**Cash won’t push women to have more children**

**Countries are trying to solve the issue of low fertility rates but the truth is most of us don’t fancy domestic drudgery**

*By Janice Turner, The Times, 01 Feb 2020*

Which country will be first to strike a medal for women who produce large families? Until 1991 the title Mother Heroine was bestowed upon Soviet matriarchs who birthed ten babies; the German Reich awarded a gold Mother’s Cross for eight. Obviously, such regimes sought the right sort of fecund female, producing the right sort of citizen, but then the message from shrinking European nations is not so different now.

In Hungary, where the fertility rate has plunged to 1.49 live births per female (the level needed to sustain population levels is 2.1), the prime minister, Viktor Orban, who preaches “procreation not immigration”, has made IVF free and mothers of four are exempt forever from income tax. In Russia (1.8), even cash for kids and preferential rates on land or dachas have done little to revive a population projected to decline from 142 million to as low as 110 million by 2050. “In order for Russia to be a strong and sovereign country,” President Putin said, “there must be more of us.”

Well, perhaps those countries are too patriarchal. Maybe their working mothers feel unsupported. So, you might expect women from Nordic nations, paragons of sexual equality with subsidized crèches and bearded dads on parental leave with papooses, to be pushing out babies. Yet Sweden (1.85), Denmark (1.76) and Iceland (1.75) are in steady decline, while Finland (1.35) is plunging. A Danish TV programme called upon couples to “Screw for Denmark”.

Better screw for Croatia, too, the world’s fifth-fastest shrinking nation, which has made demographics a focus of its six-month EU presidency. But the problem is not lack of sex, it’s pesky women: they just don’t want babies any more. Well, maybe one — the only child is becoming the norm — but seldom more than two. A fifth of British women in their forties are now childless. Or, as many would put it, childfree.

Particularly intriguing are Catholic countries, where motherhood was sanctified and a few generations ago women stirring stew or paella or pasta sauce had one child on the hip, another in utero. There, birth rates have plunged most precipitously. Perhaps remembering their grandmothers, worn-out husks at 60, the women of Spain (1.3), Italy (1.32), Portugal (1.3) and Ireland (1.8) have bolted from the maternity ward.

Indeed, modernity has uncovered a strange truth: that when women, regardless of culture, religion or race, get the chance to have fewer kids, they seize it. Women, it seems, do not naturally glory in motherhood; they see pregnancy as frightening, painful, even life-threatening; they realise raising small children makes you vulnerable, financially dependent on men or the state. It’s boring and exhausting: maybe try it, but not let it define you.

Even southern nations, where we cold, repressed northern European types are told “the family is central”, have fewer around the dinner table. India (2.2), Mexico (2.1), Brazil (1.7), Indonesia (2.3) Malaysia (1.8) are past their population bulges. Even after China (1.7) lifted its one-child policy parents did not leap to procreate.

South Korea (0.88), with the world’s lowest birth rate, doesn’t even manage one. Korean women have no appetite for unpaid domestic drudgery. The Korean word “sampo” means to relinquish relationships, marriage and children. There, as in Japan (1.37), a culture of long hours impedes family life, while an haute-consumerism means women believe branded goods and foreign travel have more status than babies. Is this sad, empty individualism or feminist progress? When asked to choose between career and family, women increasingly choose work.

Only nations who combine poverty with extreme gender inequality have spiralling populations, such as Somalia (6.02) or Niger (6.9). Sub-Saharan Africa is projected to double in size by 2050. Yet the Gates Foundation estimates that there are 220 million women in developing countries who don’t want to get pregnant but lack access to birth control. Mothers will walk barefoot for days to clinics to replace their contraceptive implant. Anything to avoid another baby, to better feed the children they have. I’m reminded of desperate letters to the US family planning pioneer Margaret Sanger a century ago: “I will not have anything out of life,” wrote one perpetually pregnant woman, “but worry, children and cares.”

It is bizarre that western nations see their declining populations as a problem when the world population is still rising. Nothing is less green, as Prince Harry remarked, than having more than two children. The US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez says the climate crisis has “led young people to have a legitimate question: is it OK still to have children?” Thousands of activists who’ve joined the “birth strike” movement have answered: No.

Family-friendly policies, cheaper housing, subsidised childcare, and ensuring men share the domestic burden might alleviate the baby doom. Mass immigration will fill employment gaps and stimulate sluggish consumer growth but it puts pressure on infrastructure and, for nativist politicians, fulfils their worst “great replacement” dread.

Moreover, it delays the inevitable: managing our declining populations. Better to invest in keeping older workers healthy and economically active. Even many over-seventies want to work part time to stave off loneliness and ennui. There’s only so much gardening a person can do.

Women are not going to breed Orban’s new Hungarians or “rebrain” Greece (birth rate 1.29) willingly. *The* *Handmaid’s Tale* features a dystopian society amid a fertility crisis, which ejects women from jobs into enforced pregnancy. What would it take for the carrots of tax breaks to turn into contraception-limiting sticks, or for the Order of Selfless Motherhood (first class) to be struck?