

Kinder, kuche... Germany's lowest birthrate yet blamed on dated policy ^[1]

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Germany's birthrate has slumped to its lowest level ever, dipping below the number born at the end of the war when many citizens were undernourished and poverty was rife.

The figures released by the Federal Statistics Office have prompted concern over whether Germany is doing enough to support families.

Last year 651,000 babies were born in Germany, 30,000 less than the previous year. With only 8.2 children being born for every 1,000 citizens (compared with 9.3 in 2000), and with 10 in 1,000 citizens dying every year, Germany is nowhere near approaching a replacement rate that would keep the population stable.

"Germany is Shrinking!" read the headline in the Tagesspiegel newspaper when the statistics were released this week, prompting alarmed reactions.

Apart from a minimal spike in the birthrate in 2007, following the introduction of a parental benefits system for mothers and fathers, the number of births has more or less been constantly dropping since the 1970s.

On a European scale, Germany has the lowest birthrate, and on a global scale it is almost as bad. Of 27 countries with populations in excess of 40 million, Germany ranks second from bottom in terms of children under 15 as a percentage of the overall population. Japan is bottom with 13%, followed by Germany with 13.6%, and Italy with 14%. At 45%, Ethiopia has the highest portion of youth population.

Politicians have long been forced to improve the birthrate or face the problem of Germany having insufficient workers and taxpayers to support a population which, like much of Europe, is ageing faster than at any time in history.

The statistics have disappointed many observers who thought that the government policy to support the family, which includes more than 150bn a year pumped into family benefits, child welfare payments and parental wage compensation, would have had a positive effect on the birthrate.

The family minister, Kerstin Schroder, said today the reason for the failure to boost numbers was the drop in the numbers of women of child-bearing age. "The birthrate is so low because there are fewer and fewer women," she said.

However, she also admitted that having children "required having a lot of courage" and that at a time of the deepest economic crisis since

the war many Germans felt "fearful and full of angst about their jobs, and for that reason decide against having a child".

Another explanation she suggested was that "some women simply fail to find the right husband".

But experts say that Germany has ignored the problem for too long, erroneously adopting the adage of the post-war chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who famously said: "People will always have children, whatever."

According to Katya Tichomirowa, a specialist in family policy, France and Scandinavia, which have higher birthrates, contradicted the idea that a low rate was natural in industrialised societies. She blamed instead a systematic failure to see each in a couple as equal.

"Nowhere in Europe is the tax system geared so much in favour of the family model of single-breadwinning father and stay-at-home wife as it is [in Germany] ... the state should be supporting the career development of both parents, enabling both to take part in child care," she wrote in the Berliner Zeitung.

But the issue remains particularly sensitive in a country which turned child-bearing into an act of patriotism during the Nazi era, with women urged to concentrate on Kinder, Kuche, Kirche, - children, kitchen and church - and awarded medals based on how many children they had.

"There are still many who support this ideal of 'children, kitchen and church', which certainly puts some women off," said Silke Schmidt, a 39-year-old academic living in Berlin. But she admitted that many of the props that would help families have children in a modern world were pitifully lacking. "Often schools finish so early it's impossible to get a part-time job, employers are regularly unsympathetic towards mothers, and childcare facilities are poor," she said.

But neither is the phenomenon of Rabenmütter particularly helpful: "raven mothers" is the derogatory term for women who combine work and family.

The fears over Germany's demographic woes have only deepened following recent warnings that large budget cuts are imminent in order to balance the budget.

Roland Koch, prime minister of the state of Hesse and a member of Angela Merkel's government, is leading conservative calls for a cut in family spending, including scrapping the guarantee of childcare facilities for children under the age of three, which experts say would quash any chance of raising the birthrate.

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