

Aligning rights, aspirations, and policy responses on fertility and for families

Abhijit Visaria

Technical Advisor, Population Dynamics

United Nations Population Fund, Asia and the Pacific Regional Office

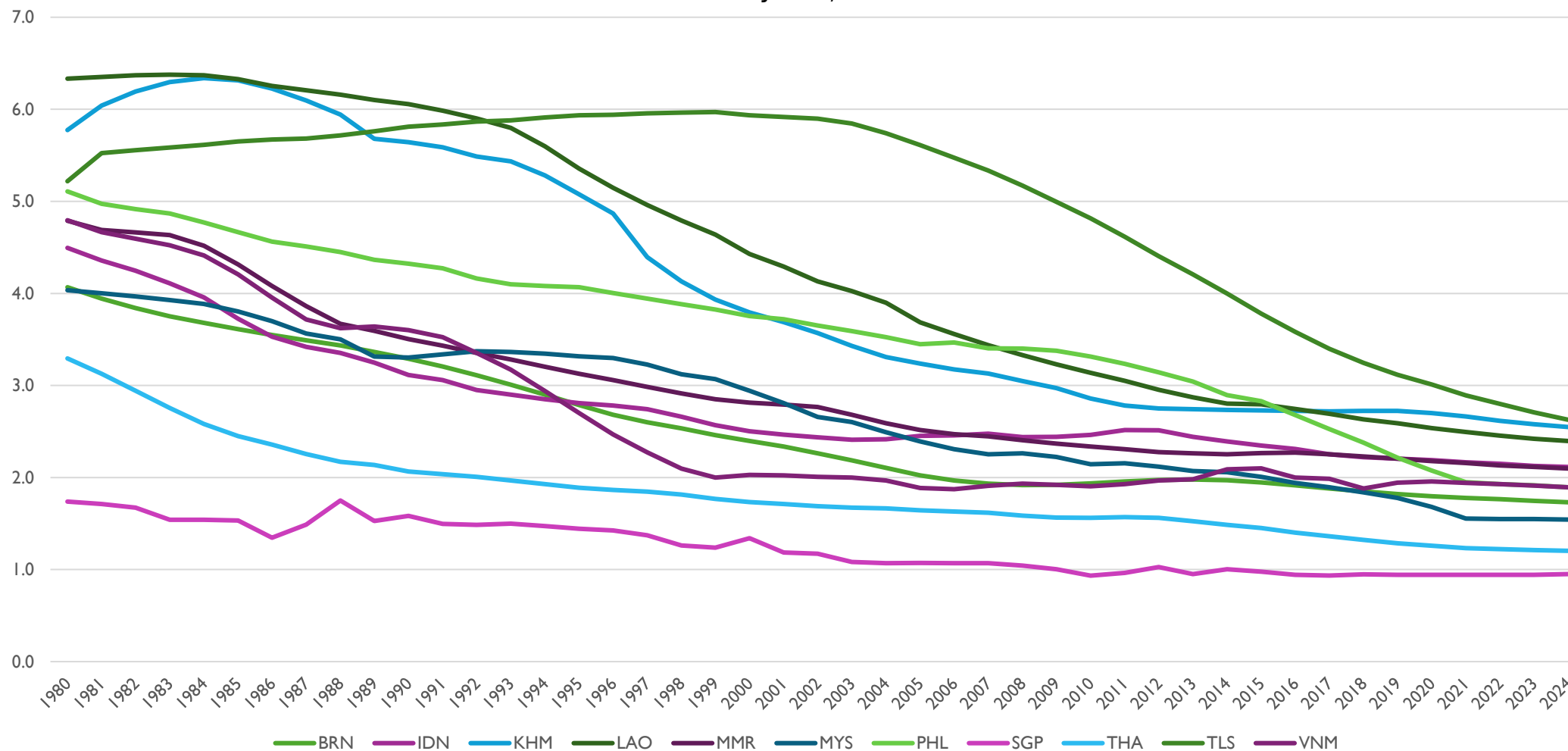
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Fertility transition is well and truly underway



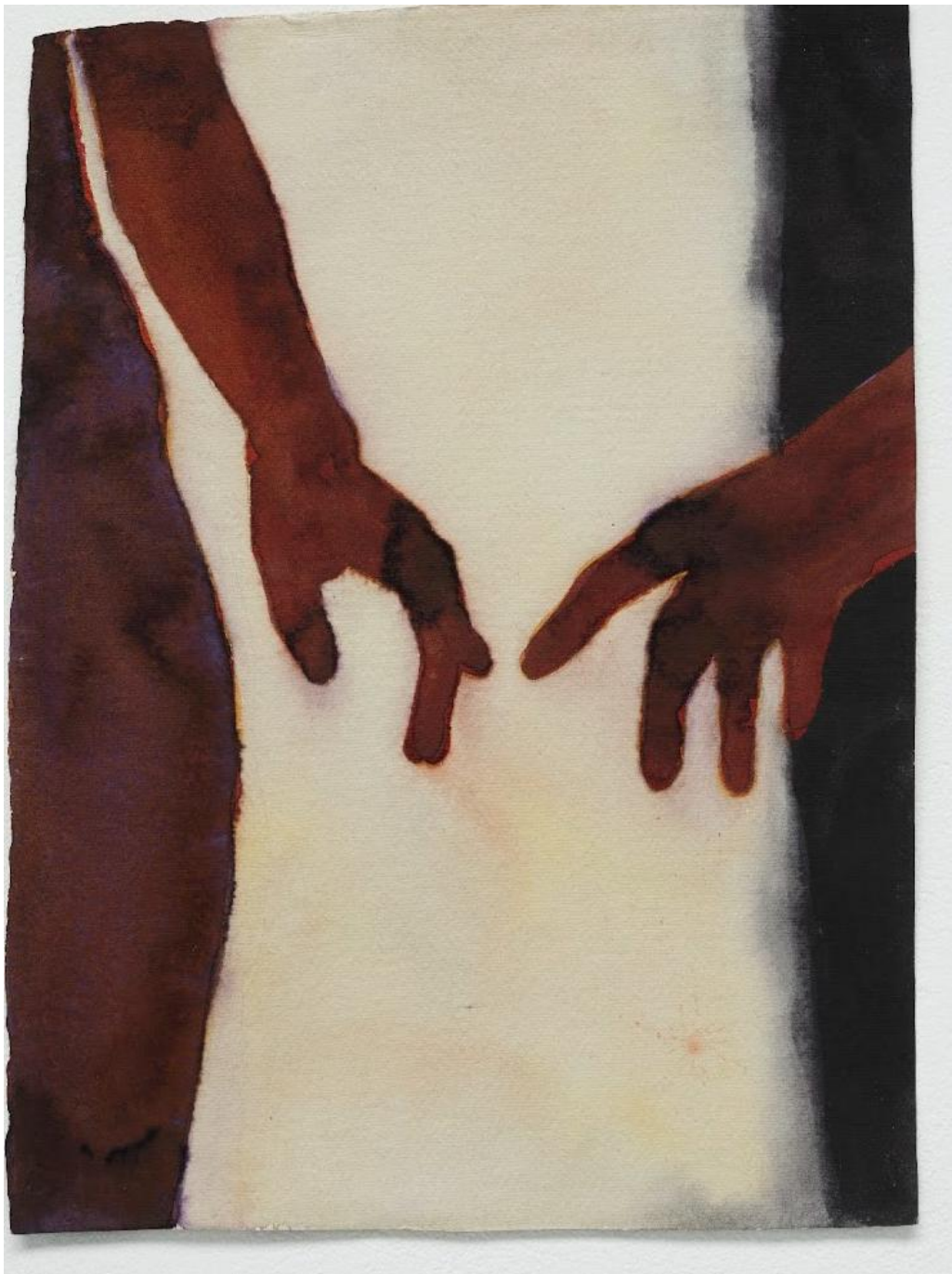
Total fertility rate, 1980-2024



Total fertility rate explained



- Total fertility rate is the average number of children a woman would have over her lifetime if she experienced the current age-specific fertility rates throughout her reproductive years
- Fundamentally, this is a synthetic measure
 - It is theoretical, and not based on the actual number of children a real group of women have over their reproductive lives
- TFR is a period measure
 - Age-specific birth rates of women of different ages (or different cohorts) at one given point in time (e.g., in a year) are combined to form a given year's TFR
- TFR does not predict how many children women will have on average over their lifetimes
- Why is this a useful measure?
 - Requires only one year of data; Comparable



*State of World
Population 2025*

The pursuit of
reproductive agency
in a changing world

Based on new data...



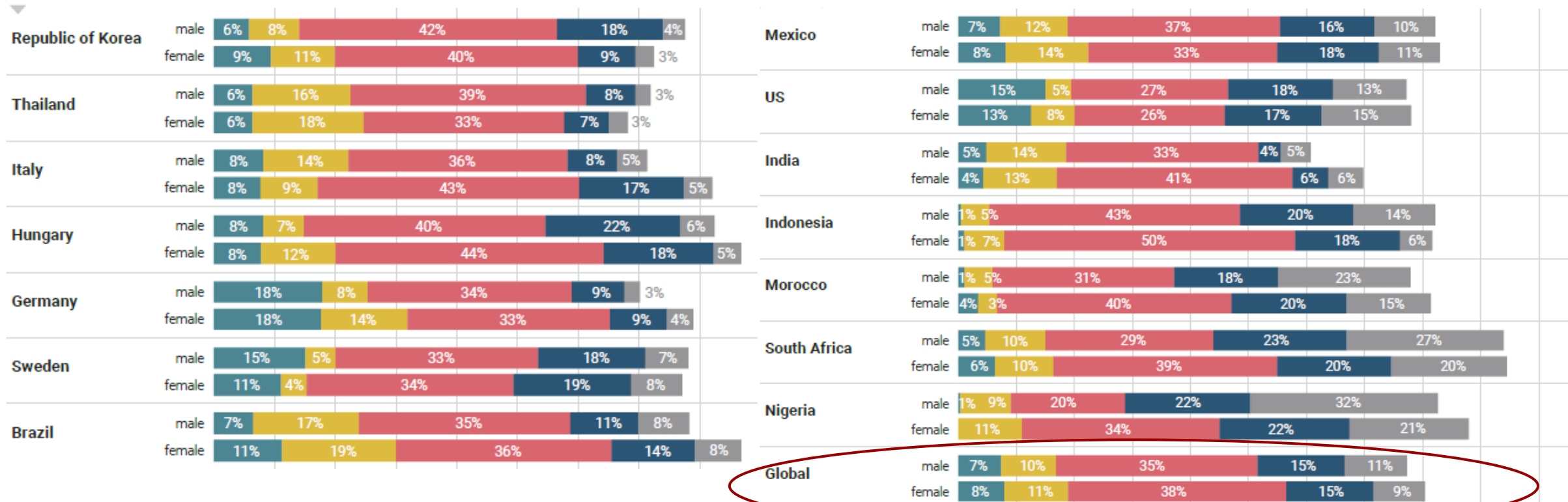
- In November-December 2004, UNFPA and YouGov surveyed men and women aged 18+ in 14 countries, home to 37% of the global population
- Brazil, Germany, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Italy, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Republic of Korea, South Africa, Sweden, Thailand, USA
- Online national panels
- Respondents without children were asked: *If you could choose the exact number of children you would like to have in your lifetime, how many would you ideally have?*
- Respondents with children were asked: *If you could go back to the time when you had no children and choose the exact number of children you would like to have in your lifetime, how many would you have ideally chosen?*
- After asking about ideal number, respondents aged 18-49 were asked: *How many children do you expect to have?*, and respondents aged 50+ were asked: *How many children do you have?*

Ideally...

Respondents' ideal number of children, by country

Countries listed from low to high total fertility

0 children 1 child 2 children 3 children 4 or more children



In Asia...

		Ideal number of children					
		Percentage of responses, including don't know / prefer not to say responses					
Respondent		0	1	2	3	4+	Don't know/Refused
India	Male	5	14	33	4	5	39
	Female	4	13	41	6	6	30
Indonesia	Male	1	5	43	20	14	17
	Female	1	7	50	18	6	18
Thailand	Male	6	16	39	8	3	28
	Female	6	18	33	7	3	33
S Korea	Male	6	8	42	18	4	22
	Female	9	11	40	9	3	28

Only among those with a numerical response, i.e., after omitting “don’t know/ refused” responses

		Ideal number of children				
Respondent		0	1	2	3	4+
India	Male	8	23	54	7	8
	Female	6	19	59	9	9
Indonesia	Male	1	6	52	24	17
	Female	1	9	61	22	7
Thailand	Male	8	22	54	11	4
	Female	9	27	49	10	4
S Korea	Male	8	10	54	23	5
	Female	13	15	56	13	4

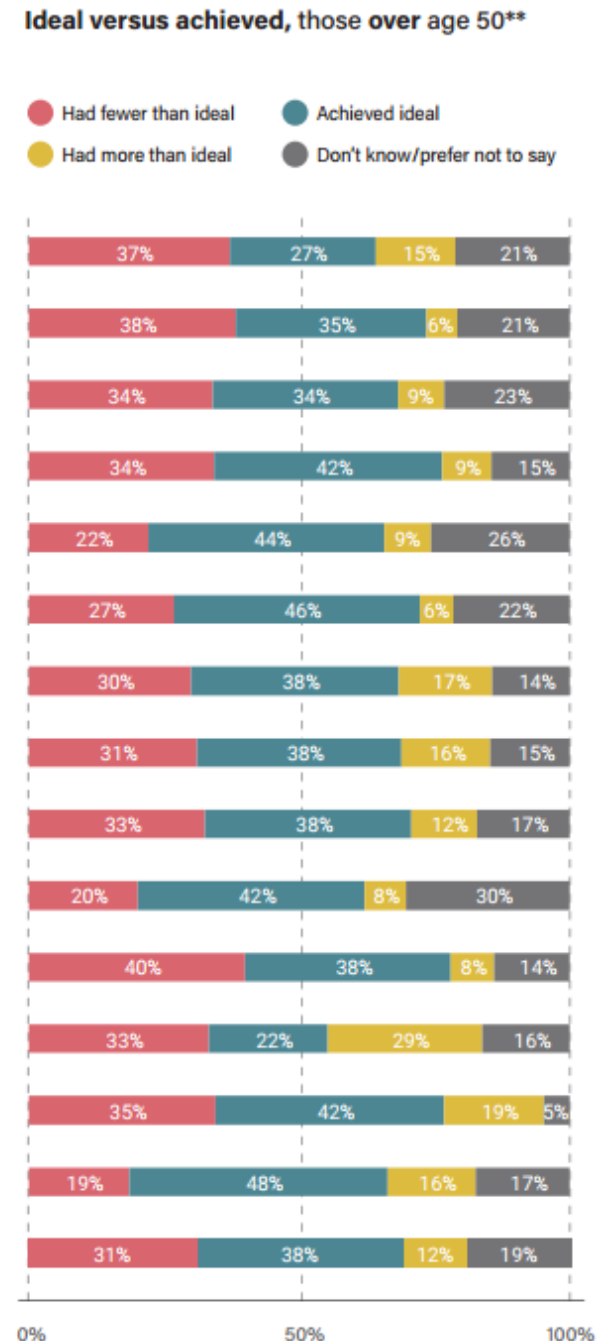
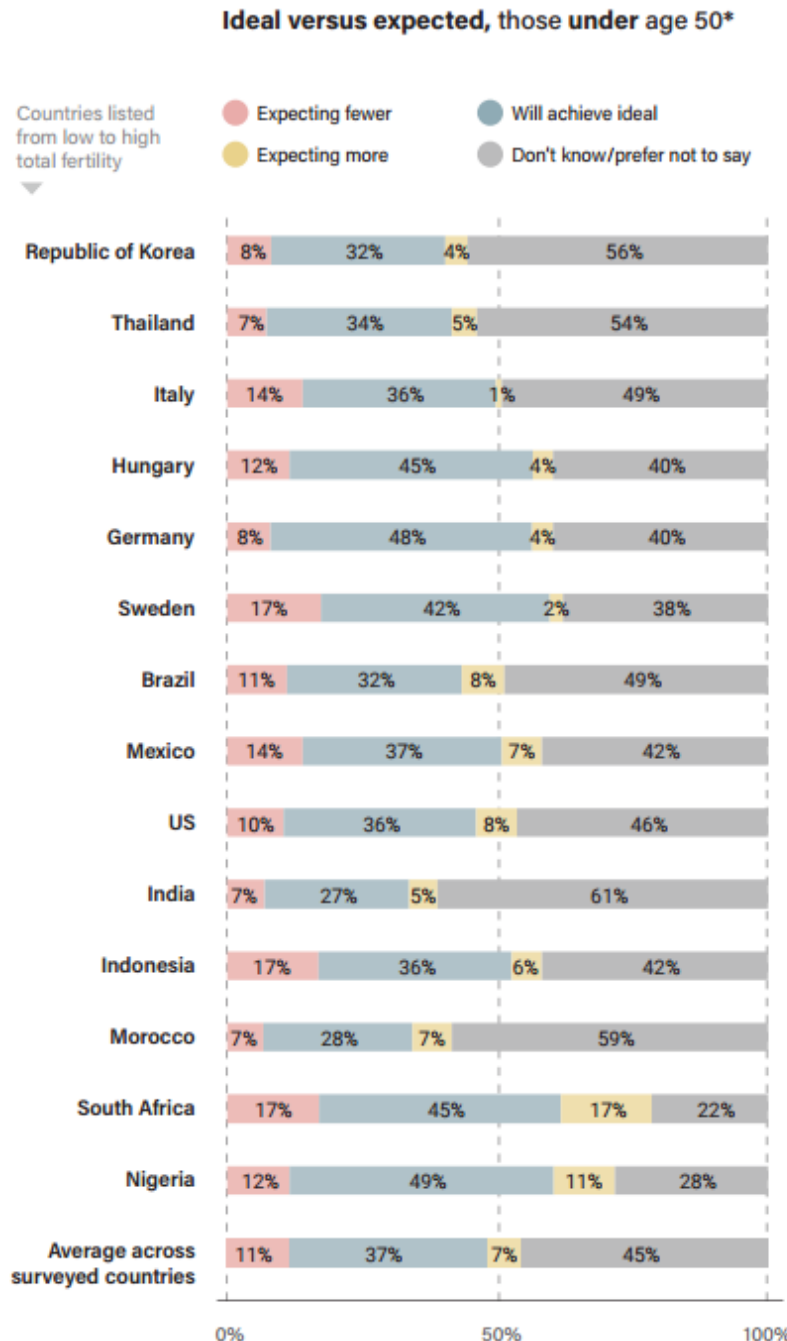
Difference between respondents' ideal and expected/achieved number of children



Among respondents aged 18-49, only 37% said that they expect to meet their ideal number of children

11% of reproductive-age adults said they expect to have **fewer** children than they would ideally want

This ranges from 7% in India, Thailand and Morocco to 17% in South Africa and Sweden



Among those aged 50+, 38% achieved their ideal number of children

31% had **fewer** children than they desired

This ranges from 19% in Nigeria to 40% in Indonesia

Those aged 18-49 are potentially still within reproductive period, whereas those aged 50+ have likely completed their reproductive period

Barriers to realizing fertility goals



Barriers to having children

Survey responses to the question: "In your personal situation, what factors have led or are likely to lead you to have fewer children than you initially desired?"

Countries listed from low to high total fertility ▼	Health			Economic				Desires changed/ influenced		Concerns over future		Other factors		
	Infertility or difficulty conceiving	Barriers to fertility or pregnancy related medical care	Poor general health or chronic illnesses	Financial limitations	Housing limitations (e.g., lack of space, high house prices/rent costs)	Lack of sufficient/ quality childcare options	Unemployment/ job insecurity	Change of heart (deciding I want fewer children)	My partner wanting fewer children	Concerns about political or social situation (e.g., wars, pandemics)	Concerns about climate change or environmental degradation	Lack of a (suitable) partner	Insufficient involvement of my partner in housework/ childcare	Pressure or force from the doctors or health workers resulting in having fewer children
Republic of Korea	12%	6%	11%	58%	31%	28%	26%	14%	13%	8%	8%	10%	19%	3%
Thailand	19%	10%	17%	51%	21%	17%	33%	12%	9%	23%	18%	25%	11%	6%
Italy	15%	6%	13%	29%	14%	12%	30%	7%	11%	19%	11%	17%	8%	1%
Hungary	10%	4%	8%	34%	20%	11%	16%	9%	8%	10%	4%	17%	5%	4%
Germany	11%	3%	10%	25%	18%	12%	10%	11%	11%	13%	9%	15%	8%	2%
Sweden	10%	3%	9%	19%	6%	3%	5%	4%	9%	6%	4%	17%	5%	4%
Brazil	8%	7%	13%	39%	18%	8%	26%	18%	12%	21%	11%	15%	8%	5%
Mexico	8%	7%	8%	35%	23%	14%	21%	12%	8%	21%	14%	16%	8%	5%
US	16%	8%	12%	38%	15%	12%	17%	12%	19%	11%	7%	18%	11%	6%
India	13%	14%	15%	38%	22%	18%	21%	17%	19%	14%	16%	12%	15%	14%
Indonesia	6%	9%	10%	39%	22%	6%	20%	19%	17%	14%	9%	4%	16%	7%
Morocco	10%	4%	19%	47%	20%	11%	15%	8%	17%	8%	4%	9%	13%	4%
South Africa	15%	8%	13%	53%	17%	9%	33%	17%	18%	15%	9%	18%	9%	5%
Nigeria	14%	11%	13%	32%	14%	17%	16%	17%	19%	12%	10%	9%	10%	8%
All countries – total	12%	7%	12%	39%	19%	12%	21%	13%	13%	14%	9%	14%	11%	5%

Barriers to realizing fertility goals



Barriers to having children

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Mexico	8%	7%	8%	35%	23%	14%	21%	12%	8%	21%	14%	16%	8%	5%
US	16%	8%	12%	38%	15%	12%	17%	12%	19%	11%	7%	18%	11%	6%
India	13%	14%	15%	38%	22%	18%	21%	17%	19%	14%	16%	12%	15%	14%
Indonesia	6%	9%	10%	39%	22%	6%	20%	19%	17%	14%	9%	4%	16%	7%
Morocco	10%	4%	19%	47%	20%	11%	15%	8%	17%	8%	4%	9%	13%	4%
South Africa	15%	8%	13%	53%	17%	9%	33%	17%	18%	15%	9%	18%	9%	5%
Nigeria	14%	11%	13%	32%	14%	17%	16%	17%	19%	12%	10%	9%	10%	8%
All countries – total	12%	7%	12%	39%	19%	12%	21%	13%	13%	14%	9%	14%	11%	5%

The real fertility crisis: A matter of rights, not rates



- Real crisis is not about too many or too few births
- It is about people unable to achieve their reproductive goals
- Fertility rates are often assumed to reflect free choice, but this assumption ignores the lived realities and aspirations of people
- Individuals are unable to decide if, when, and with whom to have children due to structural and social barriers
- Mismatch between intentions and reality is the "real fertility crisis."

Policy imperative: Enhance reproductive agency



- Enhance the ability of people to make free, informed decisions about reproduction without pressure or constraint
- Reproductive agency is supported by:
 - Access to sexual and reproductive health services
 - Gender-equitable partnerships and household dynamics
 - Legal and policy frameworks that respect autonomy
 - Economic and social conditions that support choice
- Without these enabling factors, people are denied true reproductive choice

Current policy approaches are inadequate



- Fragmented, not holistic enough
- Many countries have tried to increase birth rates through incentives and media campaigns, with little success
- Level of support insufficient
- Short-term financial incentives may help with child-related expenses but do not address long-term insecurity

Empower through education



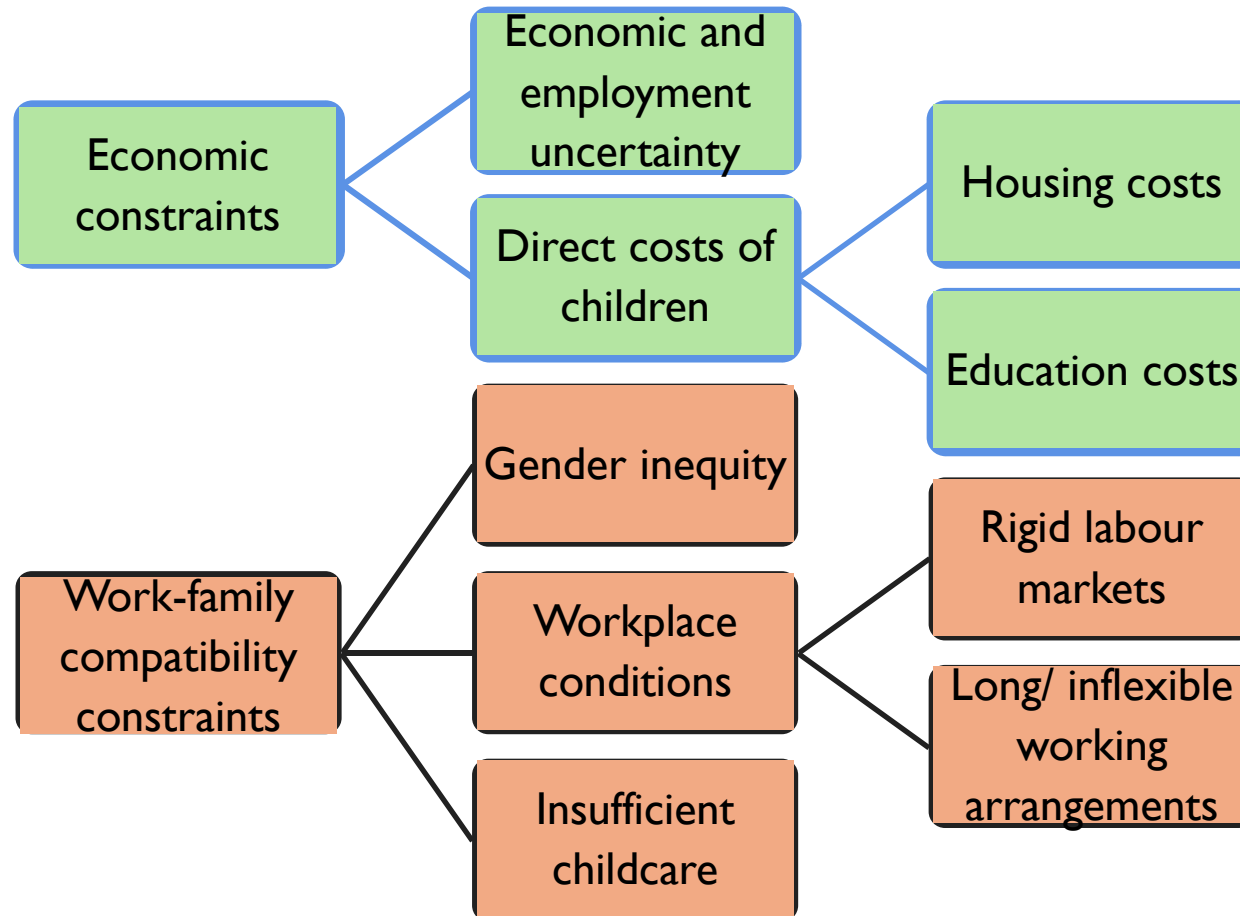
- Comprehensive sexuality education
 - Inclusive of fertility awareness: Fertility decline, role of lifestyle factors
- Unbiased, medically accurate information is needed out-of-school
- Education systems can better accommodate families
 - Parental roles and responsibilities in children's education have increased
 - Prospect of parenthood can be daunting due to pressures and costs

Opportunity to build a supportive environment as a whole



- A 'developmentalist' welfare state in several Asian countries focused on expanding the reach of health and education systems
- Industrial development and economic growth have been priority
- Less focus on family support policies, compounded by growth of service sector jobs with higher impermanence, uncertainty
- Scenario where there appears to be a tradeoff between family formation and employment and personal growth
- Opportunity for creating a supportive environment for individuals and families

Recap: Distal determinants of declining and persistently low fertility



Policy measures focus on:

Flexible work arrangements | Parental leave | Childcare services | Tax benefits | Conditional cash transfers | Housing support | Educational subsidies

Gender in the family and at work: Unequal care burdens limit fertility choices



- Unequal division of care work is a major factor in underachievement of fertility goals
- Norms that place the caregiving burden on women undermine both fertility intentions and women's rights
- 13% of women (vs. 8% of men) said a partner's lack of involvement in care was a key barrier to reaching desired number of children
- Even as men's participation in domestic labour has increased, men are sometimes stigmatized for being caretakers
- Workplace conditions often push women out of the paid workforce
- Reproductive agency must include equality at home and at work

Greater engagement of fathers



- More engaged fathers benefit children, help to promote gender equality
- A father's participation in caretaking influences son's future participation
- Surveys conducted by Equimundo show that 90% of men across 15 countries say they “feel as responsible for care work” as their partner
- More than 80% of men and women in most countries believe boys should learn caretaking skills
- 90% of parents say caring for children is “one of the most enjoyable things in their lives”

Enabling environments not birth targets



- Design and implement policies and programmes not with targets in mind, but to enhance the enabling environment
- Policies for families, not fertility rates
- Key pillars of an enabling environment
 - Full range of affordable, quality, accessible reproductive health services everywhere
 - Fertility care for everyone who needs it
 - Available, affordable, and quality childcare
 - Family-friendly work policies that support caregiving and flexibility
 - Supporting youth transition to a secure and independent adulthood

Final thoughts...



- Delving deeper into different buckets/categories of reasons will tell us a great deal about the state of the economy and society as a whole
- Barriers speak to the aspirations that people have for themselves and their progeny
- Policies that enable choice are policies that enhance shared wellbeing
- When people can form families on their own terms, governments affirm dignity, equality, and trust
- Reproductive agency is not just about individual rights - it reflects our collective values

Thank you!

Abhijit Visaria

UNFPA APRO

visaria@unfpa.org

Is ideal fertility a useful measure?



Two multi-country examples examining the relationship between ideal fertility in early adulthood (when relatively fewer women have started or completed their childbearing years), and completed fertility in later adulthood



Do fertility preferences in early adulthood predict later average fertility outcomes of the same cohort?: Pritchett (1994) revisited with cohort data

Stuart Gietel-Basten^a, Melissa LoPalo^b, Dean Spears^{c,*}, Sangita Vyas^d

^a The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Hong Kong

^b Montana State University, United States of America

^c The University of Texas at Austin, United States of America

^d CUNY Hunter College, United States of America

- Country-cohort analysis: DHS data from 46 developing countries in Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia (incl. Indonesia, Cambodia, Philippines), and the US, between 1986 and 2023
- Ideal fertility measured between the ages of 17.5 and 22.5
- Actual fertility behaviour (number of children ever born) reported after the age of 37.5

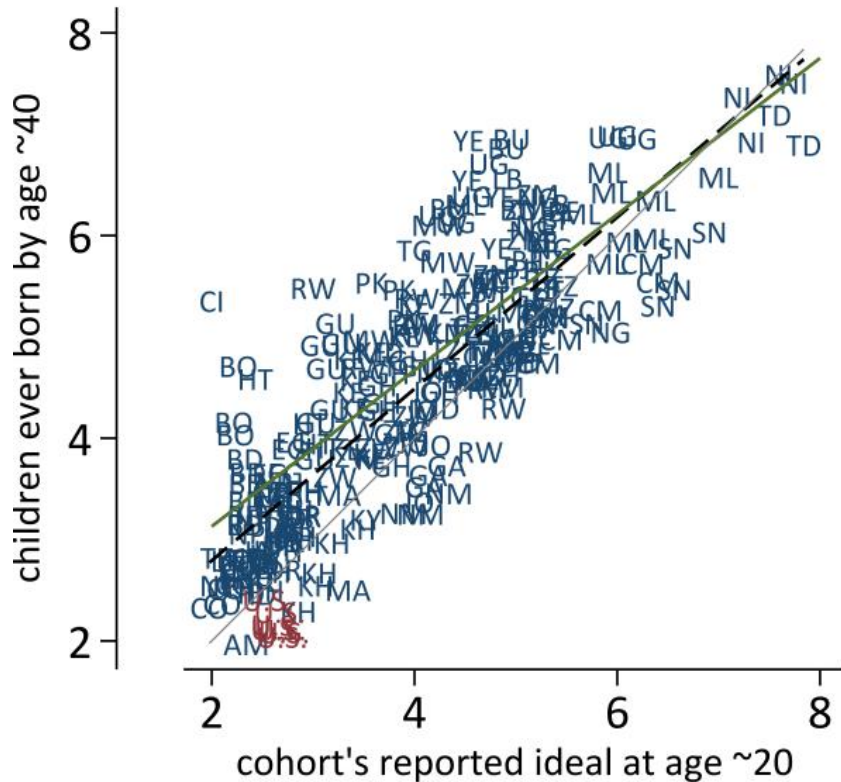
Population Research and Policy Review (2019) 38:507–535
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-019-09516-3>

The Gap Between Lifetime Fertility Intentions and Completed Fertility in Europe and the United States: A Cohort Approach

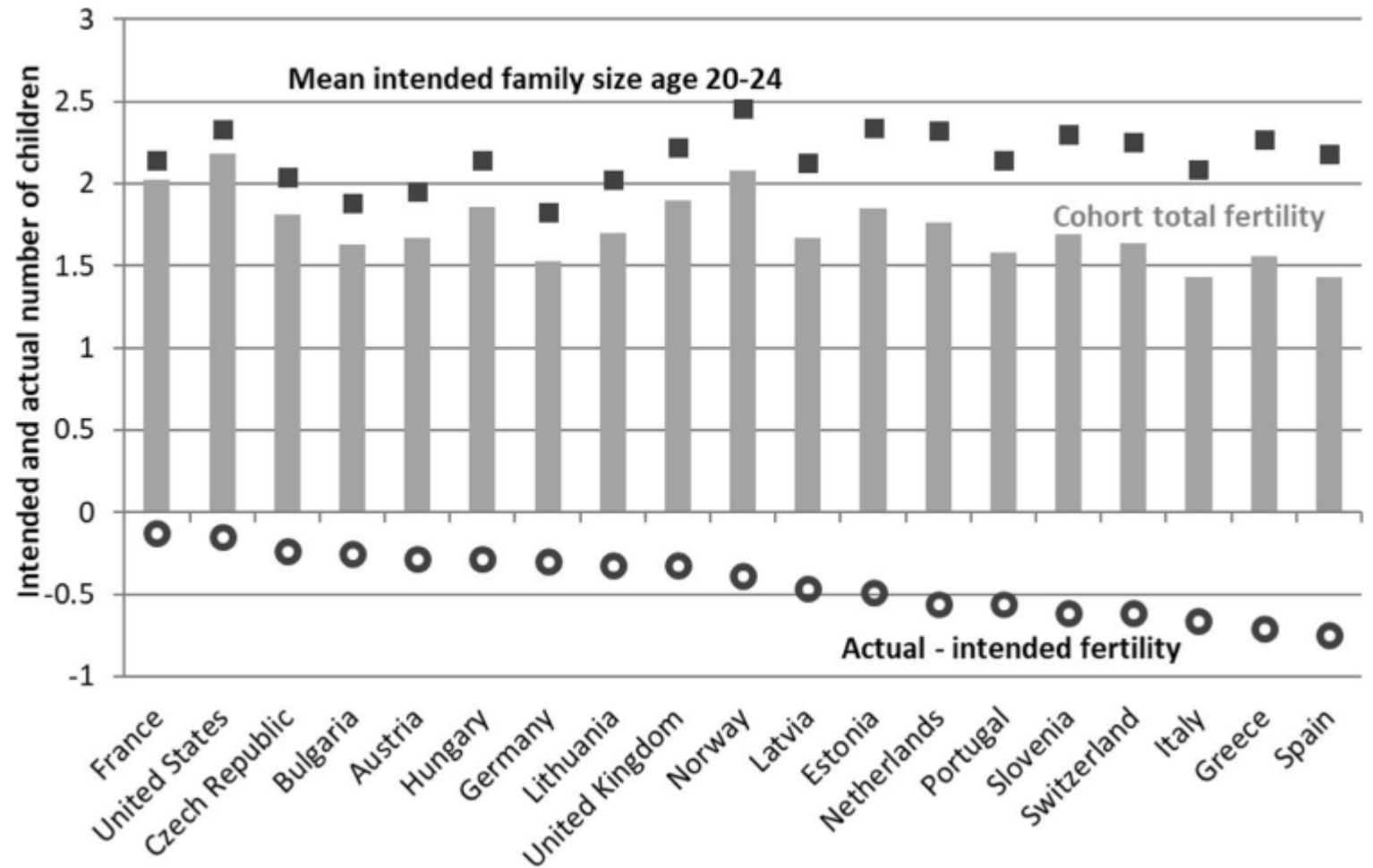
Eva Beaujouan¹ • Caroline Berghammer^{2,3}

- Fertility and Family Surveys in 19 European countries at the US
- Fertility intentions reported at ages 20-24, compared to completed fertility at age 40

Relationship between ideal and actual fertility



Ideal fertility strongly predicts actual fertility



Actual fertility is below intended fertility