

Are lazy husbands to blame for low birth rates? [CA] ^[1]

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See text below.

EXCERPTS

Globe and Mail writer Doug Saunders is one of my favourite columnists. However, given his usual topics -- globalization, world poverty -- I rarely have reason to link to him on this blog.

But his piece this past weekend, *Making more babies: a stimulus plan*, looked at the problems European countries are having with falling birth rates.

And he noted that Canada, of all places, may have the answer.

He wrote that a recent study by researchers at the University of Western Ontario discovered two provinces in Canada have actually seen sharp increases in their birth rates in recent years: Quebec and Alberta.

That is a bit of a mystery, since otherwise Quebec and Alberta couldn't be more different. Quebec has a lavish social-security system; Alberta a very limited one. Quebec has had fairly high unemployment; Alberta almost none.

By examining surveys, the demographers concluded that the primary factor controlling fertility rates is not wealth or income, but a sense of security: When a couple feels that their circumstances are secure and financial risk is low, they have children.

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Saunders column reminded me of a fascinating article published a year ago in *The New York Times Magazine* that examined Europe's "baby problem" -- in many countries, the birth rate is in steep decline.

The simple explanation for Europe's falling birth rates is that women are entering the workforce and giving up their traditional child-rearing roles.

But the NYT Mag piece argues that explanation is too simple, noting birth rates have dropped much faster in some parts of Europe than others:

The true fertility fault line in Europe - the fissures of which spread outward across the globe - runs between the north and the south.

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The article argues that while women have entered the workforce in all European countries, in the most "macho" ones -- like Italy and Spain -- they are still expected to do most of the traditional child-rearing and housemaking jobs as well.

Whereas in more progressive northern countries, men are more likely to pull their own weight. According to one study, the article states:

Women who do more than 75 percent of the housework and child care are less likely to want to have another child than women whose husbands or partners share the load. Put differently, Dutch fathers change more diapers, pick up more kids after soccer practice and clean up the living room more often than Italian fathers; therefore, relative to the population, there are more Dutch babies than Italian babies being born.

Progressive countries are also more likely to have government programs -- like subsidized daycare -- that help lighten the load on women, making having babies more attractive.

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One of the things I found most interesting about the NYT Mag piece is that it scrambles some of the traditional politics around the issue of birth rates.

In my experience, socially conservative people are often the ones most concerned about falling birth rates. Some of the most extremely conservative ones, to be frank, for mildly racist reasons -- out of a fear of higher birth rates among immigrants.

But if the research cited by the NYT Mag article is correct, the solution to falling birth rates is precisely those solutions most often seen as

left-wing and feminist: universal daycare, generous maternity leave and men picking up around the house a bit more often.

- reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: demographics ^[3]

work/life balance ^[4]

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