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Low Birth Rates in the Contemporary World: Structural Causes, Social Consequences, and Policy Responses

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***Abstract*: Low birth rates have become a major demographic issue in many regions of the world. Although global fertility remains slightly above replacement level, many high-income and middle-income societies now have fertility rates far below the replacement level of about 2.1 births per woman. Recent evidence shows that declining fertility is no longer only a European or East Asian issue; it is increasingly visible in parts of Latin America, North America, and upper-middle-income economies. This article examines the causes and consequences of low birth rates through a review of recent literature from 2015 to 2026. The study uses a qualitative literature-review method and secondary demographic data from international organizations and peer-reviewed studies. The results show that low birth rates are shaped by delayed marriage, delayed parenthood, economic insecurity, high housing and childcare costs, gender inequality in care work, work–family conflict, uncertainty about the future, and changing values about family life. The discussion argues that governments should avoid simple "baby bonus" solutions and instead develop long-term family-support systems, including affordable childcare, gender-equal parental leave, stable employment, housing support, and flexible workplaces.**

***Keywords*: Low birth rate, fertility decline, demographic change, ageing society, family policy, gender equality, economic uncertainty.**

1. Introduction

Low birth rates are now one of the most important demographic challenges in the world. The replacement fertility level in many developed societies is usually estimated at around 2.1 births per woman. However, many countries are now far below that level. The OECD reported that the average fertility rate across OECD countries fell from 3.3 children per woman in 1960 to 1.5 in 2022, showing a long-term decline across advanced economies (OECD, 2024). The United Nations also reported that the global total fertility rate has continued to fall, with the 2024 estimate around 2.2 births per woman, only slightly above replacement level globally (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UN DESA], 2025).

The low-birth-rate issue is especially serious in East Asia and Europe, but it is no longer limited to these regions. The Global Burden of Disease 2021 fertility study found that fertility has declined dramatically across most countries and projected that many more countries will fall below replacement fertility by the middle of the twenty-first century (GBD 2021 Fertility and Forecasting Collaborators, 2024). The United Nations World Population Prospects 2024 also shows that population ageing and slowing population growth are becoming central global issues (UN DESA, 2024).

At the same time, recent discussions have challenged the idea that low birth rates are simply caused by people "not wanting children." UNFPA's 2025 report argues that the real fertility crisis is not only low fertility itself, but the gap between the number of children people wants and the number they feel able to have (UNFPA, 2025). This means that many people may still want children, but feel blocked by money problems, unstable work, high housing costs, lack of childcare, gender inequality, or fear about the future.

Therefore, this article asks the following research questions:

What are the main social, economic, and policy-related factors behind low birth rates in the contemporary world, and what responses are most likely to help people realize their desired family size?

A. Global Fertility Decline

Fertility decline is closely connected to modernization, urbanization, female education, contraception, and changes in family expectations. Earlier demographic-transition theories explained fertility decline because of lower child mortality, higher education, and economic development. However, recent studies show that today's low fertility is more complex. In many wealthy societies, people are not having fewer children only because of development; they are also having fewer children because the social and economic conditions for raising children have become more difficult (Doepke et al., 2023).

The GBD 2021 fertility study found that fertility decline is a worldwide process, though the timing and speed differ across regions (GBD 2021 Fertility and Forecasting Collaborators, 2024). Europe, East Asia, North America, and many high-income economies are already below replacement fertility, while many countries in sub-Saharan Africa still have higher fertility. However, even in high-fertility regions, fertility rates

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are generally moving downward over time (UN DESA, 2024).

B. Economic Insecurity and Delayed Family Formation

A major explanation for low birth rates is economic insecurity. Young adults in many countries face unstable jobs, high living costs, student debt, and difficulty buying or renting suitable housing. These pressures delay marriage, delay parenthood, and reduce the number of children people eventually have. Vignoli et al. (2020) argue that fertility decisions are shaped not only by objective economic conditions, but also by people's "narratives" about the future. If young adults imagine the future as unstable or risky, they may postpone or avoid childbearing.

Recent studies also show that subjective economic uncertainty affects whether people can realize their fertility intentions. Lappegård et al. (2025) found that economic uncertainty may reduce the chance that fertility intentions become actual births. This is important because many people still express a desire to have children but cannot act on that desire when their economic situation feels unsafe.

C. Gender Equality and Work–Family Conflict

Gender equality is another central issue. In the past, fertility was often higher in societies where women had fewer education and work opportunities. Today, however, many low-fertility societies face a different problem: women are expected to work like men but still do more unpaid childcare and housework. This creates a "double burden" for women and makes childbearing costly in terms of career, income, time, and personal freedom.

Goldscheider et al. (2015) argue that fertility may recover only when gender equality develops both in public life and private family life. In other words, women's education and employment alone are not enough. Men also need to share childcare and housework more equally. Anderson and Kohler (2015) similarly connect very low fertility with incomplete gender equality. When women gain opportunities in education and employment, but family systems remain traditional, fertility may fall.

D. Postponement of Marriage and Parenthood

Another major pattern is postponement. In many countries, people are marrying later, forming stable partnerships later, and having their first child later. This reduces completed fertility because biological limits, partnership instability, and life-course uncertainty can prevent people from having the number of children they originally wanted. Beaujouan and Berghammer (2019) show that the gap between intended and completed fertility is strongly connected to late parenthood and unrealized fertility.

Kocourková et al. (2021) also found that delayed childbearing can make it harder for people to realize their fertility intentions. Similarly, Slabá et al. (2024) discuss the "fertility timing gap," meaning the difference between when people plan to have children and when they do. A small delay may not matter, but repeated delays can lead to fewer children or involuntary childlessness.

E. Childcare, Housing, and the Cost of Raising Children

The cost of raising children has become a major reason for low birth rates. These costs include not only food, clothes, and school fees, but also housing, private tutoring, childcare, healthcare, and lost income from reduced work hours. In many urban societies, young adults may feel that having children requires a level of financial security that is difficult to reach.

OECD (2024) emphasizes that childcare, parental leave, housing, and work flexibility are central parts of fertility-related policy. Sobotka et al. (2019) argue that family policies can help fertility, but only when they reduce real constraints on parents' daily lives. Simple cash payments may help in the short term, but they are usually not enough to reverse long-term fertility decline.

F. Fertility Intentions and Unrealized Fertility

Low fertility should not be understood only as a matter of personal preference. UNFPA (2025) argues that many people are unable to have the families they want. Yeatman et al. (2025) describe this problem as "unrealized fertility," meaning a gap between reproductive goals and actual outcomes. This gap can be caused by infertility, delayed partnership, lack of financial security, gender inequality, or lack of social support.

Spéder et al. (2024) also show that fertility intentions are not always realized. People may say they want a child soon, but later fail to do so because of unstable work, relationship problems, housing issues, or changing circumstances. Therefore, studying fertility intentions is important because it shows whether low birth rates reflect free choice or blocked choice.

G. Climate Change and Future Anxiety

Recent research also connects fertility intentions with environmental and future-related anxiety. Puglisi et al. (2025) found that climate-change concerns may be linked to lower fertility intentions. Bisi et al. (2024) also found that pessimistic climate-change scenarios can reduce fertility desires. These studies do not mean climate anxiety is the only or main cause of low fertility, but they show that young people's decisions about children are affected by wider feelings of uncertainty.

H. Policy Responses to Low Fertility

Many governments have tried to raise fertility through cash bonuses, tax benefits, housing support, parental leave, and childcare expansion. However, the literature generally suggests that no single policy can quickly restore fertility to replacement level. Bokun et al. (2024), studying Poland's cash-transfer program, show that cash policies may have limited or temporary fertility effects. Sobotka et al. (2019) argue that the most effective policies are usually long-term, stable, and designed to reduce the everyday difficulties of combining work and family.

2. Materials and Methods

This article uses a qualitative literature-review method supported by secondary demographic data. The purpose is not to collect new survey data, but to synthesize recent research on

low birth rates from 2015 to 2026.

The sources were selected according to four criteria. First, the source had to be published between 2015 and 2026. Second, it had to focus on fertility decline, low birth rates, fertility intentions, family policy, gender equality, economic uncertainty, or population ageing. Third, priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles and major international reports from organizations such as the United Nations, OECD, and UNFPA. Fourth, the selected literature had to help explain either the causes, consequences, or policy responses related to low fertility.

The analysis followed a thematic review approach. The selected studies were read and grouped into major themes: global fertility trends, economic insecurity, gender equality, delayed parenthood, cost of childrearing, fertility intentions, climate anxiety, and policy responses. After grouping the literature, the article compared the findings across regions and identified common patterns.

3. Results and Discussion

A. Low Birth Rates are Now a Global Issue, Not Only a Regional Issue

The first major result is that low birth rates are no longer only a problem in a few countries. Fertility decline is visible across many regions. OECD countries have already reached very low fertility levels, with an average of 1.5 births per woman in 2022 (OECD, 2024). The UN's global estimate for 2024 was around 2.2 births per woman, showing that the world is moving closer to replacement-level fertility (UN DESA, 2025).

The literature also shows that some countries have reached "lowest-low fertility," usually meaning fertility around or below 1.3 births per woman. East Asian societies such as South Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore are often discussed in this context. Parts of Southern and Eastern Europe also show very low fertility patterns. Latin America is also changing quickly. Cabella et al. (2024) show that Uruguay's fertility rate fell sharply from about 2.0 in 2015 to around 1.37 in 2021, showing that very low fertility is spreading beyond Europe and East Asia.

B. Economic Insecurity is a Strong Barrier to Childbearing

The second result is that economic insecurity strongly affects fertility. Many young adults delay marriage or parenthood because they do not feel financially ready. Stable employment, affordable housing, and predictable income are important conditions for family formation. When these conditions are missing, people may postpone childbearing even if they want children. This finding is supported by Vignoli et al. (2020), who argue that people's future expectations shape fertility decisions. Lappegård et al. (2025) also show that uncertainty affects whether people realize fertility intentions. In short, fertility decline is not only about income level. It is also about whether people believe their future is stable enough to raise children.

C. Gender Inequality Inside the Family Lowers Fertility

The third result is that incomplete gender equality contributes to low fertility. In many societies, women have more education and stronger career goals than before, but unpaid care work remains unequally shared. This means that motherhood can still create a major career penalty. As a result, many women delay or avoid childbearing because they expect that children will reduce their freedom, income, or professional development.

Goldscheider et al. (2015) and Anderson and Kohler (2015) both suggest that fertility may be especially low when gender equality develops in schools and workplaces but not inside the home. Therefore, low birth rates are not caused by gender equality itself. Rather, they are often caused by incomplete gender equality.

D. Delayed Parenthood Increases Unrealized Fertility

The fourth result is that delayed parenthood creates a gap between desired and actual fertility. Many people still want children, but they wait until they finish education, find stable work, buy a home, or find a suitable partner. These delays can accumulate. By the time people feel ready, they may face biological limits, partnership problems, infertility, or reduced desire for larger families.

Beaujouan and Berghammer (2019), Kocourková et al. (2021), and Slabá et al. (2024) all show that delayed childbearing can reduce completed fertility. This does not mean that people should be pressured to have children earlier. Instead, it means that societies need to make family formation more compatible with education, work, housing, and personal development.

E. Cash Incentives Alone are Not Enough

The fifth result is that simple financial incentives usually have limited effects. Governments often try to raise fertility with baby bonuses, tax benefits, or direct cash payments. These policies may help some families, but the literature suggests that they rarely solve deeper problems. Bokun et al. (2024) show that Poland's cash-transfer policy had limited fertility effects. Sobotka et al. (2019) also argue that family policy must be broad, stable, and long-term.

The strongest policy direction is not simply "pay people to have babies." Instead, governments need to reduce the real burdens of parenting. This includes affordable childcare, parental leave for both mothers and fathers, secure employment, housing support, flexible work, and protection against workplace discrimination.

F. Low Birth Rates Create Long-Term Social and Economic Challenges

The sixth result is that low birth rates affect the whole society. Over time, fewer births lead to population ageing, smaller school-age populations, shrinking workforces, and higher pressure on pension and healthcare systems. UNFPA reports that the global share of people aged 65 and above rose from 5.5% in 1974 to 10.3% in 2024 and is projected to rise further by 2074 (UNFPA, 2024).

However, the literature also warns against treating low fertility only as a crisis. Kravdal (2025) argues that the consequences of low fertility are complex. Lower fertility can reduce some pressures, such as education costs and environmental pressure, but it can also increase ageing-related

burdens. Therefore, societies need both fertility-support policies and adaptation policies.

4. Discussion

The findings show that low birth rates are caused by a combination of structural and personal factors. It is too simple to say that people today are selfish, anti-family, or uninterested in children. Many people still want children, but they face barriers that make family life difficult. These barriers include unstable work, high housing costs, expensive childcare, gender-unequal care responsibilities, delayed partnerships, and anxiety about the future.

One important implication is that governments should move away from narrow pronatalist thinking. Policies that only aim to increase the number of births may ignore people's rights and real needs. UNFPA (2025) warns that fertility policy should focus on reproductive choice, not pressure. This means that the goal should not be to force people to have more children. The goal should be to help people have the number of children they want.

Another implication is that gender equality must be treated as part of fertility policy. If women are expected to carry most childcare responsibilities, fertility is likely to remain low. Countries that want to support family formation need to encourage fathers' involvement, reduce motherhood penalties, and create workplaces where parenting is normal for both men and women.

The discussion also suggests that family policy must be long-term. Fertility decisions are not made only at the moment of birth. They are shaped years earlier by education, job security, housing, relationships, and expectations about the future. Therefore, short-term baby bonuses are unlikely to solve the problem. More useful policies include affordable childcare from infancy, paid parental leave, flexible working hours, housing support for young adults, protection for pregnant workers, and social respect for caregiving.

Finally, societies must also adapt to lower fertility. Even strong family policies may not bring fertility back to replacement level. Governments should prepare for ageing populations by reforming pension systems, supporting healthy ageing, improving productivity, using technology carefully, and creating communities that support both children and older adults.

In conclusion, low birth rates are not simply a demographic problem. They are a social signal. They show that many societies have made it difficult for young people to build stable adult lives and raise children. A serious response to low fertility must therefore be broader than fertility policy. It must also be housing policy, labor policy, gender-equality policy, childcare policy, and youth policy.

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