

France's baby boom secret: get women into work and ditch rigid family norms

Gender equality, pro-child policies and generous childcare provision are all bolstering French fertility rates rather than hindering them

Anne Chemin

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Over the past 10 years the offices of France's National Institute for Demographic Studies (Ined) have seen a steady stream of Korean policymakers and Japanese academics, determined to crack the mystery of French fertility. Scientists present their birthrate graphs and explain the broad lines of French public policy. "In the past four or five years we've had over 10 Korean delegations," says demographer Olivier Thévenon with a smile. Haunted by the threat of population decline, these Asian experts are keen to understand the recipe that has given France the highest fertility rate in Europe, alongside Ireland.

Since the early 2000s France has consistently topped European rankings. After two decades of decline, in the 1970s-80s, the fertility rate started picking up again in the late 1990s. Since then the country has registered scores just short of the mythical threshold of 2.1 children per woman, which would secure a steady population. Its fertility rate in 2014 was 2.01. "For the economy Germany is the strong man of Europe, but when it comes to demography France is our fecund woman," says demographer Ron Lesthaeghe, member of the Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences and emeritus professor of Brussels Free University.

Much of central and southern Europe has subsided into a strange demographic winter. Fifty years after the postwar baby boom, the fertility rate in the European Union has fallen in recent years to 1.58 live births per woman. Year in, year out the Mediterranean countries contradict the clichés about Roman Catholic culture. In recent years Spain, Portugal and Italy have witnessed a dramatic fall in the number of births (registering 1.4 or even 1.3 births per woman). German-speaking countries - Germany and Austria - have fared scarcely any better, much as most former eastern bloc countries - Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. Policymakers all over Europe are concerned about such decline.

Yet there is nothing mysterious about the approach that is working in both France and Scandinavia. It combines the idea of a modern family based on gender equality and powerful government policies. "Nowadays, both ingredients are needed to sustain the population," Lesthaeghe asserts. "At first sight it seems a simple recipe, but it's far from easy to put into practice: it takes a lot of time to design and establish a new family model."

There is nothing straightforward or natural about “the family”. It is a very complex world based on social norms, what the American sociologist Ronald Rindfuss calls the “family package”. “In Japan, for instance, this package involves many constraints,” says Ined demographer Laurent Toulemon. “A woman entering into a relationship must also accept marriage, obey her husband, have a child, stop working after it is born and make room for her ageing in-laws. It’s a case of all or nothing. In France the package is more flexible: one doesn’t have to get married or have children. Norms are more open and families more diverse.”

Most countries in southern Europe are based on something akin to the Japanese package, with fairly rigid family norms in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta and Greece. There is social pressure on women not to work while their children are still young, just as it is ill-thought of to live with someone or have a baby outside wedlock. In all these countries the proportion of births outside marriage is below 30%, whereas in France, Sweden and Norway it exceeds 50%. In Japan the traditional family package clearly has a dramatic impact on fertility, with fewer than 1.4 births per woman.

The picture is very different in Scandinavia and France. “In these countries the family norm is much more flexible, with late marriages, reconstituted families, single parents, much more frequent births outside marriage and divorces than further south,” Toulemon adds. “People are far less concerned about the outlook for the family [as an institution].” The positive impact of this open-ended approach to families on fertility is borne out by the statistics, at more than 1.8 children per woman in Sweden, Norway, Finland and France.

The principle of gender equality and the necessary corollary of women being free to work are the key factors in this family model that emerged at the end of the 20th century. Yet in the 1960s-70s advocates of traditional family values claimed that the birthrate would be the first thing to suffer from this trend. Fifty years on it seems they were mistaken: fertility in Europe is higher in countries where women go out to work, lower in those where they generally stay at home. “Women’s freedom of decision is essential to this system,” Toulemon asserts.

The map of the fertility rate in European countries more or less overlaps with that of women in work. In countries with relatively buoyant populations, such as France and Scandinavia, women play an important part in the labour market. According to data for 2010 published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the employment rate for women aged 24 to 54 in work was 83.8% in France, 84.4% in Finland, 85.6% in Denmark and 87.5% in Sweden, barely lower than the equivalent figures for men. In contrast, in southern Europe and Japan the share of women in work was much lower: only 64.4% of them had a job in Italy, 71.6% in Japan, 72.2% in Greece and 78.3% in Spain.

Such statistics would have amazed European demographers in the 1960s-70s. “Up to the end of the 1980s the countries with a high fertility were, on the contrary, the ones where women didn’t usually go out to work,” Thévenon recalls. “In those days building a family was the priority: women would get married, have children, bring them up and then, if they had the inclination and any spare time, they might enter the job market. The picture is quite the opposite now: a job is no longer a hindrance to child-bearing, indeed it has actually become one of the preconditions.”

This trend has gathered momentum, in both France and Scandinavian countries, as the guilt associated with women having a job has gradually subsided. “Social surveys in Europe show significant divergences in the perception of working women,” Thévenon adds. “In France, women who carry on working, even when they have children under three, are not regarded as ‘bad mothers’, thanks to pliant social norms with plenty of latitude. In Germany, on the other hand, they are often accused of being *Rabenmutter*, by analogy with crows which are thought to abandon their chicks when still young. The old rule of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* [children, kitchen and church] still holds.”

It seems therefore that to achieve a high fertility rate, society must distance itself from the traditional family model centring on the figure of the bread-winner. But families also need solid support from the state. Here again there is a gulf between Mediterranean countries, and France and Scandinavia. In the latter case generous welfare policies help families. Such aid exceeds 3% of gross domestic product in Norway and Finland, 3.5% in Sweden and France, and 4% in Denmark. Spending is substantially lower further south, accounting for barely 2% in Italy and less than 1.5% in Spain, Portugal and Greece.

Here again these differences are linked to cultural and historical factors. “In southern Europe and Germany the general view is that families, not the state, should take charge of children,” says Toulemon. “This is due to history. In countries once ruled by Fascists or Nazis, such as Italy, Spain and Germany, the idea of making ‘children for the Fatherland’ was so powerful that even today people have serious misgivings about policies to boost the birthrate. This is not the case in France or Scandinavia where there is a high level of public acceptance for state intervention in family affairs to open nurseries and infant schools.”

Policies to boost the birthrate in France date back to the early 20th century, when paternalistic companies awarded bonuses to the parents of young children. In the 1930s and again after the war, the state took over, setting up a family-allowance system for all parents, backed by tax incentives. These financial advantages were gradually followed by amenities for infants and small children. “For pro-child policies to work they must be generous, but there is a need for continuity too, built on a consensus, so that families can trust the state,” Thévenon affirms. “As is the case in France.”

Such policies also have a positive impact on fertility because they allow for the flexible model endorsed by couples. “France has opted to help all families, regardless of their conjugal preferences,” Toulemon emphasises. “This has not always been so. In the 1970s the National Union of Family Associations (Unaf) had misgivings about the state helping single-parent or reconstituted families. But research showed that these were the same people as the married couples defended by Unaf. There are difficult times in any family, so it makes sense, as successive French governments have done, to help all families, particularly the needy.”

Which leaves the question of which policies boost the fertility rate. Is it enough simply to dish out financial support, as is the case in Luxembourg? Or should this be combined with provision of day nurseries and creches, as in Scandinavia? The conclusions of research to assess the impact of the various measures are quite clear: financial assistance has a “proven but limited” effect, according to Thévenon, but childcare services for toddlers make a real difference. When such amenities are plentiful and accessible, as in

northern Europe, the birthrate responds positively. “Childminding is crucial,” says Thévenon.

In 2002 an EU summit meeting in Barcelona set a target for 2010, requiring member states to provide “formal” care facilities for a third of all pre-school children, in the form of nurseries or childminders. France has outstripped this goal, with more than half of all children under three qualifying for some form of collective care, though only 16% have a place in a day nursery, despite this solution being preferred by parents.

The figures for Scandinavian countries are even better, with 54% of toddlers in Norway being minded in a day nursery and 65% in Denmark. In Mediterranean and central European countries access to childcare services is more difficult, with fewer than 40% of under-threes in formal facilities in Italy, Spain or Greece, dropping to 23% in Germany, 14% in Austria, 10% in Hungary, 7% in Poland and 4% in the Czech Republic. This shortage seems to have a significant impact on the fertility rate, which lags below 1.45 children per woman.

Indeed the map of fertility rates in the EU is remarkably similar to that of childcare facilities. “In former East Germany fertility is higher than in West Germany,” says Lesthaeghe. “The dividing line, which coincides with what was once the Iron Curtain, reflects two different traditions for the care of small children. There were and still are more nurseries in the east than the west. There are similar contrasts between Flemish cantons in Belgium and neighbouring districts in Germany: fertility is higher on the Belgian side, with ample room in nurseries, longer school hours and better organised out-of-school activities, all of which enables women to have a career and a family.”

Ultimately there is nothing mysterious about the recipe that so intrigues Korean and Japanese experts. The fertility rate is high in European countries where family norms are flexible, women feel free to work, pro-child policies are generous and childcare is well organised - in short, in countries that have come to terms with gender equality. “The ability of society to adapt is crucial,” concludes Toulemon. “If family traditions cannot be adjusted to suit the new political reality of gender equality, it results in a de facto refusal to bear children.”

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