

# The Diversity and Dynamics of Low Fertility

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In some European countries, such as France, the issue of birth rates and fertility had more or less disappeared from public debate. However, after more than a decade of continuous decline and reaching historically low levels in recent years, the issue has returned to the forefront of concerns in many countries. Although fertility is a private matter to be protected, it has significant collective repercussions in terms of population decline and, especially, population ageing.

Today, the global total fertility rate stands at an average of just 2.2 children per woman. With the exception of Africa, where the rate is 4.3 children per woman, total fertility rates on all other continents are around or below two children per woman. The lowest levels are currently found in East Asia and Eastern and Southern Europe. The population replacement threshold (approximately 2.1 children per woman) is often used as a benchmark below which fertility is considered 'low'. However, within this 'low fertility' category, there is a wide range of fertility levels, from less than one child per woman (for example, in South Korea) to levels approaching the replacement threshold (for example, in Nepal and Peru). The term 'lowest-low fertility', describing fertility below 1.3 children per woman, was coined to distinguish between different patterns of low fertility. While some countries have experienced low fertility for several decades, others have only recently begun to do so. It appears to be a shared reality for a significant proportion of the world's population: around two-thirds of the current global population live in a country with low fertility. There is therefore a strong and pressing need to better understand the mechanisms underlying low fertility, and to highlight any spatial and social diversity in behaviour.

Although theories of demographic transition have been useful in understanding the shift from high to low fertility, they offer little insight into how fertility evolves once the replacement level has been reached. Much debate in population studies has focused on the long-term maintenance of fertility below 2.1 children per woman, the possibility of stabilisation and the level at which this might occur. Nevertheless, as recent developments in many European countries have shown, it remains difficult to understand and anticipate low fertility rates and how they will evolve.

**This issue of *Space Populations Societies (Espace Populations Sociétés)* aims to contribute to a better understanding of low fertility by focusing on the spatial dimension.** Contributions may focus on the intensity of the phenomenon (e.g. birth rate, total fertility rate, total children ever born) and/or its timing (e.g. delayed childbearing, declining fertility at younger ages, birth intervals), or changes in family situations affecting fertility (e.g. unpartnered/single individuals, childless couples). **This issue is open to contributions falling within one of the following four themes:**

**1. The spatial dimension of the phenomenon.** Globally, low fertility levels vary significantly across countries. While a great deal of research uses the country level to study low fertility, studies examining contrasts between geographical categories — i.e. between regions, urban and rural areas, cities of different sizes, etc. — remain scarce. Articles may address spatial structures and dynamics.

Sub-national analyses are particularly encouraged. Is similar heterogeneity observed across territories within the same country or region? Are some territories resistant to this trend, and if so, why? How have the spatial patterns of fertility changed over time? Has low fertility diffused spatially? Do territories follow distinct trajectories?

**2. The social dimension of the phenomenon.** Are low fertility rates and the associated demographic parameters, such as delayed childbearing, high rates of infertility and contraception, observed across all social groups? As was the case in the past with contraceptive use, are there pioneering groups or social gradients in these behaviours?

**3. The factors 'explaining' the phenomenon.** How can we explain current low fertility levels and any spatial and social differences? There are multiple explanatory factors. Fertility is sensitive to economic conditions, and both ancient and recent history have shown that it does not sit well with crisis situations. The multifaceted crises that we have experienced over the past twenty years, including financial and socio-economic crises, the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 virus, environmental crises, housing and energy crises, geopolitical tensions, and the rise of authoritarian regimes, as well as the instability of family and career trajectories, create an environment that is particularly anxiety-inducing and does not encourage people to have children. The focus is often on the high cost of housing, which may prevent couples from having the number of children they would like. But what about the effectiveness of social policies, the availability and quality of childcare services, work-life balance, changing family structures and the overall shift in values?

**4. A post-transitional stabilisation of fertility?** For half a century, many Western countries have had fewer than 2.1 children per woman, with periods of decline and recovery. We need to consider whether these low fertility rates are reversible and distinguish between major societal changes and cyclical effects (e.g. crises).

## Guidelines for articles

- Articles may be submitted in English or French.
- To fit within the scope of the journal, articles must address one of the above themes through their spatial and/or social dimension.
- Articles may be empirical, or they may offer theoretical reflections or address methodological issues.
- Today's low fertility rates are not merely a cyclical phenomenon. They are also part of a long-term trend. Furthermore, other historical periods have also been characterised by low fertility, delayed childbearing and a rejection of children. The current situation can be examined in light of past periods. Articles may adopt a historical and comparative perspective.
- All spatial scales are welcome, including intra-urban, regional, sub-national and international.
- Since low fertility is not exclusive to Northern countries, articles may focus on populations from any region of the world.

## Deadlines

- Deadline for submission of article proposals (title and abstract of approximately 1–2 pages): 30 May 2026
- Selection of abstracts by the Editorial Board: 10 June 2026
- Deadline for submission of the full manuscript: 1 November 2026
- Publication guidelines: <https://journals.openedition.org/eps/3344>

## Contacts details

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