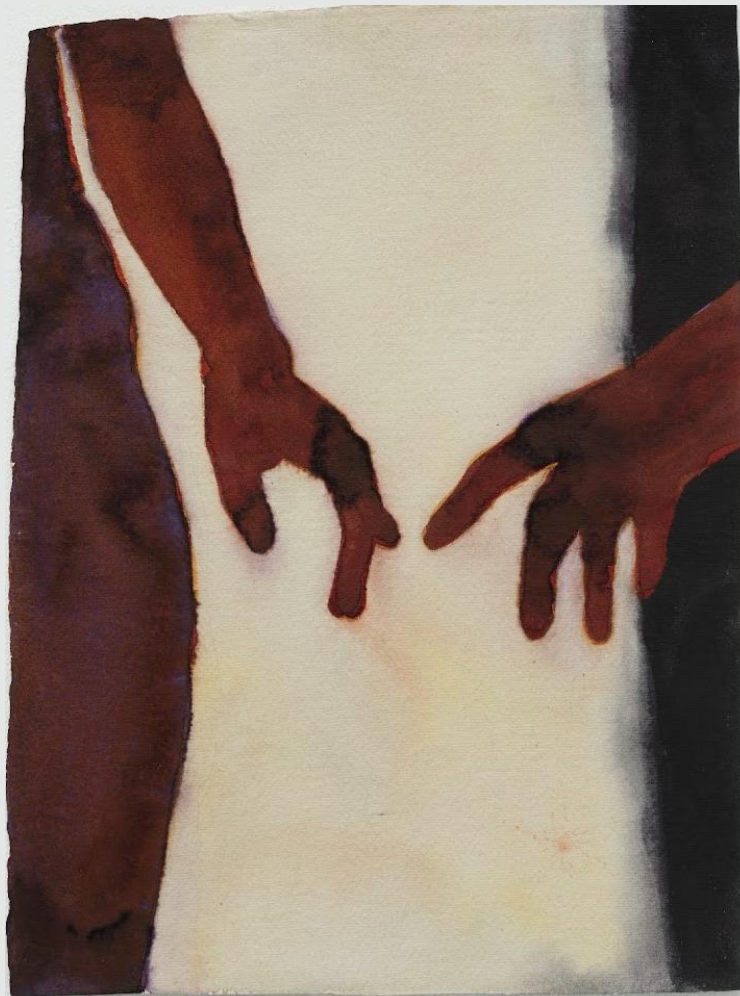




Reproductive Autonomy in Public Policy

Responding to the Real Fertility Crisis

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Editor of *State of World Population 2025*

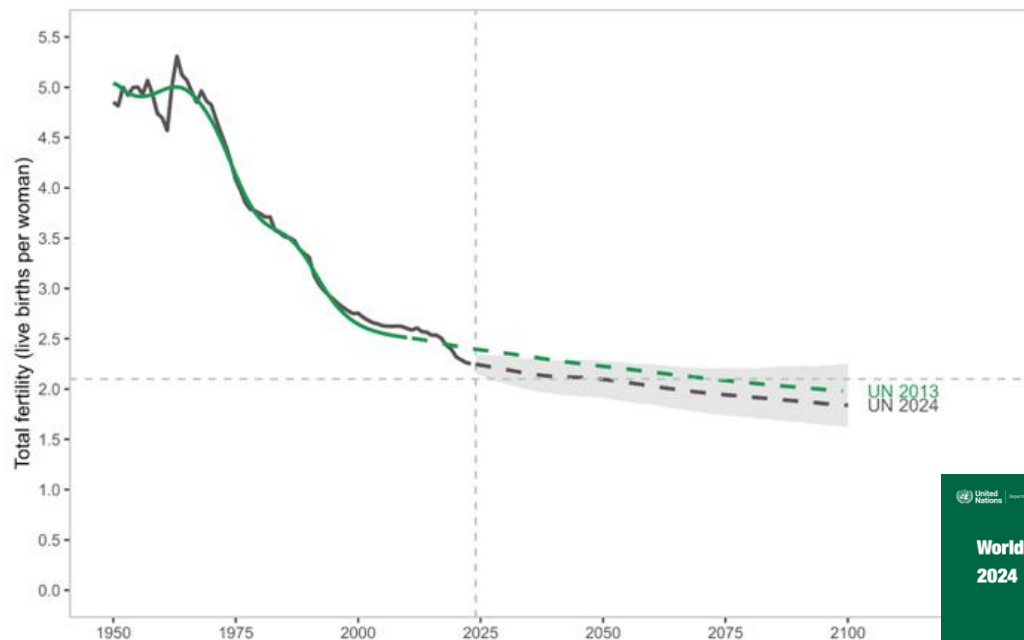




UNFPA's 2023 message: *Do not be alarmed.*
Some responses: *We are alarmed!*

Figure 1.1

Global total fertility, according to United Nations (*World Population Prospects*) in 2013 and 2024, 1950–2100



No sex, no babies: South Korea's emerging feminists reject marriage

Dutch birthrate falls as more young women say no to motherhood

Single by choice: India's women reject marriage in their millions, but society hasn't caught up

'Any woman who says she's happy to be childless is a liar or a fool'

Italian women are eschewing motherhood as Italy's birth rate plunges to one of Europe's lowest

The Kenyans saying no to motherhood and yes to sterilisation

Latin American women opt against motherhood in shift from traditional gender roles

Women on Reproductive Strike

No sex. No dating. No marriage. No children. Interest grows in 4B movement to swear off men

Craving Freedom, Japan's Women Opt Out of Marriage

Two academics have argued that the "harmful over-consumption of schooling" is responsible for the plummeting birth rate across the U.S.

Italy moves to pass law allowing antiabortion groups inside clinics

Study finds higher maternal mortality rates in states with more abortion restrictions

Republican Candidate Proposes Forcing Migrant Women to Marry American Men

Russia bans 'child-free propaganda' to try to boost birth rate

‘A dark day’ as Poland rolls back reproductive rights

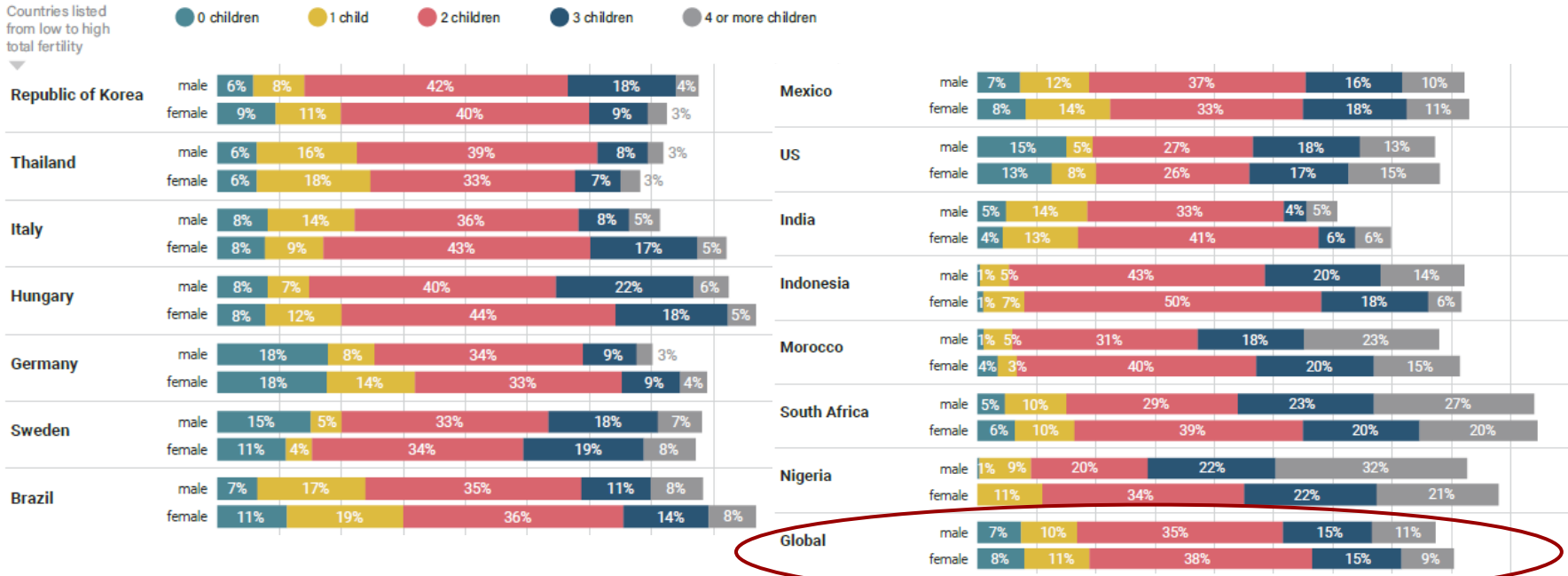
Women demand removal of husband's consent requirement for sterilization

Iran doubles down on abortion and contraception restrictions

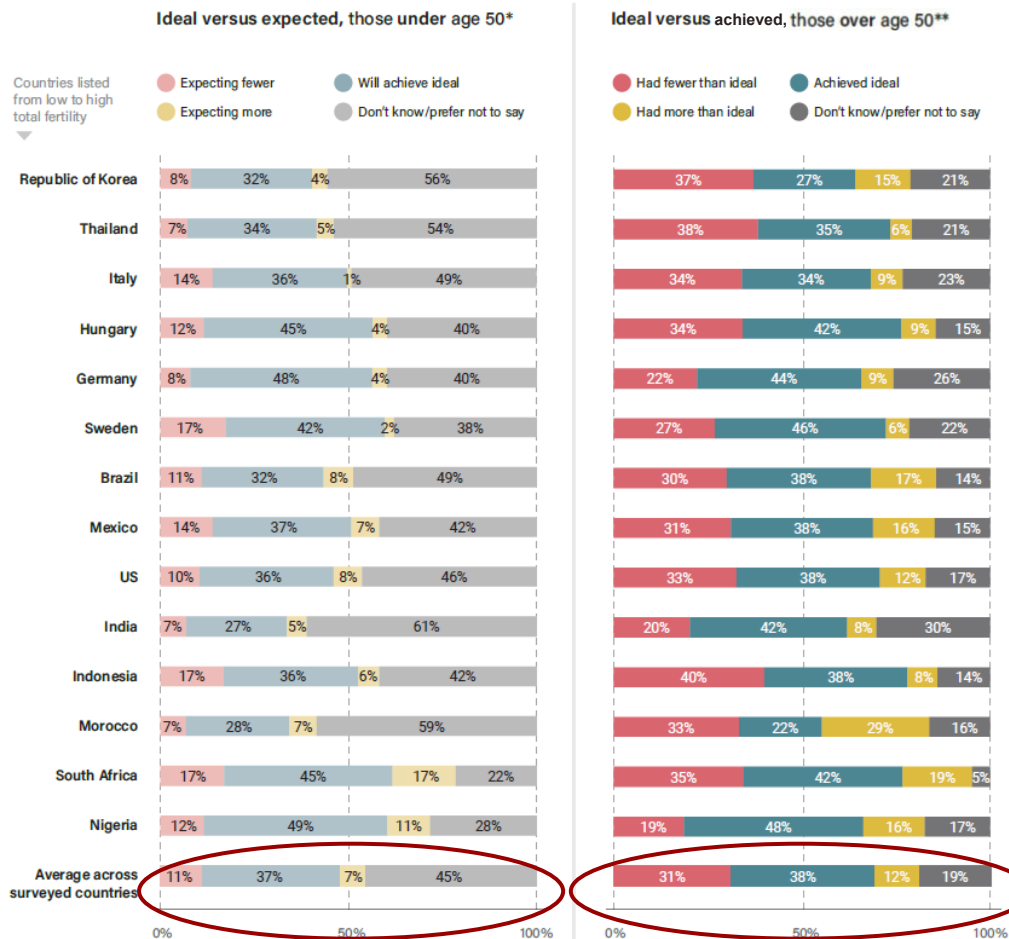
More people are opting to get sterilized — and some are being turned away

7 countries offering financial incentives for marrying their women

Respondents' ideal number of children, by country

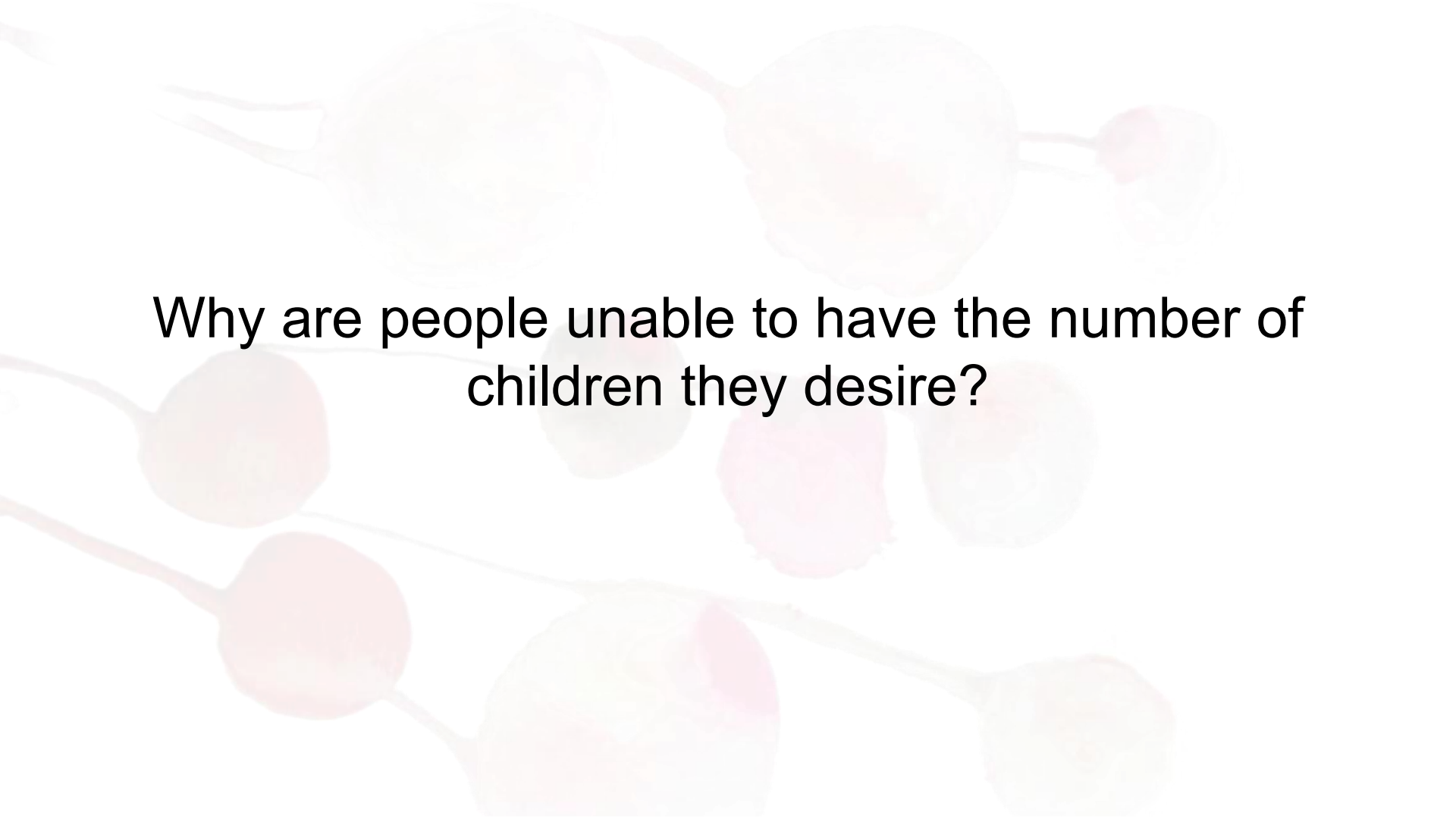


Difference between respondents' ideal and expected/achieved number of children





Revealing the real crisis



Why are people unable to have the number of
children they desire?

Barriers to having children

Survey responses to the question: "In your personal situation, what factors have led or are likely to lead you to have fewer children than you initially desired?"

Countries listed from low to high total fertility ▼	Health			Economic				Desires changed/ influenced		Concerns over future		Other factors		
	Infertility or difficulty conceiving	Barriers to fertility or pregnancy related medical care	Poor general health or chronic illnesses	Financial limitations	Housing limitations (e.g., lack of space, high house prices/rent costs)	Lack of sufficient/ quality childcare options	Unemployment/ job insecurity	Change of heart (deciding I want fewer children)	My partner wanting fewer children	Concerns about political or social situation (e.g., wars, pandemics)	Concerns about climate change or environmental degradation	Lack of a (suitable) partner	Insufficient involvement of my partner in housework/ childcare	Pressure or force from the doctors or health workers resulting in having fewer children
Republic of Korea	12%	6%	11%	58%	31%	28%	26%	14%	13%	8%	8%	10%	19%	3%
Thailand	19%	10%	17%	51%	21%	17%	33%	12%	9%	23%	18%	25%	11%	6%
Italy	15%	6%	13%	29%	14%	12%	30%	7%	11%	19%	11%	17%	8%	1%
Hungary	10%	4%	8%	34%	20%	11%	16%	9%	8%	10%	4%	17%	5%	4%
Germany	11%	3%	10%	25%	18%	12%	10%	11%	11%	13%	9%	15%	8%	2%
Sweden	10%	3%	9%	19%	6%	3%	5%	4%	9%	6%	4%	17%	5%	4%
Brazil	8%	7%	13%	39%	18%	8%	26%	18%	12%	21%	11%	15%	8%	5%
Mexico	8%	7%	8%	35%	23%	14%	21%	12%	8%	21%	14%	16%	8%	5%
US	16%	8%	12%	38%	15%	12%	17%	12%	19%	11%	7%	18%	11%	6%
India	13%	14%	15%	38%	22%	18%	21%	17%	19%	14%	16%	12%	15%	14%
Indonesia	6%	9%	10%	39%	22%	6%	20%	19%	17%	14%	9%	4%	16%	7%
Morocco	10%	4%	19%	47%	20%	11%	15%	8%	17%	8%	4%	9%	13%	4%
South Africa	15%	8%	13%	53%	17%	9%	33%	17%	18%	15%	9%	18%	9%	5%
Nigeria	14%	11%	13%	32%	14%	17%	16%	17%	19%	12%	10%	9%	10%	8%
All countries - total	12%	7%	12%	39%	19%	12%	21%	13%	13%	14%	9%	14%	11%	5%

Barriers to avoiding an unintended pregnancy and barriers to starting a family are often THE SAME:

- Economic precarity
- Gender discrimination
- Lack of support from partners and communities
- Low-quality sexual and reproductive healthcare
- Pessimism about the future

Opening policy window of opportunity



Current policy approaches inadequate

- Bifurcated
- Not holistic enough
- Level of support insufficient
- Policies are too short-term
- Measurements are themselves flawed



Healthcare policies

- Full range of affordable, quality, accessible reproductive health services everywhere
- Fertility care for everyone who needs it
- More inclusive care



Economic policies

- Childcare
- Supporting youth transition to adulthood
- Family-friendly work

Education and information

- Comprehensive sexuality education – inclusive of fertility awareness
- Unbiased, medically accurate information is needed out-of-school
- Education systems can better accommodate families



Addressing legal barriers to reproductive choice

- Parenthood is often legally inaccessible to marginalized groups
- Today, parenthood is desired, and possible, for LGBTQIA+ persons, single people, women once considered too old to become mothers
- Laws seemingly unrelated to reproduction can affect fertility – e.g., inheritance laws
- Laws can also make it harder to prevent an unintended pregnancy
- Insufficient protection from violence





**Gender
equality
and dividends
for all**

Gender in the family and at work

- Partners who equitably share domestic labour have higher fertility
- Women do 3-10x more unpaid care work than men
- Over 50 years, men's participation in domestic labour has increased
 - But they are still broadly rewarded for being breadwinners
 - They are sometimes stigmatized for being caretakers
 - Workplace conditions often push women out of the paid workforce
- Hybrid work doesn't necessarily help

Greater engagement of fathers

- More engaged fathers benefit children, help to promote gender equality
- A father's participation in caretaking influences son's future participation.
- Most men "feel as responsible for care work" as their partner.
- Most men and women believe that boys should be encouraged to learn caretaking skills.
- 9 in 10 parents say caring for children is "one of the most enjoyable things in their lives"



Intensification of parenting

- Parenting burdens are increasing – for moms AND dads.
- Women spend more time interacting with their children even as their labour force participation has increased.
- Significant mental health burdens on caregivers.
- Parents who lack support more likely to say “caring for my children is more exhausting than enjoyable”
 - 29% of fathers and 32% of mothers said this



The gender-equality dividend

- The world has failed to include men and boys in the realization of gender equality.
- Women outnumber men in university enrolment in 75% of middle-income countries, 95% of higher-income countries
 - Low-income, marginalized boys and men more likely to be affected
- Worse health-seeking behaviour
- Higher homicide rates
- Proliferation of misogynistic attitudes online, high rates of TF-GBV
 - Linked to celibacy movements by women in the Republic of Korea and United States

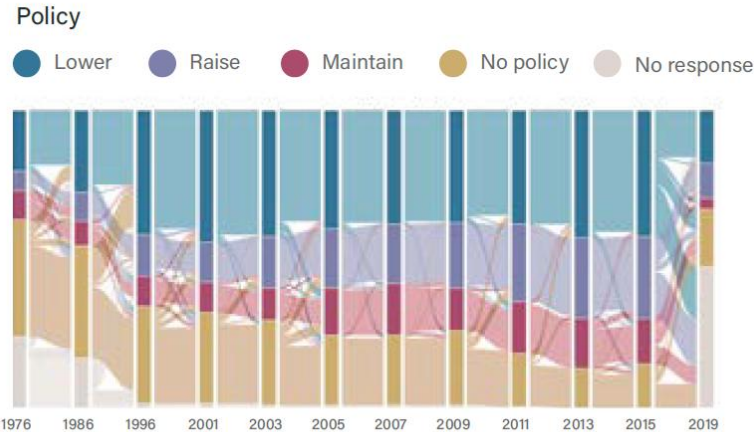


**The lessons
of history
– and hope**

Changes in government fertility policies over time

Simplified alluvial plot of reported fertility policies, 1976–2019

Share of countries reporting fertility policies by policy type and inquiry year



Perceptions matter.

Research shows both coercive AND noncoercive policies can reduce long-term fertility rates by being *perceived* as trying to compel a certain reproductive behaviour.

By contrast, policies *perceived* as supportive of choice may actually facilitate childbearing.

Alarmism and failure to communicate

Assumptions about demography:

“Overpopulation”

“Depopulation”

“Replacement-level fertility”

“Population stabilization”

“Population targets”

“Fertility targets”

Assumptions about individuals' choices:

“Opting out of motherhood”

“Rejecting marriage and parenthood”

“Saying no to children”



“Incentives”

Helping people realize
their own goals?

Pushing people to realize
State goals?

“Pronatalist”

Pro-baby?

Freedom to have children?

Pressure to have children?

Forced to have children?

Childcare grants?

Contraception/abortion bans?

“Antinatalist”

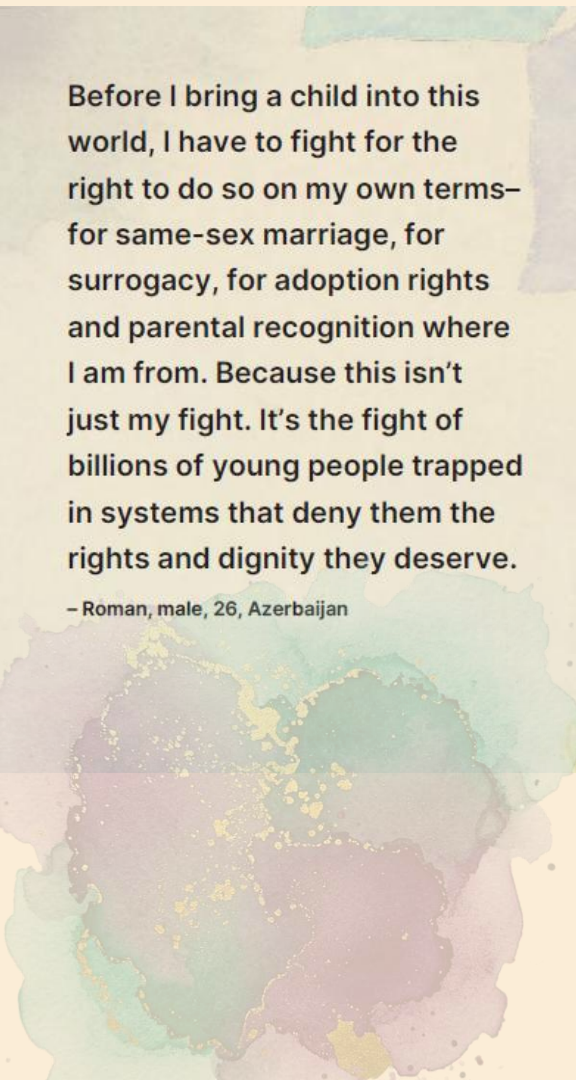
Anti-baby?

Freedom to use contraception?

Forced to use contraception?

Accessible abortion?

Forced abortion?



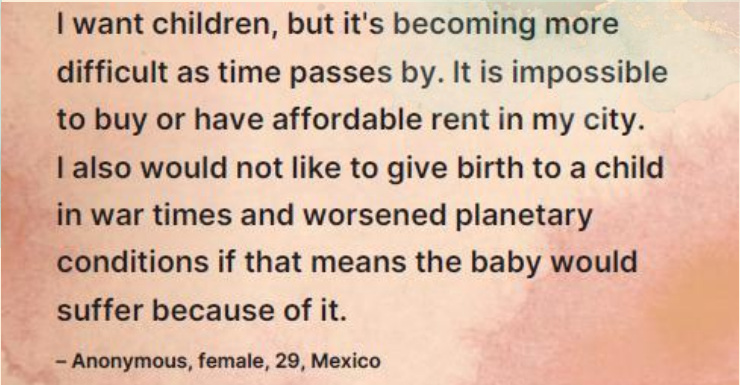
Before I bring a child into this world, I have to fight for the right to do so on my own terms—for same-sex marriage, for surrogacy, for adoption rights and parental recognition where I am from. Because this isn't just my fight. It's the fight of billions of young people trapped in systems that deny them the rights and dignity they deserve.

– Roman, male, 26, Azerbaijan



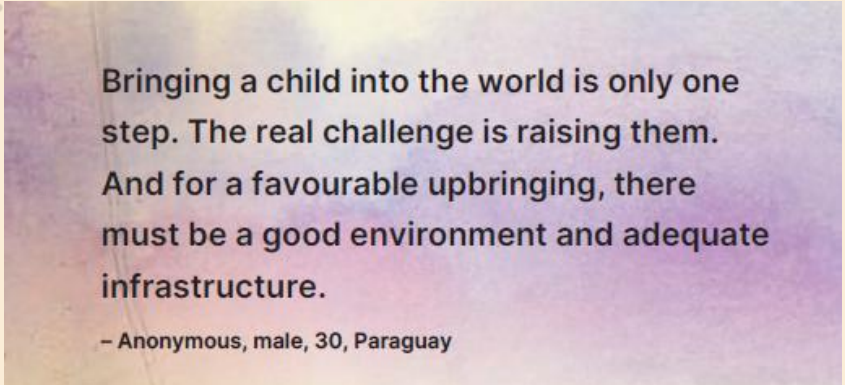
The future feels bleak despite the measures being taken by the government. Moreover, a lot of policies worldwide are against women's healthcare. I feel that this pushes us to stay single and have no children.

– Anonymous, female, 31, Philippines



I want children, but it's becoming more difficult as time passes by. It is impossible to buy or have affordable rent in my city. I also would not like to give birth to a child in war times and worsened planetary conditions if that means the baby would suffer because of it.

– Anonymous, female, 29, Mexico



Bringing a child into the world is only one step. The real challenge is raising them. And for a favourable upbringing, there must be a good environment and adequate infrastructure.

– Anonymous, male, 30, Paraguay