below two.

Such declines have been met with alarm, with some warning that the “baby bust” puts **countries at risk** of a **depopulation disaster**.

But Sarah Harper, former director of the Royal Institution and an expert on population change, working at the **University of Oxford**, said that far from igniting alarm and panic falling total fertility rates were to be embraced, and countries should not worry if their population is not growing.

Harper pointed out that artificial intelligence, migration, and a healthier old age, meant countries no longer needed booming populations to hold their own. “This idea that you need lots and lots of people to defend your country and to grow your country economically, that is really old thinking,” she said.

Having fewer children **is also undoubtedly positive** from an environmental point of view; recent research has found that having one fewer child reduces a parent’s carbon footprint by **58 tonnes of CO2 a year**.

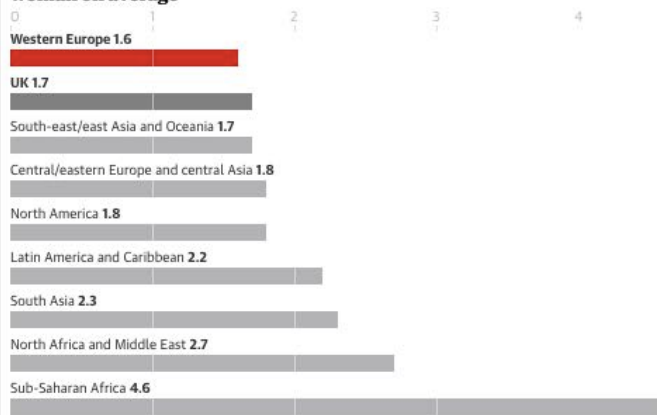
Capping our consumption, said Harper, was crucial, not least because countries in Africa and Asia, where the fastest population rises were occurring, would need a bigger share of resources if global inequality were to be curbed.

“What we should be saying is no, [a declining total fertility rate] is actually really good because we were terrified 25 years ago that maximum world population was going to be 24bn,” said Harper, who has three children herself. She said estimates now predicted the population would reach somewhere between 10bn and 12bn by the end of the century.

Declines in total fertility rate have been seen time and again after national economies develop, public health improves, and infant mortality falls, and women find themselves raising larger families. “This is a natural process,” said Harper, adding that drivers for such declines included huge strides in family planning and women’s education – with girls staying at school and entering the workforce - allowing women to delay childbearing and choose how many children to have – if any.

But there is still a ripple of alarm spreading among countries where total fertility rates have dropped below so-called replacement levels – the magic figure of 2.1.

Western Europe has the lowest total fertility rate at 1.6 children per woman on average



Guardian graphic | Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation 2017

Desperate to tackle a dearth of babies amid fears of shortages of workers and carers for the elderly, some countries have embraced incentives hoping to encourage procreation, using various methods, from **matchmaking trips in Taiwan** to advertising campaigns.

South Korea spent about **£106bn between 2006 and 2018** trying to encourage its population to reproduce, and although Italy's posters in 2016 proclaiming that "Beauty knows no age ... Fertility does" were taken down amid cries of **sexism and even echoes of fascism**, its "fertility day" remained on the calendar, with the populist government recently suggesting families could be **rewarded with land** for having children.

Even in China – famous for its former one-child policy – there are rumbles of concern, with academics recently proposing couples **could be taxed for having too few offspring**, while new hurdles are being erected to **abortion and divorce**.

But Harper said fears that declines in total fertility rate would see countries fall behind were groundless.

"A smaller number of highly educated people in the knowledge economy of Europe will vastly outweigh increasing our population because automation is going to take over many of the tasks," said Harper, pointing out that AI and robotics meant work was moving away from industrial jobs, and that effort needed to be directed towards education of the young, not boosting procreation.

Changes in the military arena, she said, also undercut fears in some countries that declines in total fertility rate could **leave them vulnerable** – concerns that appeared to be reflected in the recent rise in the maximum age for **new military recruits in Japan**. "We don't need large numbers of people for armies. Modern warfare isn't like that."

As for dealing with an ageing society, more babies would not help much there, since children also needed to be cared for and would not enter the workforce for years.

"All the evidence is, that if families, households, societies, countries have to deal with large numbers of dependants, it takes away resources that could be put into driving society, the economy etc," Harper said, adding that the "problem" of an ageing population **also needed to be reconsidered**, not least because technology to support dependants was advancing while people were staying in good health for longer. "It is much easier to enable older adults to stay upskilled and healthy and in the labour market than it is to say to women 'oh you have got to have children'."

Indeed, empowering women might do more to change a country's total fertility rate than pushing pro-natalism, said Harper, although that would not necessarily cause a baby boom. "In those societies that enable women to stay in the labour market and have children, they will go from none or one child probably up to two [per woman]." In rich societies the wealthy might opt for more.

And there was another solution: movement of people – something Harper said had helped Europe and north America cope with ageing populations, boosting economies since the second world war. In Germany women now had just 1.4 babies on average over their lifetime. "I believe that one of the reasons why Angela Merkel took the million refugees was because she desperately needed to boost her working population," said Harper.

It is a point that might enrage rightwing populists, but it is a powerful one. "Migration is that wonderful balancing act," she added.