



Our world of eight billion: what does it mean for women's rights?

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Event report

This report reflects statements and questions made during a discussion hosted by Friends of Europe in Brussels on 19 April 2023.

The event marked the launch of the flagship report of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the sexual and reproductive health agency of the United Nations. The 2023 State of World Population report examined the frequently expressed concerns that there are either too many or too few people in the world, and the implications that related policies and opinions could have for the rights of women and girls.

Recommendations

- Develop EU-level guidance on upholding women's rights in an era of global population growth, while recalling that demography is a member state competence.
- Promote affordable childcare in national and EU policies to address labour shortages and help women re-join the workforce.
- Feed priorities identified in debates around population and women's rights into the development of a Renewed Social Contract.
- Encourage debate around a positive migration strategy to counter populist anti-immigrant narratives.
- Consider referencing 'intergenerational solidarity' and 'intergenerational fairness' in EU texts.
- Invest in lifelong learning and rural broadband to allow marginalised women a fair and accessible working life.
- Replace 'maternity leave' with 'parental leave', encouraging men to take care of children.
- Build awareness of the EU Roma Strategic Framework, alongside increased focus on the framework's areas of equality and inclusiveness, to promote women's reproductive rights.
- Identify ways to get social policy and corporate social responsibility (CSR) onto the agenda of company board meetings, particularly with regard to women and equality.
- Require companies to measure the impact of CSR strategies on female employees and human rights as part of regular reporting.
- All population policies must start with protecting reproductive rights and choices.

Event summary

Asking the right questions

“Many people still believe population growth is out of control,” said event moderator **Dharmendra Kanani**, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Spokesperson of Friends of Europe. However, the UNFPA’s 2023 State of World Population report, ‘8 Billion Lives, Infinite Possibilities’, shows that the latest demographics represent “really a significant step forward for humanity.”

“ [Many] blame fertility rates for the climate crisis,” she said. “That is a fallacy. [It] holds the wrong people to account.”

Natalia Kanem, Executive Director of UNFPA

Natalia Kanem, Executive Director of UNFPA, agreed that there was a need to shift the conversation around population growth, particularly when it comes to climate change and women’s rights.

“[Many] blame fertility rates for the climate crisis,” she said. “That is a fallacy. [It] holds the wrong people to account.” About 10% of the world’s population is responsible for 50% of global greenhouse gas emissions, but the other 90% are likely to be living in vulnerable conditions and regions that are likely to be worst affected by increasing temperatures.

Without shattering myths around population, climate change and women, there is a serious danger that women’s rights will be undermined. This is seen, for instance, in calls for limits to family size, bans on reproductive rights and expectations that women will stop working to care for their families.

“ It’s not about numbers, it’s about people

Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography

Solutions put forward at the event included gender parity in the workplace, affordable childcare and migration policies that legally allow women to integrate into the workforce. There should also be a greater focus on rural areas, including through investments in broadband and lifelong learning, to ensure the inclusion of women in all regions.

Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography, agreed that “it’s not about numbers, it’s about people.”

At the same time, she cautioned that rising life expectancies in Europe represent a “huge challenge for member states.” This is the case, for instance, when it comes to health care systems, long-term care systems and pension systems.

“ The social pillar is the weakest pillar in environment, social [and] governance [reporting]

Jan-Willem Scheijgrond, Vice President for Global Government & Public Affairs at Royal Philips

Participants heard that whilst a lack of childcare prevents many mothers in Europe from working, imbalances in the workforce mean that 90% of people caring for an ageing EU population are women.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have failed to advance gender equality and reproductive rights, agreed **Camilla Brückner**, Representative of the UN System in the EU, and **Jan-Willem Scheijgrond**, Vice President for Global Government & Public Affairs at Royal Philips.

‘Team Europe’ and the UN now have a role to play together making gender equality part of each SDG, Brückner suggested.

“The social pillar is the weakest pillar in environment, social [and] governance [reporting],” Scheijgrond said. He suggested using the EU’s CSR initiatives to address this imbalance.

Demography transcends borders

Although demographics is not an EU competence – meaning that counting birth and mortality rates is a competence of member states – the Vice-President said the EU was creating the environment for a debate on population and women’s rights.

Participants agreed that demographics should remain a member state competence but said EU advice and recommendations were needed in the face of new realities – in particular, to counter mounting populism that seeks to weaponise debates around population and migration.

The debate “should be about healthy longevity” not ageing, said **Peter Piot**, Special Advisor on COVID-19 to the President of the European Commission and former executive director of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) Action Plan.

Silvia Giorguli, President of El Colegio de México, added that looking at “population, not numbers” must include building a positive, empirical narrative around migration to counter anti-immigrant sentiment.

For Roma women, this should include improving access to information on reproduction and health, said **Amana Ferro**, Senior Policy Adviser at the European

Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network. She warned against using fears around a population of eight billion to “get rid of marginalised groups”, including the very old and young, as well as migrants.

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Moving forward, audience members asked the UN to remember the importance of family itself in the context of women’s rights and shifting populations. Participants also said more work was needed to understand the cultural norms around female genital mutilation (FGM) and problems around different legal definitions of rape, with some cultures still turning a blind eye to marital rape.

Economic development and the emancipation of women also inspired several audience interventions at the conference, with the link between fertility and income levels noted as an area that requires more attention. There were calls for the EU to focus on women’s economic empowerment, rather than primarily focusing on health care. Similarly, another audience member explained that research in agroforestry and agriculture had demonstrated that women who have assets are better able to manage their affairs, enjoy more rights and are more able to reach their personal fertility goals.



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