



## For a rights-based approach to fertility and demography

### Background

Every individual and couple has the right to decide whether, when, and how many children they want to have, free from coercion. However, in Europe, as worldwide, access to this fundamental human right is often not guaranteed, both in cases where people want to have children and in cases where people do not want to have children.

The international community has repeatedly recognised and affirmed — in agreements ranging from the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action<sup>1</sup> to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>2</sup> — that the right to decide whether or when to have children, how many children to have and with whom to have them are fundamental to gender equality and represent bedrock necessities for a more peaceful and prosperous future for all. Devising population policies without investigating what individuals want for their bodies and futures results in missing a central point: for a population to be maximally healthy and empowered to contribute, innovate, and thrive, its people must enjoy — as a precondition — the fulfilment of their rights and choices.<sup>3</sup>

### States have a responsibility to support people so that they have the means they need to exercise their reproductive autonomy.

In Europe, people on average have fewer children than they intend to have in early adulthood (fertility gap) and remain childless more often than intended.<sup>4</sup> This is due to multiple barriers, either medical or societal.

- i. *Improved access to fertility care can help close the gap between desired and actual fertility.* One of the barriers to realising fertility intentions is a lack of access to fertility care when it is needed. Infertility, defined as the inability to conceive after 12 months of unprotected sexual intercourse, affects ca. one in six people in Europe and worldwide.<sup>5</sup> For people affected by infertility, as well as for other groups affected by involuntary childlessness, e.g., single people or same-sex couples, medically assisted reproduction is often the only safe possibility to have the children they desire. In countries like Denmark, which guarantee good access to fertility care, almost 12% of children are born from assisted reproduction.<sup>6</sup>
- ii. *Advancing social justice can reduce involuntary childlessness.* Involuntary childlessness also requires a systemic response to remove economic and societal barriers to becoming parents and having larger families. To envisage raising a family, people need good working and living conditions, including childcare, gender-equal sharing of care responsibilities, parental leave, work-life balance and flexibility; as well as access to housing, healthcare, employment, and a safe environment.

---

<sup>1</sup> [The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development \(ICPD\) Programme of Action](#)

<sup>2</sup> [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)

<sup>3</sup> Page 101, [UNFPA State of World Population 2023](#)

<sup>4</sup> Beaujouan, E., & Berghammer, C. (2019). The Gap Between Lifetime Fertility Intentions and Completed Fertility in Europe and the United States: A Cohort Approach. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 38(4), 507-535. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-019-09516-3>

<sup>5</sup> [1 in 6 people globally affected by infertility: WHO](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Danish Fertility Society \(2025\). Results for 2022](#)



## Coalition for Fertility

### **Demographic resilience is not merely a matter of fertility rate**

The number of childbirths has decreased in Europe over the last decades. Since 2013, the median age of the EU population has increased by more than two years<sup>7</sup>. Some governments are concerned about such demographic trends, particularly regarding the sustainability of social security systems or economic competitiveness, leading them to focus on the demographic change in their political agenda disproportionately. However, the fertility rate is only one of the determinants of demographic trends, and other determinants, such as the migration balance, can play a crucial complementary and balancing role. Furthermore, the resilience of economies and social security systems does not just depend on the number of people, but also on their health and skills. Thus, rather than focusing on increasing fertility rates, governments should invest in their populations and take measures to adapt to changing demographic structures.<sup>8</sup>

### **Governments should prioritise individual reproductive decisions over demographic targets**

Governments must first and foremost support and empower all people in their individual reproductive decisions, whether to have children or not. Setting targets for fertility rates stands in stark contrast to this principle, as this makes people a means to achieving a political goal, leaning towards dangerous population control paradigms. Misguided policies can undermine reproductive rights and risk reversing hard-won gains on gender equality. Instead, reproductive justice should be at the heart of any policies on fertility. There are many measures that governments can take to increase the reproductive autonomy of all individuals, such as providing public information and education around sexual and reproductive health and rights. Policymakers should prioritise universal access to family planning services, fertility care and safe and legal abortion, and enhance support for all types of families.

### **All people's reproductive choices deserve equal respect**

We firmly reject any racist, ableist, homophobic, transphobic or other exclusionary narratives and policies on fertility. This includes the requirement still present in some EU countries (Cyprus, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia) for people wishing to change their legal gender marker in their identity documents to undergo involuntary sterilisation, a practice that does not comply with the recommendations of international human rights bodies<sup>9</sup>. All people should be provided with the same support to decide whether, when, and how many children they want to have.

**Applying a rights-based approach to fertility and demography means creating a society where all people can thrive and have the family they desire!**



<sup>7</sup> [EU median age increased by 2.3 years since 2013 - News articles - Eurostat](#)

<sup>8</sup> [UNFPA \(2018\). Shrinking populations in Eastern Europe - Q&A's for policymakers and advocates.](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe \(PACE\); UN Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity](#)