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Reframing Low Birth Rates as an Existential Opportunity

Josephine Johnston[1,2,*]

[1] University of Otago, Dunedin New Zealand
[2] The Hastings Center, Garrison, New York, USA
* Correspondence: josephine.johnston@otago.ac.nz

Abstract: Where once overpopulation was labelled a major threat to the planet, sub-replacement birth rates are increasingly the norm. In 2020, nearly two-thirds of the world's people lived in regions with birth rates below the replacement threshold of 2.1 (representing the average number of children each woman must have for a population to replace itself in a generation). In Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, rates are especially low—0.8 in North Korea, 1.2 in Italy and Spain, and 1.6 in USA. This demographic trend is already reshaping families, neighborhoods, and nations—and is labelled by some as an "existential crisis." In this essay, I acknowledge the substantial challenges that dramatically reduced birth rates pose for individuals, communities, and nations, before suggesting that they also present an existential *opportunity*—a timely chance to reframe public discussion of demographic change and align policies and cultures for equality.

Keywords: Birth Rates, Sexism, Racism, Policy, Ethics

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1. Introduction: Population Size and Catastrophic Thinking

In 1968, the bestselling book *The Population Bomb* predicted that growth in the world's population would lead to famine and social collapse (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1968). The authors, Anne and Paul R Ehrlich, was not the first to worry about population size. Concern about both high and low birth rates dates back centuries. But Ehrlich's focus on global population, rather than on birth rates in a specific nation or group, and his framing of global population growth as a "bomb," proved especially powerful, both as counterpart to Cold War anxiety about the atom bomb and as a crisis-related frame for demographic discourse and national and international policy (Allen 2003). Among other impacts, the population bomb framing influenced decades of post-war U.S. foreign policy, which sought to tie financial and other forms of aid to population reduction goals and initiatives, even while birth rates in some target countries were already dropping (Solinger and Nakachi2016).

Yet where once overpopulation was labelled a major threat to the planet, sub-replacement birth rates are now increasingly the norm and are being met with similarly catastrophic pronouncements. In 2020, nearly two-thirds of the world's people lived in regions with fertility rates below what is considered the replacement threshold of 2.1, representing the average number of children each woman must have for a population to replace itself in a generation. In Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, fertility rates are especially low—1.2 in Italy and Spain, 1.6 in USA, and 0.7 in South Korea (CIA 2024). Only two O.E.C.D. countries —Israel and Mexico— have fertility rates at population replacement levels. Indeed, most people on earth now live in countries with below replacement birth rates.

News reports and public commentary of declining birth rates tends to be negative, using terms such as "crisis," "fear, or "threat" when describing falling birth rates (Starkand

Kohler 2001). Political leaders and other prominent figures have used explicitly existential language. In 2020, then Prime Minister of Italy Sergio Mattarella labelled the country's diminishing birth rate "a problem that concerns the very existence of our country" (Reuters 2019). In 2022, entrepreneur Elon Musk famously tweeted: "Population collapse due to low birth rates is a much bigger risk to civilization than global warming" (Christensen 2022).

2. Decreasing Birth Rates but Increasing Populations

The actual picture around population size is, unsurprisingly, more complex. Birth rates are dropping around the world, but the overall total fertility rate for the planet is 2.3, above the so-called replacement level. In addition, the world's total population continues to grow—it has risen from around 1.5 billion a century ago to over 8 billion today, and is expected to continue to increase to over 10 billion by the end of the 21st century. So, while most people live in countries with dropping birth rates and many live in countries with birth rates below 2.1, most people *also* live in countries with increasing populations. This seemingly paradoxical fact is largely a result of extremely positive worldwide trends—improved nutrition, improved public health, increased longevity, and improvements in women's rights.

Nevertheless, it is likely that these two demographic trends will eventually converge and total global population will begin to decrease, although it is unclear exactly when that will occur or how steep the decline will be. The United Nations projects that the world's population will peak in the mid-2080s, at around 10.2 billion (UN DESA 2024). Demographer Jennifer Sciubba estimates that by the end of the century "70 percent of developed countries and 65 percent of less developed countries will have shrinking populations" (Sciubba 2022). Even as we pass this peak, however, projections are for a 6% drop in the first decade or so (i.e., through the year 2100). One must therefore project well beyond the next century to find global population levels equal to the 8.2 billion we have today.

That said, it is clear that major demographic shifts have taken place, and more are likely in the future. These shifts are thought to have a variety of causes. Every country on earth now has growth in both the size and proportion of older persons in the population, which is largely understood to be the result of improvements in public health, nutrition, and medicine (WHO 2024). Decreases in birth rates have some similar drivers. In particular, advances in medicine—reliable contraception and safe abortion—have enabled many more people to choose whether and when to have children, with most choosing to have smaller families than their parents or grandparents. Decreased birth rates also have social and economic causes. There is an established link between greater access to education, particularly for girls and women, and lower birth rates (Kim 2023), as well as between improved economic opportunity for women and lower birth rates (Doepke et al 2023).

Demographers sometimes characterize these shifts in two phases. In the first phase, when living conditions and women's rights improve, women shift from having many children beginning at a young age, some of whom might die in childhood, to have having fewer children beginning at a later age, with everyone—parents and children—living longer lives (Stolnitz 2017). There is much to be celebrated about these particular trends as well, including reduced child mortality, improved maternal health, and improved human rights especially for women and girls.

During the second phase, adults move from having families of two or three children to having zero, one, or two children (Lesthaeghe2014). This second phase—characterized by increased childlessness and further decreased overall family size—appears to have a mix of causes, including individual preferences (some people are childless by choice, some wish to only have one or two children). But this phase can also be driven by less welcome factors, including inability to find a suitable partner, self-imposed reduced family size due to financial or employment concerns, and infertility (Nandagiri 2023). There is some evidence of a fertility gap in developed nations, whereby women go on to

have on average fewer children than they intended or hoped to have when they were in their early 20s, and are more often childless (Beaujouanand Berghammer2019).

As the fertility gap research suggests, decreasing birth rates result from a mix of causes—and that mix varies across time and place as people and nations respond to advances in medicine and technology, changes in human rights and reproductive autonomy, financial precarity, cultural norms, and education and employment opportunities, among other factors. The upshot is that now, in the second phase of these demographic shifts, many people around the world have access to the technological means to choose if and when to have children. Those decisions may be shaped by their own values and preferences, but also by contextual factors, many of which are beyond their individual control.

3. Demographic Shifts Present Nontrivial Challenges

Those concerned about falling birth rates are correct that current demographic shifts can have significant implications for individuals, communities, and nations. I disagree, however that the implications deserve to be labelled existential , primarily because such a label is inaccurate—the existence of humanity is not credibly threatened by falling birth rates. The existential risk framing is also unhelpful—it does not illuminate productive options, and it may even be dangerous in so far as it can feed into sexist and racist ideologies.

At the level of the individual, as already outlined above, drops in birth rates may, on the one hand, go hand and hand with, if not cause, significant improvements in health, equality, and opportunity. If individuals are having children if and when they feel ready, and are having the number of children they feel able to care and provide for, those children may be better cared for (Rubinstein et al 2020). And, as described above, reduced birth rates can indicate that some individuals who want children (or want additional children) are not able to have them, or feel that the personal cost of having children (or having additional children) is too high—that is, the number of children a person has might not reflect their values and preferences or might not be their fully autonomous choice. Infertility, involuntary childlessness, and smaller-than-hoped-for family size can have nontrivial negative impacts on the well-being of individuals and families (Fieldsend and Smith 2020). In so far as falling birth rates include individuals who have faced impediments to self-actualization, or have had their desires thwarted by biology or circumstance, such outcomes may be nontrivially negative for those individuals and possibly for their families. I take these personal-level outcomes seriously, however they are not generally the focus of those who characterise low birth rates as an existential threat.

Instead, in public discourse on falling birth rates the focus tends to be on national or global impacts. Although reduced birth rates can reduce competition for jobs and housing and reduce demands on social service and infrastructure (Nater 2023), many economies are currently structured in ways that depend on there being many more younger people in the country than older people. On these models, a significant portion of the younger people are in paid employment, making income tax contributions. Some of these younger people are also undertaking necessary paid and unpaid care work for children and older people. Increases in the proportion of nations' populations that are older adults, and decreases in the proportion that are young people in the workforce, could create a shortage of carers and cause profound reductions in financial contributions to tax revenue and pension schemes (Chapman 2022).

Beyond these economic and caregiving challenges, some express concern that falling birth rates could lead to the end of certain cultures, or, most dramatically, the end of the human race. These broader concerns are sometimes alluded to rather than explicitly spelled out—when the Italian president Sergio Mattarella said that "The fabric of our country is weakening and everything must be done to counter [low birth rates]" he did not spell out *how* the fabric or culture of Italy was weakening beyond challenges for the

country's economy. However, one can imagine several changes that he might have been thinking about. The president might have been thinking of changes in family life and the nature of family gatherings, which might now feature more older people and fewer children. Or he might have been gesturing at changes in the role of women in Italy, or changes in the ethnic make-up of Italy's population, or both—gender roles and the racial and ethnic make-up of Italy may already be quite different from fifty or a hundred years ago, and those changes may continue. Mattarella may possibly even have been imaging a more distant future in which birth rates approach zero—one where the population of Italy is halved or more greatly diminished—such that the country would be "going extinct" to borrow another of Elon Musk's phrases. However, in the case of Italy as with other low birth rate countries, such a greatly diminished national population is not imminent and would only occur if none of the policies to address changes in birth rate succeed.

These suppositions about Mattarella's concerns surface two particularly challenging ideas that are seldom expressed explicitly in public discussion of birth rates but appear to be lurking behind at least claims that low birth rates amount to an existential concern: opposition to immigration and opposition to women's rights. As explained below, immigration is one policy response to demographic change, but it can be a politically charged issue, especially if national identity is defined in ways that exclude ethnic or racial groups. Seemingly separately, not everyone celebrates the fact that more women are choosing lives for themselves that do not centre around reproduction and childrearing. Neither of these discriminatory ideas is especially novel, and in the birth rates discussion they have long been co-mingled.

In the early 1900s, declining birth rates in white populations in Australia and USA were decried as the result of unnatural and immoral choices by white women, creating the risk that white people would be outnumbered by immigrants and non-whites (Mackinnon 2019). Today, women who postpone childbearing,have one or two children, or have no children at all, might be called selfish (Graham and Layne 2020). When it is white women who are making such choices, they may be accused of being complicit in the so-called Great Replacement, a far-right conspiracy theory that white populations are being demographically and culturally replaced by non-white peoples (Brackeand Aguilar2024). Elon Musk is considered a proponent of the Great Replacement theory, as are various other prominent right-wing political and media figures around the world, including Tucker Carlson in USA, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, and Marine Le Pen in France (Rose 2022). For these figures, the concern with low birth rates is less that the human race will become extinct, than that white and or other dominant populations will decline in numbers or lose their power.

Addressing these "risks" all too easily becomes the responsibility of women. In late 2023, China's President Xi Jinping opened the country's National Women's Congress by calling for "a new childbearing culture" and encouraged female leaders to "guide women to play their role in carrying forward the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation" (Stevenson 2023). In 2024, the leaders of Japan's Conservative Party said women should be barred from universities from the age of 18, banned from marrying after the age of 25, and have their uteruses removed at 30, in order to incentivize them to marry and procreate while young, comments for which he later apologized (Muzzaffar 2024). In late 2024, the attorneys general of the U.S. states of Idaho, Kansas and Missouri argued in court that expanded abortion access was "causing a loss in potential population or potential population increase" and that "decreased births" were inflicting "a sovereign injury to the state itself" (Greenhouse 2024). All this is to say that at least some of the existential or catastrophic rhetoric around declining and low birth rates is tightly bound up with sexist and racist ideologies.

4. 4. Policy Responses to Low Birth Rates

In response to low birth rates, some countries have implemented policy initiatives that seek to add workers to the economy, including increased immigration and a raised retirement age. As witnessed in France, both of these policies can face stiff political resistance (Alderman 2023), and there is some evidence that immigrants' fertility rates decline once they move to a low fertility country suggesting that immigration merely defers the need to make economic and other adaptations (Desiderio 2020). Other policy responses include efforts to reduce welfare obligations (Cylus et al 2019), which may be considered cruel and be politically unworkable, and efforts to encourage more people already in the country to enter the paid workforce (Cooke 2006). But the other major category of policy response to low birth rates are measures to directly encourage or support childbearing. Within this category are a heterogenous collection of policies such as financially incentivising births, expanding access to childcare, improving or expanding paid parental leave, subsidizing fertility treatments, and reducing access to contraception and abortion. Some of these policies are explicitly driven by or aligned with gender equality goals, while others primarily seek to increase the birth rates of citizens regardless of the impact of such efforts on individual rights. The approaches of two European nations—Sweden and Hungary—illustrate these different approaches.

Sweden has had gender equality-focused family policies in place since the 1970. It offers parents 480 days of paid leave when a child is born or adopted—if there are two parents, each parent is entitled to 240 of those days, a split intended to encourage all parents to take the leave (in Sweden, fathers average around 30 of all paid parental leave) (Swedish Institute 2024). Thereafter, each child from the age of one year is eligible for heavily subsidized childcare until they go to school. Sweden also provides families with an allowance of SEK1,250 (€100) per month that increases for families with two or more children (SSIA 2024). Sweden's policies are explicitly driven by and measured against gender equality goals (Haas 2003).

Hungary instituted a suite of policy initiatives approximately a decade ago, under the Orbán Government, and now spends around 5 percent of its national GDP on measures aimed at increasing birth rates. For example, taxable income is reduced by approximately 67,000 HUF (€160) per month per child, and women who have four or more children receive a lifetime exemption from paying income tax. Some of these new policies are explicitly for married couples, including a cash allowance of 33,335 HUF (€80) per month for couples in their first two years of marriage (NTCA 2024), as well as housing loans that are written off of the couple goes on to have at least three children. First-time homebuyers with children receive financial assistance of up to 15 million HUK (€36,000) depending on how many children they have (Nandagiri 2023).In 2020, the Hungarian government brought the country's fertility clinics under government control due to their "strategic importance" (BBC2020). Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, is an outspoken critic of immigration and has explicitly contrasted his government's support of heterosexual marriage and childbirth to other countries' immigration policies, stating in 2019: "There are fewer and fewer children born in Europe. For the West, the answer (to that challenge) is immigration. … But we do not need numbers. We need Hungarian children"(Reuters 2019).

Hungary's policies have been moderately successful at addressing declining birth rates. Hungary has gone from a fertility rate of 1.2 in 2011 to 1.5 in 2022, but it has not risen to the government's target of 2.1 births per woman. In addition, it is not clear whether the gains will be sustained, with some scholars suggesting that couples may simply be choosing to have the same number of children that they would have had without the policies, simply earlier in their marriage, thereby creating a bump in births following the new policies (Berdeand Drabancz2022). One scholar characterized Hungary's new policies as not particularly successful in boosting the birth rate, but noted that those same policies "have exacerbated women's paid and unpaid work burden and deepened gender inequalities while strengthening anti-liberal political rule" (Fodor 2022). In the decades since Sweden began its gender equality-focused policies, the

country's birth rate has moved up and down between 1.45 and 2.1, with the government projecting the fertility rate to stay at around 1.8 in the next decade (Statistics Sweden 2024). It is notable that Sweden consistently ranks first for gender equality in the European Union, while in 2024 Hungary ranked 26th, second only to Romania (EIGE 2024). These very different examples illustrate how racist and sexist ideologies can be bound up with—or decoupled from—policies in support of childbearing.

5. Conclusion: An Existential Opportunity?

Despite the sometimes substantial challenges that reduced birth rates can pose for individual nations' economies, they do not warrant the existential threat label. Nor does this type of catastrophic framing help to illuminate the complex and varying causes of lower birth rates or facilitate productive public discussion about how best to respond. If anything, catastrophic language invites policies and other changes that override individual rights in favour of 'saving the human race'. It is worth repeating that reduced birth rates are largely the result of *improvements* in health and human rights—and it may well be that a society can flourish without meeting the replacement fertility rate of 2.1 birth per woman.

If anything, a focus on birth rates might instead represent an existential opportunity. First, because the birth rates discussion provides an opportunity to move away from a fixation on replacement fertility and towards alternative measures of health and well-being. Two countries can have very similar birth rates but very different measures of health and well-being, freedom and equality. In some countries, close examination of the causes of birth rates reveals barriers to childbearing that negatively impact well-being and drive inequality. Addressing these factors may or may not raise the birth rate, but could dramatically improve the lives of anyone who lives in that country. Financial barriers to childbearing can be moderated, if not alleviated altogether, and gender and other forms of equality can be a target of policy and societal reform (Skirbekk 2022). It is telling that investigations of low birth rates in South Korea and Italy have pointed to stubborn gender norms as a major factor discouraging women from combining career and family (Nandagiri 2023). Addressing these barriers to childbearing could radically improve lives, while failing to do so misses an valuable—perhaps even existential—opportunity.

The 2023 State of World Population Report from the United Nation's Fund for Population found that too often, "efforts to influence fertility are associated with diminished levels of human freedom (Nandagiri 2023).The Report advocates both abandoning total replacement fertility as a goal of national and international policy and strengthening commitments to equality and freedom, including as laid out in reproductive justice approaches. On such an approach, a nation pursues the dual priorities of adapting to demographic change while also supporting people to have children if and when they wish. Such a nation would emphasize its measures of work-life balance, happiness, and gender equality, rather than its birth rate. A low or declining birth rate might be unremarkable, while declining reproductive freedom or declining gender or intergenerational equality would be cause for great concern. De-prioritizing the birth rate can also make room for a variety of adaptive strategies from elder care technologies to tax and pension reforms. This more flexible, less dogmatic approach enables a nation to embrace opportunities to address causes of inequality, undo barriers to childbearing, and innovate in policy and technology.

Care is needed in scholarly and public discussion of birth rates. Past and current tendencies to blame and stigmatize women for their reproductive choices, and the racist and eugenicist under (and over-) tones in some discussions of both birth rates and immigration, show how much is at stake in these discussions. It is too easy in describing the causes of reductions in birth rates to demonize positive developments like contraception, abortion, education of women, and self-determination—it is not a *problem* that girls are educated and that women have a choice about whether to marry, who to

marry, whether to get pregnant, and whether to have a child. Existential threat and other catastrophizing language can lead to an overemphasis on birth rates, while overlooking or ignoring reproductive and other rights, potentially sliding into sexist and racist ideologies. Let us look instead for *opportunities* to improve gender and other forms of equality and to promote reproductive and other forms of justice.

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