

WORLD

Affluent families in Europe more inclined to have babies: Study

They are also highly educated, in stable relationships and have support networks

Arvind Jayaram
Assistant Foreign Editor

If you are affluent, educated and well connected socially, you are more likely to have children than someone who is not. That is the finding of research conducted by European sociologists amid a sharp fall in fertility rates in the region and elsewhere.

Research professor Anna Rotkirch, director of the Population Research Institute at the Family Federation of Finland, told The Straits Times a reason for this could be that individuals may delay their decision to have a child till they are more sure about the future. "For many, having children is kind of the cherry on the cake. You don't have children to reduce uncertainty. On the contrary, you stay childless longer to reduce uncertainty and then, when you feel very certain, you have a child," she said.

This is the obverse of the theory of "uncertainty reduction", which suggested that people from poorer backgrounds historically had more children because of high child mortality, and to have someone take care of them in their old age.

"And this explanation, I mean, it's a hypothesis but it fits with the fact that those who actually become parents in the Nordic countries are those who are better off. They're highly educated, but they are also those who have a stable partnership (and) good support networks," said Prof Rotkirch.

Stockholm University's associate professor of demography Livia Olah said that for the most disadvantaged people, there was also significant uncertainty over maintaining a partnership. "It seems that, for people who have a high career and relatively high income, it's much easier for them to both find a partner and to have a rewarding long-term relationship. But as for the least advantaged segment of the population, they also become disadvantaged demographically, both in terms of finding and maintaining a partner and of course having children," she said.

The growing need for economic stability is particularly acute for women in the labour force, who are trying to balance the pressure to start a family with the need to ensure their careers do not suffer.

Ms Duygu Guner, an affiliate fellow at Brussels-based economic think-tank Bruegel, said a growing number of women across Europe are choosing to remain childless or delaying their plans to start families due to a "motherhood penal-

ty" that can limit their career opportunities and wages, or even result in job losses.

"There is a negative correlation; if you have high prospects in the labour market, if you're anticipating higher wages, if you are career-oriented, ambitious, the penalty from having a child will be more significant," said Ms Guner.

"The motherhood penalty stretches across the entire working life. Hence, standard measures like childcare benefits do not fully offset this negative impact," she said.

A study conducted by the London School of Economics in 2019, based on interviews with professional employers and empirical evidence, found that even when mothers' competence and work commitment were unquestionable, employers often tended to view them as less desirable than non-mothers.

According to the study, employers often perceive mothers as costly and ineffective. Consequently, they consistently seek to sideline, demote or dismiss them, reflecting persistent bias.

With many women delaying their decision to have children as a result, Prof Rotkirch observed one of the reasons for falling fertility rates was that from an average age of 35, a woman's chances of becoming pregnant and giving birth to a healthy child drastically go down.

"We really need support from employers, because young people do think very much about their careers. We need very strong signals that having a child is welcome, and it's a good thing for society, and you will absolutely not be discriminated against," she said.

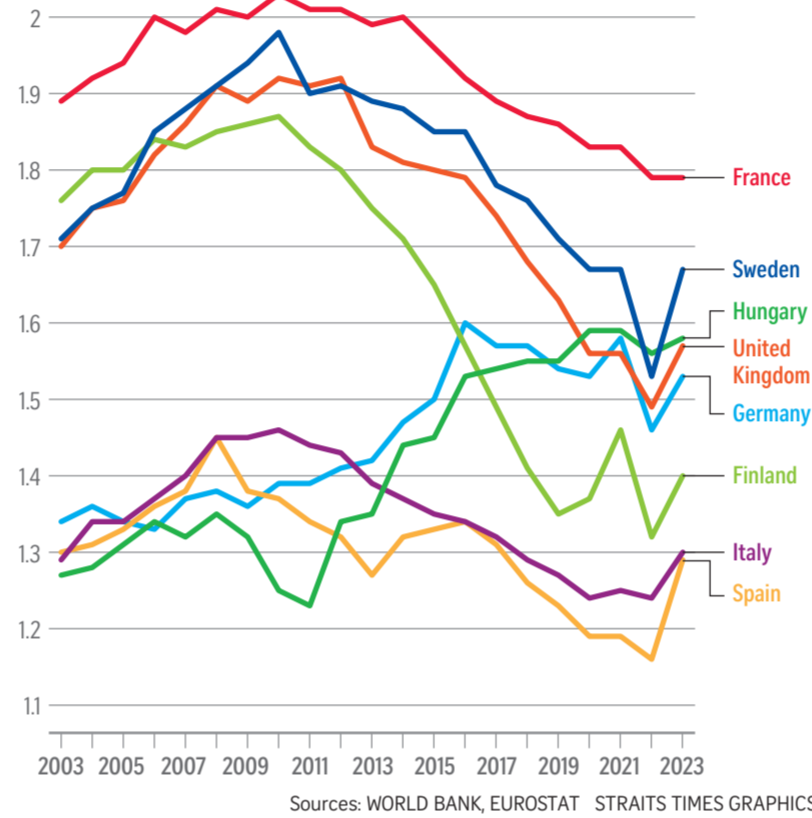
The motherhood penalty applies to women in all stages of their career. But women who have successfully climbed the career ladder may not suffer as greatly as those who are earlier in their careers.

Underlining the importance of reducing the burden of raising children on working women, a working paper by German economists Matthias Doepke, Anne Hannusch, Michele Tertilt and Fabian Kindermann, titled *The Economics of Fertility: A New Era*, demonstrated that in advanced economies, higher male involvement in household and childcare duties correlates with increased fertility rates.

Separately, a 2022 study by Stockholm University associate professor Martin Kolk on whether accumulated lifetime income was linked to fertility rates in Sweden found that for very high disposable incomes, fertility was above the

Demographic crisis

Total fertility rate (per woman)



Sources: WORLD BANK, EUROSTAT STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS



A change in parenting style over the years is a significant factor deterring people from having children, says Stockholm University's associate professor Livia Olah. "We see a growing importance of what we call intensive parenting. So young people feel that they are required to invest a large amount of time, not only money, in children if they have one." PHOTO: REUTERS

population mean. The study also indicated that having a third and fourth child, beyond the two-child norm, was more common among those with high incomes.

The average total fertility rate (TFR) across Europe stood at just 1.5 in 2023, a sharp decline from 2.67 in 1967.

The situation in Europe has parallels with Singapore, where the TFR plummeted to just 0.97 children per woman in 2023 from 3.9 in 1967.

PhD candidate and research fel-

low Sofi Ohlsson-Wijk from Stockholm University's Demography Unit said the decline in fertility rates was particularly puzzling for the Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. These countries were seen as providing the most generous and flexible family-friendly policies throughout the last half century. But, since 2010, fertility rates have fallen to historical lows in many of them.

"We do not know why yet. In addition, the economic climate has

HAVES AND HAVE-NOTS

It seems that, for people who have a high career and relatively high income, it's much easier for them to both find a partner and to have a rewarding long-term relationship. But as for the least advantaged segment of the population, they also become disadvantaged demographically, both in terms of finding and maintaining a partner and of course having children.



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR LIVIA OLAH, at Stockholm University.

France has some of the world's most generous child benefits, such as a back-to-school allowance, a family allowance, and an allowance which covers childcare costs.

But Mr Laurent Toulemon, a senior researcher at the National Institute of Demographic Studies in France, said social attitudes towards raising a family were a greater motivating factor than handouts in the decision of French couples to have children.

"The social pressure on couples is very strong in France to have one child and, when you have a child, to have a second child. So most of the young adults who say that they do not want to have a child, they will change their mind and finally have a child. So it is very difficult to predict," he said of the future trajectory of fertility rates in the country.

Mr Toulemon noted that French President Emmanuel Macron has proposed national "demographic rearmament" to increase fertility rates, through measures such as free fertility checks for young people and new paid maternity and paternity leave.

However, he indicated that the measures might not be warranted at this stage. Because of migration, the population is not in danger of declining, even though the country's TFR is below the theoretical replacement rate of 2.1.

"It's very important to notice that in Europe, there is net positive migration and this allows the European population to go on increasing without fertility being at the level of two children per woman," said Mr Toulemon.

He noted that in terms of population policy, including in some Asian countries where there is no tradition of migration, this was something that could ensure a stable population in the face of falling fertility rates.

Stockholm University's Prof Olah said a change in parenting style over the years was also a significant factor deterring people from having children.

"We see a growing importance of what we call intensive parenting. So young people feel that they are required to invest a large amount of time, not only money, in children if they have one," she said.

"This is not selfishness, it's rather that we have such high demands for parents and prospective parents. And that might scare off young people."

Prof Rotkirch blamed a culture that has fed too much into the idea that it is somehow ideal to cope on one's own, with focus on the individual and individual well-being, for the precipitous decline in fertility rates.

"I think this is, in many ways, just not healthy because we are social animals," she said, adding that in the West, there has been a decline in social relationships such as marriage and close friendships.

"I think many people are just following the cues the culture and the labour market give them. It's very hard to say in what ways we would be better off as a society with these values. If human relationships and community are not flourishing, then we need to correct course," she said.

arvindj@sph.com.sg



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COMMENTARY
Rise of Indian Australians

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