

World Population Day (11 July)

Statement by UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem

Create choices, not barriers, for young people to thrive

Our human population is the subject of growing interest – and intensifying anxiety. The concerns that draw most attention are declining fertility rates, ageing and workforce shortages, while many still argue that the greatest threat to the planet is overpopulation. The real fertility crisis, however, is lack of reproductive agency. Young people are too often unable to create the families they want, while at the same time being blamed for low fertility rates and saddled with the expectation of resolving them.

It is often assumed or implied that fertility rates are the result of free choice. Unfortunately, that is not the whole picture. Financial stress, health concerns, backlash against women's rights, global conflicts and concerns about climate change are among the many reasons why young men and women today are not having the number of children they would like, according to UNFPA's recent *State of World Population* report. UNFPA surveyed 14,000 people around the world and found that 1 in 5 people under age 50 expect to end up with a family size different from their ideal – and most of them expect they will have fewer children than desired. Of those over age 50, almost a third of respondents said they'd had fewer children than they wanted.

Misguided assumptions – for example, that young people are prioritizing careers over children, or that “selfishness” is leading them off the path to parenthood – can influence policy decisions that often worsen issues they are intended to solve. We see this, for instance, when countries restrict the availability of contraceptives, leading to more unintended pregnancies.

Starting on this World Population Day, let's listen to what young people want and need and create conditions that enable them to exercise their rights, make their own choices and enjoy a hopeful future.

As one youth activist from Lebanon told UNFPA, “Young people are not just thinking about their future children – they are thinking about the world those children will inherit.”

Secure jobs and sufficient income for housing and other living costs would help young people feel financially stable and broaden their choices about when and whether to have children. Family-friendly policies – including affordable and accessible childcare, generous and flexible parental leave, and promotion of fathers' participation in care-giving – can help prospective parents balance career and family goals. Investing in comprehensive sexuality education is another imperative that supports informed choices.

Intergenerational understanding is crucial to build trust and strengthen solidarity and fairness across generations. Only shared solutions, grounded in human rights, will meet the demands of a demographically diverse world.

Ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health and rights is a cornerstone for sustainable, inclusive societies. Let's create the circumstances where people who deeply want to experience the joys and rewards of parenting can meet their fertility goals, where they have hope for a better tomorrow that is supportive of their choices and protective of their rights, one where they and their children will thrive.
