India's Fertility Story: Total fertility rate falls below replacement level

India is now the world's most populous country, yet the number of births are falling-UNFPA warns the real crisis lies in barriers to reproductive choice, not rising or shrinking numbers

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The Real Fertility Crisis report identifies India's high population and low fertility duality.

India continues to hold the title of the world's most populous country, with an estimated 1.46 billion people in 2025. But there's a surprising twist to the numbers. According to the State of World Population Report 2025 released by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), India's **Total Fertility Rate (TFR)** has now dropped to **2.0**, slipping below the replacement level of 2.1.

While many might see this as a step in population control, the report urges us to look deeper. The real issue isn't how many children people are having—but whether they're able to have the number of children they want. Millions of Indians are being denied that choice.

The report, titled The Real Fertility Crisis, points to a growing gap between fertility aspirations and outcomes. The report urges policymakers and the public to shift focus to reproductive freedom.

According to a UNFPA–YouGov survey, 36 per cent of Indian adults have experienced unintended pregnancies, while 30 per cent were unable to have the number of children they wanted. Alarmingly, 23 per cent said they had faced both challenges. These numbers point to a significant gap in access to quality sexual and reproductive health services and informed contraceptive choices.

India's adolescent fertility rate remains high at 14.1 per 1,000 women aged 15–19, in comparison to countries like China (6.6), Sri Lanka (7.3), and Thailand (8.3). This high rate of fertility amongst the adolescents endangers both maternal and child health and affects education and employment outcomes.

Why is the fertility rate falling?

The reasons for not meeting these fertility goals are complex and layered.

Financial strain: Nearly four in 10 people said money is a major obstacle to starting or growing a family. Add to that job insecurity (21 per cent), housing problems (22 per cent), and lack of affordable childcare (18 per cent), and it becomes clear that parenthood can feel like an unattainable goal for many.

Health-related barriers: Poor general health, infertility, and limited access to pregnancy-related care create further hurdles. The report also flags pressure from family, partners, and even health workers as factors pushing people to have fewer children than they'd like.

The report also identifies a complex web of modern challenges: the growing loneliness pandemic, shifting relationship patterns, difficulties in finding supportive partners, social stigma around reproductive decisions, and deeply entrenched gender norms. Rising expectations around intensive parenting place disproportionate pressure on women, reinforcing unequal caregiving burdens and influencing decisions about if and when to have children.

Current state

What makes India's situation unique is the "fertility duality" across its states. While places like Delhi, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu have fertility rates below the replacement

level, states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh continue to report high fertility rates. This disparity reflects gaps in healthcare, education, income, and deeply entrenched gender norms.

"India has made significant progress in lowering fertility rates and improving maternal health," said Andrea M. Wojnar, UNFPA India Representative. "But true progress means ensuring that everyone—regardless of where they live—has the freedom to make informed reproductive choices."

The way ahead

The report recommends a roadmap for India:

- Expanding sexual reproductive health services with universal access to contraception, safe abortion, maternal health, and infertility care
- Removing structural barriers by investing in childcare, education, housing, and workplace flexibility
- Promoting inclusive policies extending services to unmarried individuals, LGBTQIA+ persons, and other marginalised groups
- Improving data and accountability beyond fertility rates to measure unmet family planning needs and bodily autonomy
- Fostering social change through community initiatives challenging stigma and building health literacy

Ultimately, the goal isn't to push people to have more or fewer children. It's to ensure they can decide for themselves—freely, safely, and confidently.

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