Declining Birth Rates No Cause for Alarm

By Nelly Madegwa

After decades of efforts to reduce the fertility rate, Kenyan women are having fewer children, from eight children per woman in the 1970s to three in 2022.

According to Yohannes Dibaba Wadoa, a research scientist at APHRC specialised in sexual and reproductive health rights, the decline in fertility and birth rates is driven by socio-economic changes such as changing marriage and family formation patterns, increased use of contraception and access to healthcare, improved child survival, and women’s education and their increased involvement in modern society. Improved income and employment opportunities for both women and men have also led to the desire for fewer children.

“Women’s role has changed. They are perceived as equal to men and engage in productive employment rather than being segregated into childbearing and rearing roles,” said Wadoa, adding that improved healthcare and desire for fewer children lead to increased use of contraceptives. For instance, the percentage of married women who use contraceptives in Kenya increased from 33 per cent in 1993 to 63 per cent in 2022, according to data from the Demographic and Health Surveys.

Financial concerns could also be a factor, going by the concerns raised by respondents to an informal survey by the Africa Women Journalism Project (AWJP) shared on social media platforms. Many of the 39 respondents said they had delayed childbearing or restricted the number of children they had due to financial instability.
One respondent aged between 20 and 24 years said she wanted to have four children in future after working on financial stability to provide a happy life for her children. Yet another (in the 25-29 years age group) said she wanted to have two children and was laying an economic foundation for their future.

“I’m a student. Having a child at this point in my life will make me vulnerable and expose me to financial constraints,” she said, adding that society restricts what she should be doing at a certain age.

One man in his thirties (30-34 years) also cited financial stability, saying that he planned to have four children if his fortunes changed and if he could provide a better future for them; coming from a poor family, he had worked hard in school to break the cycle of poverty, but unemployment stands in the way of creating a better life for himself and subsequently keeps him from starting a family.

“I have been unemployed for 10 years since I graduated, so starting a family is a challenge. I also come from a history of poverty. I worked so hard in school to live a better life, but it’s like I am in a vicious cycle of poverty.”

At 27.357 births per 1000 people, the current birth rate is a 1.2 per cent decline from 2022, a trend that has provoked conversations about what that means for the Kenyan population. Globally, the UNFPA’s State of the World Population Report 2023 revealed widespread “population anxieties” that have governments adopting policies to raise, lower or maintain fertility rates. In countries with lower fertility rates, there have been concerns about the ageing population and the anticipated consequences such as an additional strain on social security services, with fewer workers expected to fund the increasing pension and healthcare needs of a greying population.

He had worked hard in school to break the cycle of poverty, but unemployment stands in the way of creating a better life for himself and subsequently keeps him from starting a family.

Some of these sentiments were expressed by respondents of the AWJP’s informal survey, with 13 per cent of the respondents expressing worry or concern about Kenya’s declining birth rate. However, the majority – Nearly half (49 per cent) of the 39 respondents – expressed positive sentiment towards Kenya’s declining birth rates, while a third (28 per cent) said it doesn’t matter. Most of the respondents (27) were female and 44 per cent were happy with the decline, while 57 per cent of the seven men who responded were content with the declining birth rates.

Most of the respondents who expressed positive sentiment about the declining birth rate were in the 25-29 years age group and had never been married, while those aged 35 years and above expressed concern about the declining birth rate, citing economic concerns, career, breakdown of values and change in priorities.
While most of the respondents did not have children, many of those who did had one or two and a good number said they did not plan to have more.

Since adopting its first family planning policy in 1967, Kenya’s goal has been to increase the use of contraceptives and reduce the fertility rate, which according to the latest National Family Planning Guidelines for Service Providers (6th edition) plays a key role in the achievement of national and international goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A lower population through women having fewer children is expected to lead to development by reaping from the demographic dividend - having more people of working age to enhance productivity and drive economic growth.

Subsequently, the updated guidelines published in 2019 recommended more investments to accelerate rapid fertility decline. However, the current government reduced the allocation towards procurement of family planning and reproductive health commodities from KSh1.2 billion (2022-2023 financial year) to KSh1 billion for the 2023-2024 financial year, a deficit of 200 million.
Since adopting its first family planning policy in 1967, Kenya’s goal has been to increase the use of contraceptives and reduce the fertility rate.

Even as investments that would lead to a decline in fertility and yield a demographic dividend reduce, the guidelines note that “the demographic dividend is not automatic or guaranteed – it is earned through economic reforms that create jobs, investments in human capital and efficient governance”.

The declining fertility and birth rate could yield a dividend for Kenya, says Wadoa. “Birth rate is one of the key drivers for population growth or decline along with mortality (death) and migration. A falling birth rate brings about a decline in the rate at which the population changes from time to time. In Kenya, the rate of population growth declined from about 3.5 per cent in 1980 to about two per cent in 2020 due to declines in the birth rate. During the same time, the average number of children per woman declined from 7 children to 3.4 children. This has various implications for women, children, families and societies at large,” he says.

For one, fewer and well-spaced pregnancies are beneficial for the health and survival of the mother and the newborn. The converse is true: With too many births, closely spaced births and births at an older age, women may lack the strength and health to withstand the complications of pregnancy.

Secondly, as observed in national policies, a falling fertility rate means a lesser child dependency burden at the household and societal level, which reduces expenses on food, education and health services. Fewer children mean families can spend more on food and invest more in education and health services instead of struggling to meet the needs of many children.

A falling birth rate benefits a country’s development, particularly if investments are made in the education and skills of the working-age population (labour force). This demographic dividend will be larger the faster the birth rate falls.

“For women, a declining birth rate offers them the opportunity to engage in economic and social activities instead of spending their most productive years on childbearing and rearing,” Wadoa said.

A falling birth rate benefits a country’s development, particularly if investments are made in the education and skills of the working-age population.

Wadoa, however, warned of a relentless lowering of the birth rate which he said might create momentum for future population decline. He explained that a low birth rate reduces the population, not at all ages, but among the young, which leads to a smaller workforce and an older population and this has negative implications for economic productivity and per capita income growth.

Falling fertility rates could also lead to population declines in the long term (such as those in European countries), population ageing and a shortage of labour. Nevertheless, countries like Kenya will not experience such demographic challenges in the near future, even though the decline in fertility rates in Africa and in other low- and middle-income countries of the world is the result of years of population policies and programmes that focused on reducing fertility rates.

Kenya, for instance, launched a family planning programme in 1967 to reduce the fertility rate, which stood at eight children per woman in the 1970s. Over the years, the fertility rate has fallen to the current 3.4 in 2022.
For several years, especially before the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) that was held in Cairo in 1994, the discussion around population growth centred on the implications of rapid population growth for socio-economic development and environmental sustainability.

It was believed that rapid population growth in Low and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) contributes to poverty, environmental degradation and conflicts, while the slow population growth in the developed world is leading to a shortage of labour force, population ageing, and social crisis in the long term.

Several Low and Middle-income countries (LMICs) have employed various strategies including educational campaigns, increased availability and affordability of contraceptives, improvements in healthcare infrastructure, and empowering women to make informed decisions about their reproductive health and use modern methods of contraception to bring down fertility rates and reduce population growth.

Policies adopted to manage population growth differ from country to country. For example, while Kenya adopted policies that promoted family planning programmes and created awareness of the various methods available, China adopted a one-child policy in 1979 which restricted couples from having more than one child. This was enforced by a variety of methods, including financial incentives.
for compliance, promotion of contraceptives, and while not endorsed by the government, compulsory sterilisations and forced abortions were part of the policy.

China’s one-child policy remained in place until January 2016 when it was amended to allow couples to have two children. But even after the policy was amended, couples still hesitate to have a second child for reasons such as concerns about their ability to afford another child, availability of childcare, and worries about how having another child would affect their careers, especially for mothers. Furthermore, decades of messaging and policies devoted to limiting family size to just one child succeeded in ingraining the viewpoint that having one child was preferable.

With the ICPD, the debate shifted from a demographic target (of reducing the fertility rate to 2.6 children per woman by 2030) to ensuring the upholding of people’s reproductive rights. This is the message Wadoa says should take centre stage, and something the UNFPA’s recent report titled Billion Lives, Infinite Possibilities: The Case for Rights and Choices, highlighted, noting that efforts to influence fertility rates can erode women’s rights.

Decades of messaging and policies devoted to limiting family size to just one child succeeded in ingraining the viewpoint that having one child was preferable.

This is often evident in discussions about declining fertility and birth rates, which often incorporate anti-feminist, nationalistic and misogynistic views, with women being viewed as baby-making machines. Their choice on whether to have or when to have children is often criticised as them abandoning the primary role of their existence.

According to Wadoa, the focus of population programmes should be ensuring the reproductive health and the rights of women, girls and men by providing access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. This recognises that people have the right to give birth to the number of children they want, when they want.

Moreover, the ICPD made it clear that women and couples have the fundamental right to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights. Thus, discussion about population growth should consider reproductive rights rather than demographic targets that aim to reduce or increase birth rates.

This article was produced as part of the Aftershocks Data Fellowship (22-23) with support from the Africa Women’s Journalism Project (AWJP) in partnership with The ONE Campaign and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ).

Published by the good folks at The Elephant.

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on Twitter.