

Study points to shrinking population in Europe red line [GB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

London-A new study published in the journal, Science, has concluded that Europe's population will, in all likelihood, continue to shrink further mainly because of the fact that women have been postponing childbirth for increasing lengths of time.

According to the researchers, led by Wolfgang Lutz, of the Austrian Academy of Science in Vienna, and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Laxenburg, Austria, the year 2000 marked a key turning point for the continent because in that year the population's "momentum" flipped from positive to negative.

In Europe, where older generations outnumber the younger ones, the negative momentum arises as subsequent generations have fewer potential mothers. Thus, even if women begin having more children, a tendency to decline can persist for decades, simply because there are fewer women of childbearing age.

Two factors are responsible for Europe's negative population momentum. The first is well-known: that women are having fewer than two children on an average.

The second factor, whose future impact hasn't been addressed directly until now, is that women's average age at childbirth has been increasing over time. This so-called "tempo effect" matters because it reduces the number of children born in a given year, boosting the average age at which women have children.

Using data from the European Demographic Observatory, the researchers estimated how these two factors might affect Europe's population in future decades. They found that approximately 40 per cent of potential future population declines caused by low fertility were related to the postponing of births.

Lutz and his co-authors suggested that governments concerned about population aging and the potential for population decline could consider policies that give women more options in planning when to have children.

Possible starting points for consideration might address childcare, labor laws, part-time work options, or subsidized housing for young parents.

"Giving women more choices is easier said than done. It would involve revamping the career pattern that's structured around the male life course with no room for a baby break. This male- oriented career pattern needs to be changed," said Lutz.

"In thinking about what different policy options are out there for addressing aging and the possibility of population decline, one that has not been considered before is that there may be a demographic as well as a health benefit to providing more options to women in how to arrange their life-course, and when to have children," said O'Neill.

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Region: Europe ^[2]

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