

THE REAL FERTILITY CRISIS

The pursuit of
reproductive agency
in a changing world

In 2025, the global fertility rate is making headlines.

In many countries, declining birth rates are leading to alarm over “population collapse”. In an attempt to address these demographic changes, some governments are employing drastic measures to persuade women and young people to have more children. The assumption is often that young people are deliberately choosing to have fewer children, and that women must be incentivized to make reproductive decisions in line with national fertility targets.



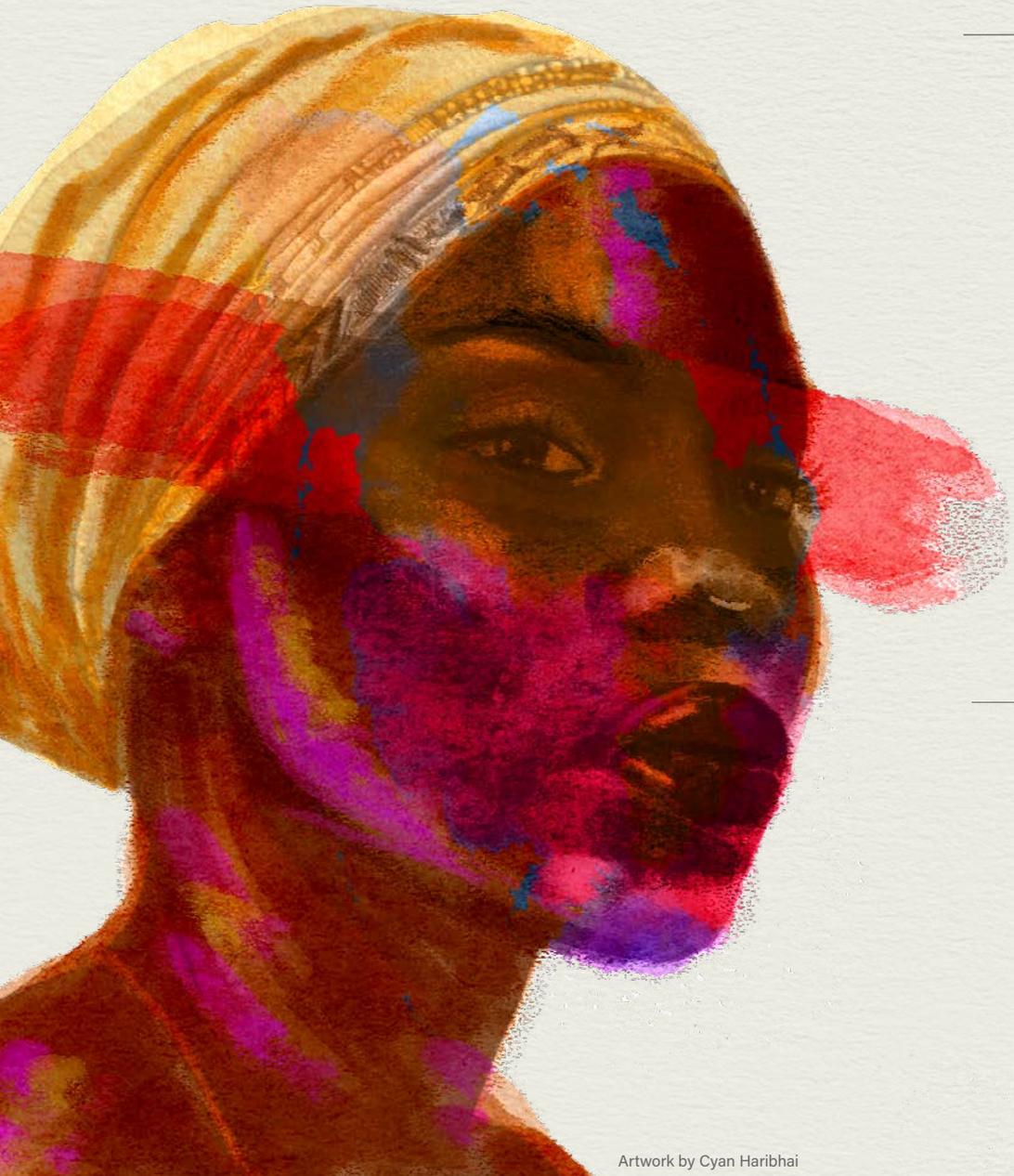
The 2025 *State of World Population* report shows, however, that most people already want to have children, and many want more children than they are able to have. This is true everywhere we look, even in the lowest-fertility countries.

These findings reveal that the real crisis the world is facing is not one of underpopulation: It is a crisis of reproductive agency. In every country studied, regardless of its total fertility rate, the most consequential reproductive decision a human being can make – whether, when and with whom to have a child – is being undermined, and in some cases outright denied.



A crisis of reproductive agency

Too many people face obstacles to forming the families they desire. Although women and girls around the world continue to struggle to exercise autonomy over preventing pregnancy, they also face barriers to exercising the reproductive choice to have children.



Artwork by Cyan Haribhai

In a survey of 14 countries – which are collectively home to around 37 per cent of the global population – UNFPA found that alarmingly high proportions of adults, both men and women, are unable to realize their fertility intentions.

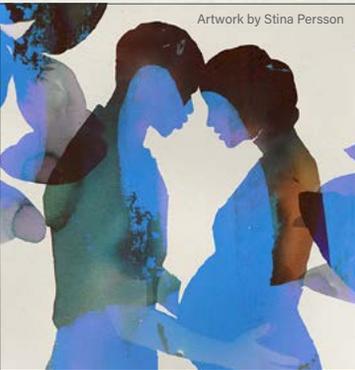


Nearly
20 per cent
of reproductive-age adults
believe they will be unable
to have the number of
children they desire.

Nearly
1 in 3
have experienced
an unintended
pregnancy.



Nearly
1 in 4
have felt unable to
fulfil their desire
for a child at their
preferred time.



39 per cent
reported that financial limitations had
affected, or would affect, their ability
to realize their desired family size.

Nearly
1 in 5
said fears about the future, such
as climate change, environmental
degradation, wars and pandemics,
would lead or had led to them
having fewer children than desired.





Unpacking barriers to choice

The leading barrier to having children across all countries surveyed was financial: 39 per cent of respondents said financial limitations had led, or likely would lead, to having fewer children than desired. Gender inequality also plays an outsized role in constraining choice: Women were nearly twice as likely as men (13 per cent compared with 8 per cent) to cite the unequal division of domestic labour as a factor in not reaching their fertility goals.

Many governments are looking for ways to incentivize higher birth rates, but for many people it is restrictive policies, unaffordable healthcare and inequality that thwart their desire to have children. Persistent gender inequality has been linked to fertility decline in countries with sub-replacement fertility, for example. Same-sex couples and single people are often denied access to fertility services. And in sub-Saharan Africa, infertility is a significant, but neglected, barrier to desired parenthood.

Yet rather than expanding choice, some policymakers are limiting it – in extreme cases, even restricting access to contraception in an attempt to sway birth rates.

These measures not only undermine the reproductive rights and agency of women and girls, they are also likely to be counterproductive. Policies that are coercive, or even *perceived* as coercive, can trigger unintended consequences as both women and men seek to assert their reproductive autonomy. In places where abortion is prohibited, for example, some have sought elective sterilization, while others have experienced secondary infertility as a consequence of unsafe abortion.

Planning for families

The solution to the crisis of reproductive agency is to remove barriers to the free exercise of choice. That means creating systems that respect individuals' reproductive aspirations, including:

- **Making parenthood accessible and affordable** through family-friendly policies such as affordable childcare and paid leave for all caretakers.
- **Assisting young people** in their transition to adulthood with secure jobs and affordable housing.
- **Promoting gender-equal partnerships** in which women are not disproportionately responsible for childcare, and in which men experience the rewards of caretaking.
- **Support families** in all their diversity.
- **Recognize immigration** as a way to address declines in economic productivity and workforce shortages.
- **Secure reproductive health and rights for all**, including accurate information about fertility.
- **Enable all people to decide** freely on the number, spacing and timing of their children – whether they want to have many children, few children or none at all.

Importantly, policymakers must also listen to the voices of young people, whose concerns about the future will be reflected in the choices they make about raising families. Young people who feel hopeful about the future are more likely to pursue the lives they want for themselves and their families.

Ultimately, the real solution to the crisis in reproductive agency is building a more equitable, sustainable and caring world that supports people in having the families they aspire to. As one youth activist shared, “Young people are not just thinking about their future children – they are thinking about the world those children will inherit.”



Ensuring rights and choices for all

United Nations Population Fund
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158
212-297-5000 • www.unfpa.org • @UNFPA

Cover image by Graham Dean