

The "Birth Dearth" is Highly Selective, Says E " The Environmental Magazine

by E - The Environmental Magazine

No one told Salamatou Adamou about the "birth dearth." A midwife and widow in the drought-stricken African country of Niger, she had already given birth to 12 children by the age of 37. "I am exhausted," she said as she struggled through labor with child number 13. Her large family is not all that unusual in Niger, which has the highest birth rate in the world--eight children for every woman. As E " The Environmental Magazine reports in its November/December 2006 issue (now posted at www.emagazine.com), the birth dearth is certainly real enough. Declining birth rates are evident in many parts of the world. In Germany and Japan the total fertility rate is 1.4; in Italy, Russia and Spain it's 1.3. (The average "replacement level," the level of fertility at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next, is approximately 2.1 globally, adjusting for infant mortality rates.) But the birth dearth is far from universal, and some of the world's poorest (such as Niger) and most populous (like India) countries are still experiencing rapid population growth. And so the current world population of 6.5 billion will continue to zoom upward dramatically. Meanwhile, the United States, with replacement-level fertility but high immigration, is hitting the 300 million mark this fall. In Niger, life expectancy is only 41, near the bottom of world charts. More than a quarter of all children born in Niger fail to reach their fifth birthday. Just four percent of women use modern methods of contraception, and abortion is illegal. The country has the lowest adult literacy rate in the world, only 17 percent. Kenya is a particularly striking case of a nation with high and actually increasing fertility--a situation that owes quite a bit to the Bush administration's foreign policy. Kenya's population rose from 5.4 million in 1948 to more than 30 million today with birth rates as high as 8.1. By the period between 1995 and 1998, a long decline had reduced the rate to 4.7. It seemed to be stepping into line with world trends. But the country's birth rate actually increased slightly between the surveys of 1998 and 2003, from 4.7 to 4.8. According to the Nairobi-based Nation newspaper, the cause is "erratic supply of contraceptives, particularly the pill." It's hardly surprising that contraceptive access is declining in Kenya because one of its biggest family planning donors--the U.S.--is now putting tight strings on contraceptive aid through the application of the Bush Administration's so-called Global Gag Rule. Restrictions of the rule mandate that no U.S. family planning aid can be given to foreign organizations that perform abortions, provide counseling and referral for abortion; or advocate it. Kenya's two largest family planning providers refused to sign onto the Bush policy and so forfeited a considerable amount of U.S. Aid for International Development (USAID) funding. Many clinics (often the only source of health care for Kenya's rural poor) were forced to close. In Kenya today, nearly half of all births are said to be unwanted or unplanned. Clearly, this is a country that would join the birth dearth trend if it could. But Kenya had 33.8 million people in 2005, and it could have 64 million by 2050. There are many Nigers and Kenyas, and they're still growing rapidly. The UN reports that Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger and Uganda are all expected to triple in population by 2050. The scholars who study and publicize the birth dearth don't have much to say about continued population growth in the developing world. TV personality Ben Wattenberg (who coined the "birth dearth" phrase) is somewhat selective with data in his book, *Fewer: How the New Demography of Depopulation Will Shape Our Future* (Ivan R. Dee). He uses a full page to show 63 countries with below-replacement-level fertility in 2000-2005, but no comparable chart on countries whose fertility is higher than replacement level. And, indeed, today 35 developing countries (30 of them "least developed") have birth rates that are above five children per woman. "Ben Wattenberg and company seem to me to be deliberately ignoring that there are still almost 100 million births a year," says Alex Marshall of the UN Population Fund. The birth dearth idea has caught on in the mainstream media. In late December 2005, the ABC program 20/20 with Barbara Walters included a segment from correspondent John Stossel entitled "Ten Media-Fed Myths." Number Seven was "The World is Getting Too Crowded." Sure, there are six billion people on the earth, Stossel proclaimed, but it's nothing to worry about. "Our planet is huge," he said. "In fact, we could take the entire world population and move everyone to the state of Texas, and the population density there would still be less than that of New York City." This of course proves nothing, because it confuses overpopulation with overcrowding. As Population Connection has pointed

out, “Yes, they could all fit in Texas, but they'd be drinking each other's sewage. We are not limited by space. The limiting factors are arable land which can be used to grow crops, topsoil on the arable land, drinkable water free of disease from disposal of sewage or industrial pollutants, fossil fuels and mineral resources. • Many of the world's most populous nations, including India and China, are expected to see large population increases well before they start to decline. Even with the “birth dearth,” nine or 10 billion people will likely share the planet's strained resources by 2050.

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