

## The Decline in Birth Rates and Its Implications for Older Adults and the Oldest-Old

Demographic indicators in Argentina show a sustained decline in birth rates in recent years<sup>1</sup>. This phenomenon, along with the increase in life expectancy, has generated concern in both society and the media<sup>2</sup>. It is striking that just a decade ago, the main concern was the uncontrolled growth of the population, and today, in a 180-degree turn, warnings are raised about the decrease in births.

We are undergoing a demographic transition, which, far from being recent, has historical roots. Women have always sought to limit the number of children and families to reduce their size<sup>3</sup>. The so-called “replacement rate” –the number of births needed to maintain population stability–, set at 2.1 children per woman of childbearing age, has already been questioned by organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)<sup>4</sup>. When this rate falls, the young population declines and the number of older people increases, affecting multiple dimensions: economy, labor market, health, education, environment, and social sustainability.

This change, which Europe experienced more than a century ago, the United States in the mid-20th century, and Latin America in recent decades<sup>5</sup>, should not cause alarm but rather drive innovative public policies. The great challenge will be to design fair and sustainable pension systems<sup>6</sup>. Believing that these changes can be solved by encouraging women to have more children reflects a reductionist and unacceptable view.

From bioethics, tools can be provided that respect individual autonomy, avoiding coercive measures. This is not only about reproductive policies: we must also consider intergenerational justice. In modern societies, the right to decide about one’s own reproduction is central: it means being able to choose whether to have children, when, and how many, and to access sexual and reproductive health services, including safe and legal abortion. Turning women into demographic tools denies them their status as subjects of rights.

While it is true that many couples cite economic reasons for not having children, tax incentives have failed in various countries<sup>7</sup>. From the perspective of sustainability, it is also necessary to consider the environmental impact: being born in a large industrialized

megacity is not the same as being born in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>8</sup>. Poorly designed pro-natalist policies can deepen inequalities and harm the planet.

In this context, older adults have also become a focus of debate. Low birth rates affect them emotionally, but also redefine their role in the family. Today, more than 57% of households in Argentina do not live with children or adolescents, compared to 44% three decades ago<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, 12% of the population is over 60, and many will never have grandchildren. The figure of the “functional grandparent” is being replaced by new family models.

The care of older adults, historically entrusted to children and grandchildren –especially women–, must be reconsidered. Family support networks are weakening, while older people demand free time and projects of their own. It is essential that the State create spaces for participation, learning, and well-being for older adults. In addition, virtuality and geographic mobility have transformed the way affective bonds are built. In countries such as Japan or the United Kingdom, there are already institutions dedicated to combating loneliness, considered a contemporary pandemic.

The debate on pension and retirement systems cannot be reduced to the need to have more children. With more than 50% of jobs in the informal sector and a future where employment will be scarce, the idea that the young will finance the old is utopian. The economic view that stresses the need for young people to sustain the elderly is simplistic. Instead of lamenting longevity, we should celebrate it as a social achievement. Today, a 70-year-old has capacities comparable to those of a 53-year-old two decades ago<sup>10</sup>.

The solution does not lie in reversing reproductive rights, but in designing broader policies: inclusive parental leave, accessible care systems, quality education, and technologies that promote new forms of sustainability.

Ultimately, we must build a society that respects individual freedom, promotes intergenerational equity, and embraces family diversity. The current challenges demand responses that are economic, social, and environmental in scope. Only by advancing policies that defend rights and reflect today’s realities can we secure a fair and sustainable future for all generations.

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