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Europeans make love but not babies

As Europe's population ages, understanding the causes of declining birth rates becomes more important.

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When demography expert Daniele Vignoli asked young couples for their thoughts about having children, a theme emerged: uncertainty about the future.

In an experiment that Vignoli conducted in Italy and Norway in 2019, he showed a total of 800 couples in their 20s and 30s newspaper headlines about the economy. His aim was to explore how negative media coverage might be affecting people's choices about when, or whether, to have a baby.

Vanishing youth

Some of the 1 600 participants told him that their own economic difficulties – specifically a lack of work or access to housing – meant they felt unable to have a child. Others described an increase in general anxieties about the state of the world.

‘Our results showed very clearly that fertility is affected by uncertain narratives of the future,’ said Vignoli, a professor of demography at the University of Florence in Italy.

He leads a project that received EU funding to explore how fertility across Europe is changing and being shaped by multiple anxieties in people. Called EU-FER, the six-year initiative is due to wrap up in August 2023.

Angst about the future is causing more and more people in Europe to delay having a child or to decide against having any at all, according to Vignoli.

In the 1960s, Italians had 2.4 children on average. Today they have 1.25, below the EU average of 1.53. In Italy, the average age at which women have their first child is 31.6 years – among the oldest in Europe.

These figures are below what demographers term “replacement level” – the average number of births required to keep the population size stable in the absence of migration.

In 2022, more than half of Europe’s population was older than 44.4 years and more than a fifth was over 65.

‘Ageing doesn’t just mean having an increasing share of the elderly,’ said Vignoli. ‘Ageing also means having fewer and fewer younger people around.’

Economic shocks

Young people are growing up in a world buffeted by disruptions that range from rapid technological changes and worsening climate change to widespread air, sea and soil pollution and geopolitical conflict among nuclear-armed powers.

A particular point of interest for the EU-FER researchers has been the effect on European birth rates of the 2007-2008 global financial crash.

Whereas previous economic shocks such as the oil crisis of 1973 caused a temporary dip in fertility, the 2007-2008 banking meltdown was different because birth rates continued to decline even after the economy started growing again, according to Vignoli.

He believes the turbulence a decade and a half ago marks the point at which people’s uncertainty about the future began to take hold.

The disquiet has been accentuated since then by the Covid-19 pandemic that struck in 2020 and triggered a severe global recession, according to Vignoli.

‘The economic shock of the pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis have further deepened the effects on fertility,’ he said.

Although total births in the EU rose slightly in 2021 from a record low in 2020, Vignoli expects overall fertility rates in Europe to continue to fall in the coming years.

In the view of Dr Anna Matysiak, an expert in employment and family dynamics, increased automation in the labour market has further contributed to reducing fertility in Europe.

‘Workplace changes have significant implications for fertility as they cause uncertainties,’ she said. ‘But also the need to reskill and adjust takes away from the time people could spend on childbearing and childrearing.’

Matysiak, an associate professor at the Faculty of Economic Sciences of the University of Warsaw in Poland, is coordinating another project – LABFER – that received EU funding to assess how fertility is affected by such job-market trends as greater automation and flexible work hours.

The five-year project runs through September 2025.

Job angst

The research so far has shown that people in occupations that feature labour-replacing technologies, including in Germany, Italy and Sweden, are more likely to delay having children.

Structural labour-market changes like automation fundamentally alter the nature of jobs and even destroy some of them, requiring people to retrain and venture into new areas, according to Matysiak.

Changes like these can destabilise family life, even in countries such as Sweden and Norway with highly regulated labour markets. Matysiak's analysis for Sweden has shown that couples who faced such challenges at work were also more likely to divorce.

In general, manual workers are the most exposed to labour-replacing technologies and, as a result, have become more restrained in their decisions about creating a family, according to Matysiak.

There's an inverse social effect with regard to flexible working.

While working from home has become much more common since Covid-19, the beneficiaries tend to be people in highly skilled jobs. Once again, manual workers find themselves at a disadvantage.

On a positive note when it comes to expanding families, increased work flexibility may be associated with couples choosing to have more than one child, according to Matysiak.

On the other hand, policies such as greater flexibility put in place to support working parents haven't brought forward the age at which people have their first child.

'We assumed that it would have an effect, but couples are not necessarily having children earlier as a result,' Matysiak said.

Action time

She and Vignoli believe the effect of uncertainty on birth rates will only increase in the years ahead, especially as artificial intelligence in the workplace becomes more prevalent.

Both researchers also think that couples will need more governmental support at work and home to bolster their confidence in starting or expanding a family.

According to Matysiak, policies are much needed to help people stay in the labour market. These include better access to counselling and training.

Matysiak also argues for new rules to protect workers from long hours and prevent spillovers from paid work into family life.

In any case, as Europe's population ages and increasingly relies on younger generations, a continuing trend of declining birth rates would ultimately create uncertainties for all.

'Demography defines our past, but it also sets our future,' said Vignoli.

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- LABFER
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