

## Investigating the phenomenon of small families in Europe

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In the last decades, European countries have experienced a significant decline in fertility rates, with family patterns undergoing drastic changes. The conventional idea of large families has become antiquated and been replaced by a more contemporary view of family structure, which gave rise to the phenomenon of small families or having no kids at all. It is argued that the emergence of households with two kids or less can be attributed to a number of factors, including technological, political and legal, economic, and sociological contributors. In this essay, I will explore to what extent these variables play a role in determining family size while noting that there are many correlations and crossovers among these factors. Additionally, I will also shed light on the negative implications a decrease in the number of children per household entails, ranging from an aging society, a declining labour force, to a shrinking economic performance.

One significant factor that profoundly contributed to the emergence of smaller families is the advancements that occurred in technology. The relevance of technological factors shaping family size roots back to the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century, namely the Industrial Revolution. According to Beauvoir (1949, p. 122-155), the Industrial Revolution's new position for women in factory production allowed them to reclaim the economic significance they had lost since “prehistoric times”. This rise was made possible by the invention of machines utilized in factories, which ultimately made the difference in physical strength between women and men irrelevant. Additionally, as the shift increased, more workers were required than men could provide on their own, thus women's cooperation became essential. Despite receiving considerably lower wages than men, women were seeking emancipation through labour and therefore accepted the deprecated wages. This turn of women becoming integrated into the workforce has marked a pivotal transition in the duties women could undertake, meaning that their role in society was no longer confined to household tasks, including cooking and cleaning but they could also establish their own careers and contribute to the income of the family. This turning point was the beginning of the phenomenon that continues to prevail today with a 67% employment rate of women in the EU as opposed to that of men at 78% (Eurostat, 2020). Ultimately, countries with high rates of female employment are likely to witness a sharp decrease in the number of kids, since women are more occupied with their careers, which tends to allow less room for bringing up children, making pairs opt for establishing smaller families.

Another technological factor influencing family size is the development made in contraception methods. With access to birth control and abortion, couples have more control over when and how many kids they would like to have. Additionally, the dissemination of knowledge about family planning and the prevalence of sex education enables women to get a better understanding of their prospects and opportunities when it comes to reproduction. Statistics also

show that (United Nations, 2020) fertility rates are typically lower in nations where a large percentage of women use contraception. Furthermore, as Goldin (2002, p. 730-770) stated, the advent of the pill entailed a shift not only in the timing and number of children but also in career investments. Thanks to the prevalence of birth control, the reproductive function of women is no longer a restrictive factor as far as their career prospects are concerned. Thereby, mitigating the risk of pregnancy has enabled women to invest in careers and thus delay marriage and pregnancy. As a result, the number of women pursuing a career and that of women delaying pregnancy simultaneously increases, leading to a tendency of smaller families.

The question of whether political reasons contribute to the rise of smaller families sparks controversy and speculation since governments across Europe are struggling with economic and societal problems posed by an aging society as a result of many young adults refusing to have kids. In 2021, the average fertility rate in the EU reached 1.53 children per woman (Eurostat, 2023), dropping considerably below the level of 2.1 which is necessary to maintain population numbers constant. This tendency impeccably gives cause for concern since, in the long run, low fertility rates entail grave implications. It is argued that (Borji, 2021; Belsie, 2009) a rising life expectancy accompanied by low fertility rates account for the formulation of an aging society, which implies a smaller number of people being involved in the workforce and a bigger number of people moving into retirement. Consequently, with the increasing proportion of the elderly, there appears to be a shortage of qualified workers. As a result, there is a greater strain imposed on the smaller pool of workers, essentially leading to a decline in economic productivity. Furthermore, with the exacerbation of an aging society emerges simultaneously an increase in the dependency ratio, meaning that countries are contingent upon a smaller number of workers, who are responsible for covering the increasing costs of healthcare and pensions. Therefore, in an effort to alleviate the issue of an aging society and combat low fertility rates, governments across Europe have been introducing family-friendly policies to encourage young couples to have more children. Such policies (Walker, 2020) include tax benefits, prolonged maternity and parental leave, childcare services, and flexible working hours. Thereby, the idea of politics being a driving force behind the phenomenon of smaller families can be refuted, since political agendas aim at fostering the cultivation of larger families rather than the opposite.

Another overwhelming factor determining family size is economic considerations. When deciding about the number of kids, couples are expected to carefully consider a number of financial aspects. Raising children is a heavily money-consuming activity, which might not be consistent with the income of many young couples. Bastani (2022) claims that student loans strongly impede those who have hardships repaying their debts yet desire to have kids. According to Espenshade, Kamenske, and Turchi (1983, p. 293), "as the number of children increases, families often need more space", however, constantly rising housing prices pose further difficulties facing young families. They (Espenshade, Kamenske, Turchi, 1983, p. 290) also add that an increase in the number of children inherently entails higher consumption levels.

Hence, larger families tend to dedicate more of their expenses to necessities, including food and clothing, and less to luxuries. Consequently, as the number of kids increases, the standard of living in families with less satisfactory financial backgrounds decreases. On these grounds, in order to provide their kids with a sufficiently good lifestyle, many young adults decide to not have another child after the first or second one, essentially placing quality over quantity.

The decrease in family size significantly correlates with many sociological factors as well. There has been a considerable shift in the values of society, which has altered the attitude of young adults towards the idea of having kids. Hoffman (1975, p. 435) claims that new generations are bound to associate childbearing with giving up their freedom. This notion is based on the valid argument that raising children involves a high level of responsibility coupled with multiple commitments, and hence restricts the freedom of parents. With the increasing emphasis put on self-development, personal growth, and self-love, young people nowadays are likely on the one hand to prioritize career prospects over parenthood, and on the other hand to make fewer sacrifices, ultimately resulting in smaller families. According to Hoffman (1975, p. 435), other reasons that accentuate the prevalence of small families include worries about overpopulation and a “troubled world”, with many people expressing concern about future kids suffering in a world that is already spoilt due to the ubiquity of drugs, crimes, and environmental issues. Taking these factors into account, many adults are choosing to make more mindful decisions, thus minimizing the number of children per household.

After carefully examining the measure of the contribution of potential variables leading to the prevalence of smaller families, it can be concluded that the decrease in family size is a systemic issue perpetuated by several correlating factors. Such contributors include industrialization, improvements in contraception methods, economic obstacles, and a shift in societal values. When addressing these components as sub-contributors, it is of great importance to underline the cause-causation relationship among them. Therefore, it is also worth noting that while politics may not directly contribute to the phenomenon of small families, it influences many areas of economics, ultimately accounting for the prevalence of small families in an indirect way.

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