

8 Billion Strong

At this landmark demographic moment, it can be tempting to draw the easy conclusion that population dynamics are the root cause of multiple, intersecting challenges facing our world.

Some blame dwindling resources and raging conflicts on there being 'too many' of us; others fear falling birth rates will leave the planet devoid of people, with 'too few' of us to sustain life as we know it.

A story of a world with too many. Or a story of a world with too few.

Either option seems to lead us only one way – towards fear, blame, and control.

But the truth is, the number of people was never the problem.

Let's start with the facts.

Asking the right questions

Still wondering whether the world population is at the 'right' level? The question we should be asking is not whether there are too many or too few people on the planet, but whether all individuals are equipped to exercise their basic human rights, including to sexual and reproductive autonomy.

As it stands, only a proportion of humanity has access to these rights.

It's only when we guarantee them for everyone that we will unlock the potential of all people to thrive and adapt to the changing realities of our world.

This year's State of the World Population report makes the case for a world in which each individual is free to choose their reproductive future – a world in which countries build demographic resilience by adapting to population change, rather than attempting to control it.

Population is, essentially, human beings. We must structure our societies to meet the needs of our population as it continues to experience inevitable change. Systems are tools to be used in the service of humanity, not the other way around.

This moment requires us to recognize the potential of all people, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, nationality or ability, so that each person is enabled to contribute positively to our collective future – **a future for all 8 billion of us, a future of infinite possibilities.**



Ensuring rights and choices for all

www.unfpa.org/swp2023



UNFPA state of world population 2023

8 Billion Lives, INFINITE POSSIBILITIES

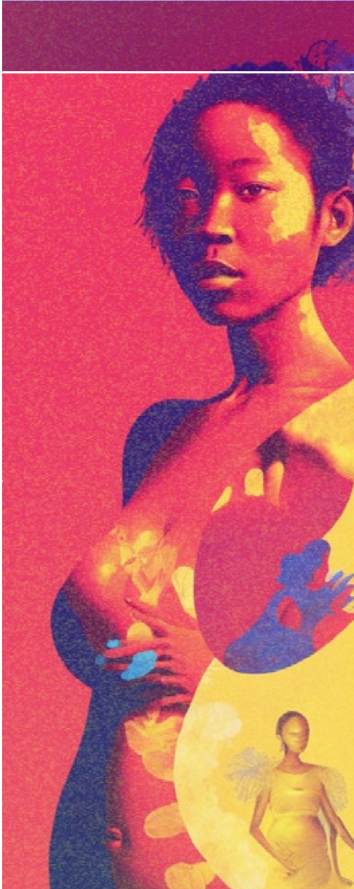
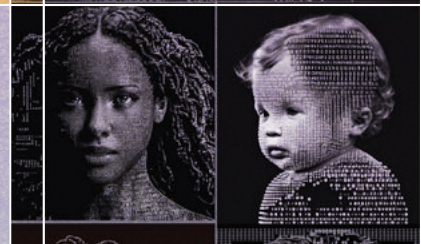
the case for rights and choices

In November 2022, the world's population surpassed 8 billion people.

Our human family is now larger than ever before. Collectively, we live longer and enjoy healthier lives than at any other point in human history.

Yet ours is also a world of anxiety and uncertainty. Challenges like climate change, economic upheaval, conflict and COVID-19 have brought us to a crossroads, where the threat of a worse future for humanity feels just as possible as the promise of a better one.

How do we make sense of these contradictions, and begin solving the pressing problems of our day?



The problem with 'too many'

According to population alarmists, our world is overrun and close to bursting at the seams. Politicians, media pundits and even some academics have asserted that global challenges like economic instability, climate change and resource wars can be pinned on overpopulation – on too much demand and not enough supply.

They argue birth rates are out of control, and point fingers at poor and marginalized communities who have long been accused of reproducing recklessly and prolifically, despite making the smallest contributions to issues such as environmental destruction.

This narrative oversimplifies complex issues and causes real harm. Importantly, it also makes it harder to hold to account those responsible for the urgent issues facing us.

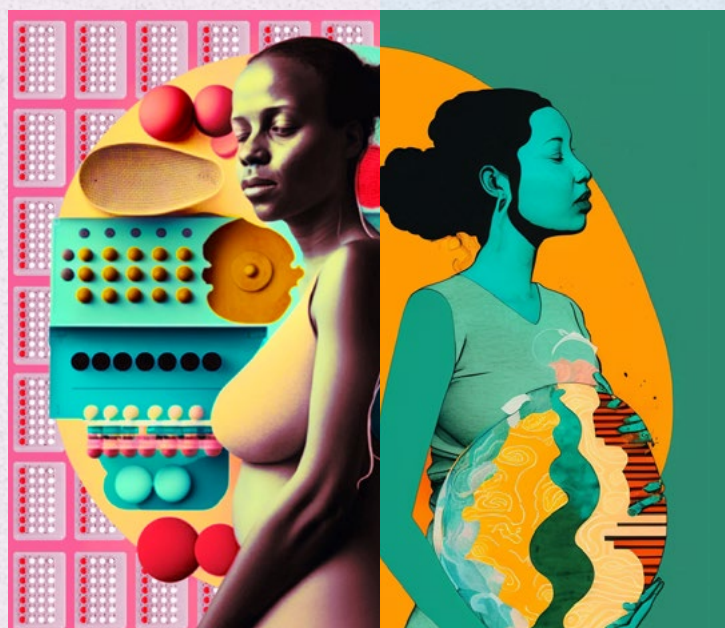
Here are the facts:

- > 2/3 : of the world population is living in a place with sub-replacement fertility
- > 72.8 years : Global life expectancy. Rising lifespans are driving much of population growth - something to be celebrated.
- > 25+ years : Period over which 2/3 of all population growth will be the result of past growth, meaning it will be unaffected by fertility changes
- > 10% : Percentage of the world's population responsible for half of all greenhouse gas emissions. Conflating a rise in emissions with population growth is therefore incorrect.

Changing the narrative

We don't have to adopt the narrative that women's bodies and reproductive choices are the problem and solution to 'overpopulation'. Instead, we can insist that our individual choices are key, and take a sexual and reproductive justice approach to supporting all forms of human progress.

This means investing in education, health care, clean and affordable energy and working towards gender equality, rather than trying to reduce the number of people on our planet.



The problem with 'too few'

While the global population has more than doubled in just 50 years, and the current global fertility rate remains above the so-called 'replacement level' of 2.1 births per woman, an estimated two-thirds of the world's population is now living in a country or area with sub-replacement fertility. This has caused some to begin to sound the alarm about an 'underpopulation crisis'.

They warn that if low fertility rates continue, whole countries or even the human population itself could "collapse."

Here are the facts:

- > 1 : Number of global regions (Europe) expected to see population decrease between 2022 and 2050
- > 1970s : When many countries began to experience sub-replacement-level fertility rates. Still most of their populations did not decline, thanks to immigration.
- > 5 to 2.3 : Fall in average global fertility since the 1950s. Global fertility rate is projected to be 2.1 by 2050.
- > ↓↑ : Population ageing is the natural result of growing longevity and declining fertility rates, a process taking place everywhere.

Changing the narrative

Despite fears that soon there will be 'too few' people to sustain our economies, services and societies, experts say falling birth rates do not spell disaster. Instead, they are hallmarks of demographic transition.

Developments such as rising lifespans and declining global fertility rates are indications of the increasing control that individuals, particularly women, are able to exercise over their reproductive lives – and how quality of life improves with access to rights and choices.

Rights and choices are key

It is the basic right of every individual to decide freely the number, spacing and timing of their children.

As a global society, we must guarantee the ability to make sexual and reproductive health decisions free from discrimination, coercion and violence.

The services to help us reach these reproductive goals must be affordable and accessible, and meet international standards of quality.

These are the goals we must work towards – not the goal of influencing fertility rates, whether high or low. Interventions in this vein are never the answer because these rates are neither inherently good nor bad. With the right approach, resilient societies can thrive, whatever their fertility rate may be.

> Demographic resilience: the quality or state of being able to adapt and thrive amid demographic changes

> 44% : Percentage of partnered women in 68 countries denied bodily autonomy



How do women feel about their reproductive choices?

Unfortunately, the number of children women want to have is often omitted from conversations about birth rates. In reality, women's desired family size often does not match their actual fertility.

This is the result of policies that intentionally or unintentionally make it hard for women to exercise rights and choices.

When we devise population policies that ignore what individuals would choose for themselves, we risk the health and empowerment of our society as a whole. For a population to be maximally healthy and empowered to contribute, innovate and thrive, its people must be guaranteed their rights and choices.

