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## Global population collapse and the coming battle for women's autonomy

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### [Mannat Vikramaditya Jain](#)

JD Vance's views about "childless cat ladies" and Elon Musk's warnings about low birth rates are the latest in a long line of passionate opinions about women's reproductive preferences. Plato specified 5,040 citizens as the maximum a city-state's resources could support. Kautilya, his contemporary philosopher-statesman, viewed demographics through the prism of political stability. Medieval Islamic and Confucian scholars focused on balancing population with an eye on social cohesion and harmony, and the theologian Thomas Aquinas found the pursuit of social justice to be inseparable from any discussions about a society's ideal population.

This time, it's different. Scientific consensus has emerged around the UN's predictions that the world's population will shrink precipitously after peaking at about ten billion in another fifty years. The average number of children per woman worldwide (the Total Fertility Rate) is already 2.3, down from 5 as recently as the 1950s. For a society's population to remain stable, the replacement rate is about 2.1 children per woman; the weighted TFR for the West is now 1.57.



TFR's are falling at different rates in every country around the world. Given that in no country where the TFR has slipped below replacement levels has it ever risen again, the outcome is clear: the world's population will be several billion less in the coming 100 years or so and may decline to as little as 2-3 billion in several hundred years. A new, smaller world is emerging as rapidly as the populous one born in the 20th century. The math is relatively uncomplicated: If each woman had only one child, the population of every subsequent generation would halve!

This outcome is an unexpected corollary of the most significant uplift in human rights in the history of the world: the rise in social empowerment and economic opportunities for women, which—along with the wide availability of contraception—gave women the freedom to delay or forgo childbirth. Western countries that benefited first from the ideas of the Enlightenment, its focus on individual rights, and post-war economic growth saw their weighted TFR drop first and fastest to 1.57. As the economies of non-Western countries have risen, the TFR's trajectory has shown the same pattern: China's TFR is now about 1.3; India's is at 2.0 and continues to fall. Expectedly, in Africa, the region where industrialization and economic growth arrived last, the TFR still remains high at an average of 4.2, though even there, it has fallen from 7 and continues to fall.

This decline—and the rate at which it is accelerating—is forcing disruptive social and economic consequences. First-order effects are already visible in countries such as Japan and Italy, where stranded real estate, vacant villages, smaller working populations, and a deflationary economy that cannot provide pensions for its senior citizens are affecting every aspect of life.



However, answers to the second-order questions will genuinely transform society. Questions surrounding the price of women's reproductive autonomy, or even more, a woman's role in a society that is facing an existential implosion. Will Margaret Atwood's dystopian vision, where women are subjugated, forced into reproductive slavery, and stripped of their rights under a totalitarian regime,

come to bear? Will higher fertility rates in Islamic countries and sub-Saharan Africa that increase both the global Muslim as well as the global non-White population (what the historian Niall Ferguson calls the “brownisation” of the world) cause global religious and racial tensions to inflame? In the face of accelerating immigration, how far will societies go to protect cultural identity? What will that do to the politics of nations, and what kind of leaders will it propel forward?

All these changes are bound to reignite ancient tensions. In trying to thread a path forward, what can the West learn from the response of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1970s, which panicked and instituted authoritarian policies to control the country’s population through its one-child policy? Seemingly benign questions about the population remain beset with profound ethical dilemmas and risk a new wave of tyranny.

The history of the West is filled with examples of the ease with which the rights of entire sections of society can be easily curtailed in the face of imaginary threats. This time, when the demographic threat is existential and not merely ideological, who will stop political leaders and restless masses from curtailing the freedoms of women who choose to work instead of having children? Or of women who choose not to have children at all? Who will even frame the question of a womb’s true worth without being pilloried, let alone answer it?

The past will likely repeat itself, and societies will be unable to resist the siren song of ‘action.’ We may even be condemned, as were the people of China in the 1970s upon whom the one-child policy was so brutally enforced, to treat the female body as the arena for all policy battles. At its core will be the search for a fundamentally unknowable balance between individual rights on one side, and economic, cultural, and social ambition on the other. And long before we arrive at an answer, we will be forced to answer – and see emerge – how deeply tyrannical a state we are willing to accept. And as has been for thousands of years, the loss will not be uniform; the lash will fall the hardest on women.



In response to existential decline, future societies will be forced to adopt unconventional marital and societal structures. This scenario is not implausible; in its mildest avatar, governments in Russia, Italy, and Japan have already offered tax incentives to promote childbirth and largely failed. The journey from a passive, benign policy to Atwood's dystopia, where the primary function of fertile women is to bear children, can be short. It took only a decade or so of panic in China for the "wan, xi, shao" (the policy of late marriage, birth spacing, and limited fertility) of China in the 1970s to evolve into the brutal One-Child Policy in 1979. It is not inconceivable that practices like polygamy, or scenarios where women's bodies are commodified for reproduction, could be introduced once the rate of population decline accelerates in the coming century.

Ironically, it is not readily apparent if arguments surrounding this issue will be framed through the vocabulary of the Left or the Right. JD Vance may have framed his comments poorly. Still, he is unknowingly forcing a reckoning with the most significant and disturbing policy questions of the next century: Will our future selves retain the wisdom to resist oncoming tyranny in the face of total social and economic upheaval?

*All images created by AI*

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