

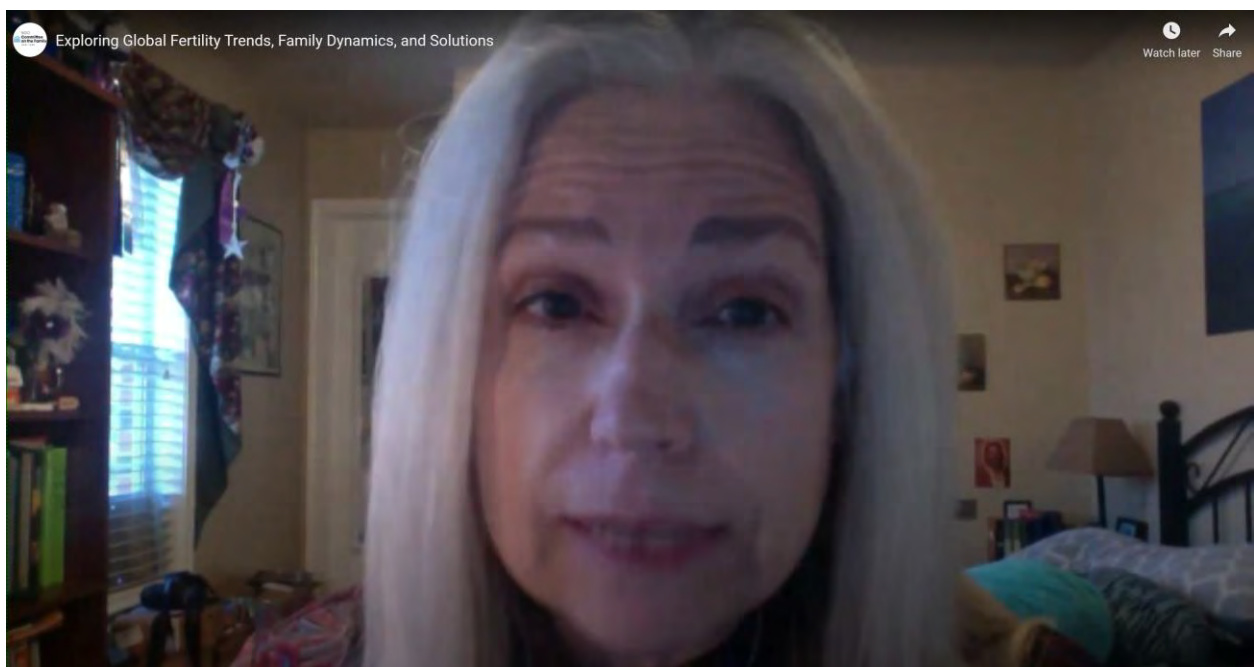
WFWPI UN: Fertility Decline and Sex-ratio Imbalance: Geopolitical Ramifications

Lynn Walsh
October 28, 2021



United States -- The NGO Committee of the Family, NY organized and co-sponsored with UPFI the hybrid event titled, "Exploring Global Fertility Trends, Family Dynamics, and Solutions" on October 28, 2021. This event explored menacing consequences of fertility decline, aging population, and sex-ratio imbalance such as economic stagnation and inability to care for the elderly, but also issues not always correlated such as: national security, increase in crime and violence, social unrest, and women's inability to have their desired number of children. Birthrate decline and aging populations have increased especially in developed countries but also developing countries around the world. Addressing falling birthrates has proven not only hard to reverse but to lead to a sharper decrease in babies born.

Ambassador **Zsuzsanna Horvath**, Permanent Mission of Hungary to the UN, presented abundant data on Hungary's demographics as well as multiple innovative policies and financial incentives to address their serious fertility decline. Hungary's birthrate has fallen precipitously for decades to be one of the lowest in Europe. Because Hungary has taken a broad strategy to addressing hindrances to having children, Ambassador Horvath's message conveyed not only many practical policy ideas but real hope for seeing a new flourishing of families with children. One point that H.E. Horvath made that is not always heard, is that many women in Hungary feel they cannot have the number of children they desire. The ambassador said that Hungary's overall goal is to enable families to have the number of children they want which would result in the necessary 2.1 population replacement rate.



Ambassador Horvath shared the four pillars of Hungary's strategy to erase barriers to desired fertility. The first pillar is increasing financial support to young married couples and families raising children. This includes generous tax breaks, salary increases, housing subsidies, and mortgage forgiveness, each of which increase with the number of children born to a couple. Student loans are forgiven at the birth of the third child. The second pillar is strengthening public services such as paid parental leave, post-parental-leave job protection, easing the ability to return to work with flexible work schedules and free childcare.

The third pillar encourages marriage and child-bearing with value-based pro-family public policies. The Hungarian culture upholds the unparalleled human fulfillment in having a stable, happy marriage and raising children. The fourth pillar is providing more choice, whether to return to work or stay home to care for one's children by generously supporting both options. For instance, childcare allowances remain whether one chooses to return to work or stay home to care for children. In addition, grandparents can receive the childcare allowance if they provide the childcare.

H.E. Horvath reported that as hard as it is to reverse fertility decline, Hungary is encouraged that their birth rate has risen from 1.25 in 2010 to 1.55 in 2021. The current rate is the highest it has been since 1996. The data further show the marriage rate has doubled, divorce has decreased by 40%, and abortion has been cut almost in half. Remarkably, by giving mothers more work-family flexibility and childcare, the number of females in the labor force has increased from 55% to 72%. All of these indices give other countries hope that with concerted national effort, population decline is not simply inevitable and that couples can delight in having the number of children they want without fear of economic loss. Hungary more than doubled financial resources for families, bringing the total to 5% of Hungary's GDP -- almost twice the OECD average. Certainly, this is a very substantial investment but one which Hungary feels confident will pay off exponentially in the future.



Dr. Valerie Hudson, professor of international affairs, Texas AandM, Bush School of Government and Public Service and author of *Bare Branches: The Security Implications of China's Surplus Male Population*, was our next presenter. Dr. Hudson stated that 132 nations in Europe, Central Asia, North America and Latin America are experiencing a birthrate below the replication rate. The areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab world and the Middle East have rising birthrates, however at a much slower rate than any time in history. Significant decline in birth rate and aging populations lead to economic decline as a country is less productive with less workers contributing to the economy along with more elderly relying on services of others and intergenerational transfers. Dr. Hudson pointed out that throughout history, no country ever became a world power when experiencing sub-replacement birthrate because of the congruent economic debilitation. Then she noted that all the current world powers are experiencing a sub-replacement rate: United States at 1.84 and Russia, the EU, and China at 1.6. Some sources estimate that China's birthrate may be closer to 1.0. Furthermore, the US allies are all experiencing sub-replacement birthrates: South Korea at 1.09. Japan at 1.38, Australia at 1.8 and Taiwan at the lowest birthrate in the world of 1.07. Data affirm that once a nation reaches below replacement rate it is very difficult if not impossible to regain replacement level of population growth, that is, nations only continue to shrink.

Dr. Hudson turned her focus on the added problem of sex-ratio imbalance. The US has a normal sex-ratio balance. Russia has a higher number of females than males, largely due to the high death rate of young men with substance abuse and alcoholism. China and India have significantly imbalanced sex ratios with more males than females. China's sex-ratio imbalance of 100 females to 112 males leaves at least 18% of young males unable to find a wife. The rate is higher for older males. Dr. Hudson explained that when there are too few females the birthrate declines more rapidly, making it even more unlikely to regain population replacement. While China is currently experiencing its global ascendancy it is interesting to note that, at the same time, their economic stagnation is highly predictable due to their declining and aging population. Furthermore, when a large portion of men are unable to marry, their frustrated male energy is commonly channeled into social unrest and crime. Dr. Hudson said that there are signs that China is already experiencing these problems. She explained that China has taken more rigid authoritarian control including tight digital social monitoring in an effort to minimize the unrest, but that may not be enough. Another way to diffuse male discontent and violence is by promoting strong nationalism and aggressive international moves in the world. Interestingly, we are witnessing this today. Furthermore, she argued that China's awareness of ensuing economic weakening and social unrest, could motivate an acceleration of geopolitical aggression. Her fascinating, though somewhat alarming, perspective about the

global impact of birthrate was summarized when she stated, "It is babies, boys and girls, that shape geopolitics, and war and peace."



Lyman Stone, adjunct fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, research fellow at the Institute for Family Studies, and a former international economist at the US Department of Agriculture, gave a research-rich presentation. The economic and social problems caused by low fertility has led to a doubling of pro-natal countries since 2000 around the world. He explained that many countries are attempting to promote childbearing by raising public concern about national economic faltering as well as communitarian concerns for the disintegration of cultural, religious, racial, ethnic or national identity. Although these issues may be legitimate to some, Mr. Stone pointed out that, in reality, these kinds of arguments hardly make a couple decide to have children. Through his research, he found that, with a few exceptions, all around the world most women want to have more children. Women from a wide range of countries, developed and under-developed, both rich and poor, with varying cultures, want a larger family than they have. That is, women in high-fertility countries such as Niger, Chad and Afghanistan, want more children than they are likely to have, just the same as European women. Mr. Stone suggested that the "mystery" why the prolonged and generous provision of birth-control options to African countries has not produced the expected goal of lowered birthrates could be explained by the simple desire for larger African families.

Mr. Stone then asks why couples do not have the families they hope to have? He argued that parents want to give their children a good life with optimal opportunities, and they are very aware of the income loss, expense, and time consumption of having children. Policies that help couples decrease the cost of childbearing such as those Hungary has introduced seem to be good strategy for increasing fertility. Mr. Stone suggested another important reason why couples do not have the family size they want. He stated that the average person thinks that women's fertility declines in the late thirties, but the reality is fertility declines starting at in the late twenties and miscarriage risk rises after that. So, many women misjudge their loss of fecundability with age and find they cannot have the number of children they desire. In addition, couples assume that assisted reproductive technologies are more successful than they really are in compensating for age-related infertility.

The question-and-answer session was moderated by **Ryan Koch**, co-chair of the NGO Committee on the Family, NY. Addressing a question about immigration, Dr. Hudson stated that immigration is seen differently by different countries as positive or negative. For instance, Hungary has married pro-natal policies with anti-immigration policies. Mr. Stone remarked that from the neo-liberal perspective, immigration, with some exceptions, can be seen as a solution for low population growth. He added that from the communitarian perspective, immigration can be viewed as a major problem unless the immigrants assimilate to appreciate the political system and perspectives of their new national home.

Dr. Hudson made the point that part of the "desire for more children" in some countries, such as in Africa, may in fact not be the woman's choice but her husband's imposed desire for a large family influenced by cultural values. Mr. Stone agreed there is a serious problem with husbands usurping their wives' choice of family size, but clarified that it is hard to ascertain all the factors at play and how prevalent a problem this is. After this, the discussion became quite "lively" -- the sign of a critical issue with many complicated facets that deserves more research and dialogue. Hopefully, this discussion will lead to delving further.