

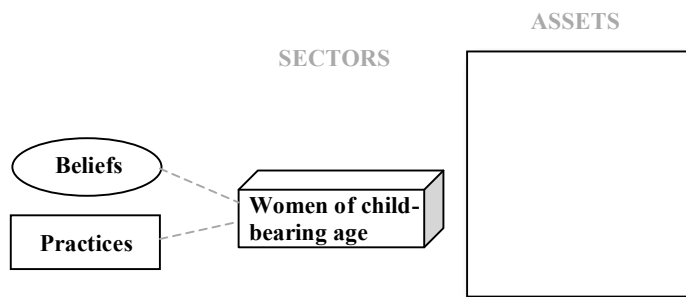
CHAPTER SIX

Women, Children, and Population*Rethinking Today's Trends*

Sustainability is a “thinking long” performance standard. If we humans want the planet to be as habitable for all future generations as it was in the past, we shall have to be good at thinking long, and nowhere is that more important than on the first of the five Zeroes, Zero Net Population Growth. It is time to match humanity’s great strides in cutting the death rate with equally great strides in cutting the birth rate.

This, too, is a sector redesign issue.

Women of child-bearing age are a sector of special importance. The auto sector produces cars, and cars are important. The energy sector produces electricity, and electricity is important. But women, as a sector, produce children, and nothing is more consequential than children. Humanity’s future is in their hands. Each pregnancy is a personal decision; taken together, when women of child-bearing age have so many children that births exceed deaths by seventy-five million a year, when the global population rises by another billion each thirteen years, it is not only a personal matter, it is also a matter of global impact. Women in their teens, twenties, thirties, and even forties are a sector to be reckoned with, a sector to be supported, and a sector to be reasoned with.

**Why Overpopulation Matters**

Why is overpopulation important? We already know. The more of us there are, the more food we want to eat, the more land we want to occupy, the greater our hunger for jobs, or small plots of land from which to eke a living, the more pressure we create in situations of dire poverty. We are the consumers at the end of several different value chains, and the more powerful our consumer demand, the harder it is to protect the common good.

In a world with billions of mouths to feed, farmers will in desperation use up their local water resources faster than the water can be replenished. Underground aquifers are pumped dry. Rivers are diverted from their normal course and emptied onto fields and farms. Streambeds dry up; habitats wither and die.

With billions of mouths to feed, the factory fishing trawlers of the world scoop up as many fish as they can, with little regard for whether they might be overfishing today and triggering population collapse or even extinction tomorrow.

In those parts of the world that suffer from the deepest poverty, the larger the population, the more desperate the subsistence farming. Hillsides are stripped for slash-and-burn agriculture, and once they've been stripped, the forces of erosion take over and the forests disappear. Haiti is Exhibit A in why no one wants to see runaway stripping of forests; once forested hillsides are gone, getting them back is nearly impossible.

In the rest of the world, as prosperity spreads, the more consumers there are, the more pressure there is for unsustainable exploitation of resources. Energy resources in particular are being tapped at a prodigious rate, with no regard for the long-run climate catastrophe waiting in the wings.

Thinking long should warn us away from all of these adverse trends. We want population stabilized, we want agriculture stabilized, we want the use of water stabilized, we want fishing stabilized, we want atmospheric carbon dioxide stabilized. High speed population growth makes everything harder. In a smaller population world, we have many more degrees of freedom. In a world of far too many people, those degrees of freedom diminish and disappear.

The Numbers Are Worrisome

I want to anchor this discussion in an awareness of what the numbers say. In a previous chapter, I cited a forecast from the U.S. Census that predicted a global population of 9.5 billion by the year 2050. Here I turn to a different forecast, from the United Nations Population Bureau, that projects a global population of 9.1 billion by mid-century.¹ Today's count is roughly 6.8 billion, so we will gain another 2.7 billion people in the next forty years, if the Census forecasters are right, but only 2.3 billion if the UN forecasters are on the money.

The UN growth estimates are not spread evenly among all the nations of the world. Although the average growth per nation is 34%, those nations with the highest fertility rates also have much the highest growth rates.

The fertility rate, to demographers, expresses the average number of children each woman will have during the course of her child-bearing years. A fertility rate just above 2.0 is considered the replacement rate. Nations with fertility rates much above 2.0 will grow from natural increase; nations with fertility rates lower than 2.0 are likely to see population shrinkage over time. The US fertility rate isn't much above 2.0, but expected immigration raises the expected US population by 2050 to 400 million, another hundred million higher than today.

In the following table, I stratify the UN forecast by fertility rates.² The numbers tell an interesting story.

Fertility Rates and Population Growth

(Population in 1000's)

Fertility	Countries	2009 Base	2009 - 2050 Growth	Growth Percent
1.00 thru 1.99	103	2 839 000	110 000	4%
2.00 thru 2.39	39	1 302 000	382 000	29%
2.40 thru 2.99	24	1 575 000	615 000	39%
3.00 and up	60	1 112 000	1 213 000	109%
TOTALS	226	6 828 000	2 320 000	34%

There are 103 countries with fertility rates below 2.0, in this forecast. Collectively they will see nominal population growth, a total of 4 percent over forty years. Within that group of 103 countries are many who are expected to see population shrinkage.

The next 39 countries have fertility rates of 2.00 up through 2.39. With a current population of 1.3 billion, total, those thirty-nine countries are expected to add another 382,000 people, a 29% gain in forty years from today's levels.

On the third notch of the fertility scale, from 2.40 through 2.99, we see 24 countries and a 2009 population count of 1,575,000. Their population is expected to jump by 39%, with another 615,000 people being added to their rolls.

Finally, at the top of the scale, we find 60 countries whose fertility rates are 3.00 or higher. They begin with a base of only 1.1 billion people, but in the next forty years can expect an increase of 109%, with another 1.2 billion folks thrown in alongside the first 1.1 billion.

If UN demographers are correct in their guesses, 79% of total population growth between now and 2050 will come from the 84 countries whose fertility rates are 2.4 and above. Only 21% of future growth is expected from those 142 countries with fertility rates of 2.39 or below.

Let's look at this pattern from another angle. In the following two charts, I focus only on the 84 countries whose fertility rates are the highest. In one, I break out the numbers by dominant religion, relying on the Wikipedia estimates for each country. In the next, I break out the same numbers by geographic region.³

Growth Forecast, by Leading Religion

Fertility: 2.4 and up

(Population in 1000's)

Religion	Countries	2009 Base	2009 - 2050 Growth	Growth Percent
Muslim	30	788 000	781 000	99%
Christian	44	609 000	562 000	92%
Hindu	2	1 227 000	435 000	35%
Buddhist	2	21 000	13 000	62%
Other	6	41 000	37 000	90%
TOTALS	84	2 686 000	1 828 000	68%

Muslim countries with high fertility rates show the largest expected gain, a total jump of 99%. While some of these are in the Middle East and North Africa, many are in sub-Saharan Africa as well. But Christian countries are close behind, with a growth of 92%. India, one of the

two Hindu countries on this list, has a lower expected growth rate, but nonetheless might well expand its population by more than 400,000 people in the next four decades. Smaller faiths make a much smaller contribution.

Growth Forecast, by Geographic Region

Fertility: 2.4 and up

(Population in 1000's)

Region	Countries	2009 Base	2009 - 2050 Growth	Growth Percent
Africa	47	840 000	910 000	108%
North Africa	3	90 000	50 000	56%
Middle East	8	122 000	112 000	92%
Asia	10	1 564 000	715 000	46%
Pacific	6	2 000	1 000	50%
Latin America	10	68 000	40 000	59%
TOTALS	84	2 686 000	1 828 000	68%

Geographically, the two areas with the highest expected increase in numbers are Africa and Asia. The Middle East also has countries with very high expected growth, but the base is much smaller.

If I were responsible for minimizing population growth, I would look at these forecasts and ask three questions. How can we convince moms and dads in high fertility countries to aim for much smaller families? How can we get the message out in Africa and Asia? And how can we enlist Muslim, Christian, and Hindu faith leaders in this work?

If the world had effective answers to each of these three questions, it might be able to make an important dent in the 2.3 billion gain forecast between now and 2050. Might these higher fertility nations be able to reduce their population trajectories by half a billion people? Or even more?

The sixty countries with fertility rates of 3.00 and higher are at the head of his parade. They are the ones whom forecaster say will do the most to expand the total human population. They are the ones to work with the most intensively.

The Pregnancy Decision

Demographers tell us that women in poor societies tend to choose large families, while women in prosperous societies tend to choose smaller families. Give women in poor countries the same advantages as women in wealthier ones and birth rates will fall of their own accord. It is a sensible perspective.

One starts with education for girls as well as for boys. Girls who can read and do arithmetic and understand the world will be much smarter about their options. Elementary school education for children in poor countries is not a costly investment, and the returns can be profound.

One builds on education with proper clinics and health care. If babies have medical care, they won't die unnecessarily from treatable diseases, as ten million children a year do today. When almost every child survives to maturity, smaller families are a safer bet than before. A women can

have just two or three children, rather than five or six, because she knows all her kids are likely to survive their childhood diseases and grow to maturity.

Better job opportunities, both for dads and for moms, especially in the city, make it easier to have small families. When the only work to be had was on the piece of land where the family lived, larger families meant more hands to work in the field. When urban jobs are available in sufficient number, moms and dads can afford to leave the land for something that pays better. And while children on a farm can be revenue generators, taking care of urban children costs money.

These are tame recommendations. Who can be against education for girls, or proper health care for children, or decent jobs for their parents?

There is more to all of this, as we know. If we're talking about babies, we're also talking about sex, and there is considerable controversy on the matter of how sex is to be discussed. What is the message that public health professionals should promote? Safe sex? No sex before marriage? Responsible sex? Whose behavior has to change? In what direction? And with what encouragement? How does pregnancy figure into the message about sex? What options should a pregnant woman have, especially if she doesn't want the pregnancy? What is the role of any particular religion, if any, in the shaping of a public health message? Should public health activities operate as an extension of religious instruction? It all gets very complicated.

We cannot unravel this properly without a detour into America's recent past.

Rules-Based Morality vs. Aspirational Morality

Cue up the 1950s, please.

Recall if you can, or imagine, at least, a decade when respectable middle-class Americans lived by strong social codes. Many of these bore on issues of sex and pregnancy and marriage and other matters of special importance to churchgoers. Sex before marriage was verboten. Illegitimate pregnancy was terrible and embarrassing. Any girl foolish enough to have gotten pregnant was summarily sent to a special home for the duration of her pregnancy. As soon as the baby was born, she'd give it up for adoption and never see it again. She'd return to her family and her normal way of life and pray that her friends would be forgiving. And that's just the way it was.

So much else operated by a similar set of codes. Middle class America lived by a strict moral code that punished all sorts of deviation. What was viewed as proper middle class Christian morality was enforced by depriving people of the freedom to live by any other standard. It was a different era. Whites were superior to non-whites. Men were superior to women. Christians were superior to non-Christians. People without handicaps were superior to those with handicaps. Heterosexuals were superior to homosexuals. Many public schools mandated Christian prayer. (In my 12th grade homeroom at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, in Maryland, we were required to recite the Lord's Prayer every morning.) Sex before marriage was strictly forbidden. Abortion was illegal. Babies born outside of marriage were scorned as illegitimate. Foul language was off-limits everywhere. Abortion was outlawed. Pornography was forbidden. We Americans may have gotten drunk a lot, but no one smoked marijuana. Virtue through rules, not through the wise use of freedom - that was the code of the day.

As long as everyone agrees, rules-based morality works. In an earlier America, when few people had been to college, and almost no one to graduate school, strict codes felt normal to all. But

this sort of social order loses its pre-eminence once those with higher education begin to number in the millions. And it really starts to break down when the Supreme Court upholds the rights of those who have been stripped of their equal rights.

A social revolution begins. It seems simple enough. A few doctors discover a pill that prevents pregnancy. Four Negro college students, wearing coats and ties, sit down at a Woolworth's lunch counter and request service. Woolworth's calls the police and they arrest the students. Four lads from Liverpool become prime time musicians. A simmering police action in Vietnam inches toward full-scale warfare, and the military draft puts every young man on the spot. I wandered into Harvard Square in September, 1960, seventeen years old, the greenest of freshmen, little suspecting that the nineteen-sixties would soon become *The Sixties*. Who knew?

Yesterday's belief system had enforced its moral code by limiting all sorts of freedom. This strategy began to crack apart. As demands for freedom reach critical mass, they are not to be stilled. One demand led to another. Equal rights for blacks and other non-whites. Equal rights for women. Equal rights for Catholics. For Jews. For Muslims. For those of no faith. Equal rights for gays and lesbians. Equal rights for singles. The Supreme Court declared that prayer in public schools violated the establishment clause.

The wheel kept turning. Handicapped Americans demanded equal rights. Profanity fought for its place in public discourse. Unmarried women decided to bear and raise children on their own. Pot-smoking became a way of life both in Vietnam for American soldiers and on college campuses for American civilians. Roe v Wade legalized abortion. Many colleges replaced single sex dorms with coed dorms. And on and on.

So many changes occurred, all in a single generation, and so many of them escalated to high theatre. So many social codes were turned upside down. Those who were raised in the moral certainties of an earlier era, with religion at the center of an orderly, obedient, middle class social order, felt adrift in a world whose new ethos featured the rejection of the old moral order at one point after another after another. One cannot but feel for all those who were on the receiving end of this turbulence. What were they to make of all this?

The land was ripe for a culture war. With passions high everywhere, choosing sides was easy. Social conservatives wanted to halt the breakdown of civilization and find an issue they could win on. Social liberals didn't want to surrender any of their hard-won freedoms.

Yet for all the turmoil, I think we have yet to grasp the core meaning of what happened. Blame comes easily, but the diagnosis remains cloudy. And too little healing has taken place.

I boil it down to this. In an earlier era, rules-based morality prevailed, and it achieved its aims by depriving several classes of people of their freedoms. In the following era, an aspirational morality took center stage. Those who had lived in the shadows were now free to live in the sun. The range of tolerated behaviors widened considerably, and not always to everyone's benefit.

Now we have an argument among ourselves as to how we are supposed to feel about all this. Those who lived by the old rules claim that much has been lost because immorality is rampant in the land. Others celebrate the wider freedoms and decry those who would bring back the old oppressions. It is an unresolved family feud. Each faction talks past the other. The intensity of the debate stirs bad manners on both sides, as each constituency decries the immorality of the other. In an era of lifestyle consumerism, both points of view harden into Lifestyle Attitudes. The more rude

the language, the more successful the branding. What a sorry ethos!

In my own extended family, there are relatives who pop up on all sides of the culture war. I feel for all of them. Even the one who said, “Those poor Muslims. They’re such nice people. But they don’t know Jesus, so they’ll never go to Heaven.” My relatives! Sometimes they drive me crazy. But still I love them.

Look to either side of this gulf. There but for accidents of history go I. Or you. Or any of us, had the spin of the wheel been a bit different.

Social conservatives want so much to be reaffirmed. Give us back the old codes, at least some of them, so that we may feel more comfortable with the world we inhabit. Social liberals want the same affirmation in reverse. What is so hard, social liberals want to know, about respecting equal rights for gays, including the right to marriage?

Each party silently begs for respect, in the way of a deep family quarrel – “We are real in who we are. Why can you not respect us and honor the truth we feel so deeply?” But, like two figures struck dumb in a stage play, neither knows how to say the right words to the other. The actors stand frozen in place. No one says “I’m sorry.” No hand reaches out.

It is . . . so painful.

It is time to remember that we are actually on the same side of both themes. All of us have great respect for freedom, and the rights of individuals to make free decisions about their lives. Social conservatives in general cherish freedom as much as social liberals. And all of us, too, have great respect for morality. None of us really believe that Freedom is meant to be a license for vice. All of us prefer the view that free people have obligations to those around them to live morally responsible lives. We may not always agree on the content of the decisions that follow from these principles, but conservatives and liberals alike share a fondness both for freedom and for morality.

How, then, are we to blend our wisdom for the betterment of all?

Social liberals break the frozen silence of estrangement by saying “Yes, we want all people, especially our young, to pay special attention to moral issues, and to develop responsible moral codes by which to live their lives. You have a case to make, about responsible moral decisions, and we want all young people to hear your case.”

Social conservatives break the same frozen silence of estrangement by saying “Yes, we want all people, especially our young, to make free decisions for themselves about their moral codes, so that they will believe more fully in the codes by which they choose to live. Social liberals have a case to make, about the range of responsible decisions that people are to consider if they are to be fully free, and we want all our young people to hear your case.”

It is a mistake for social conservatives not to respect the freedom of the young. It is a mistake for social liberals not to respect the importance of challenging the young to set high moral standards.

Freedom – social conservatives used to fear it. Is that still true? Moral reasoning – social liberals used to fear it. Do they still?

In part, the answer is Yes. And Yes. There are liberal advocacy groups that profit from the culture war, just as there are conservative religious leaders and conservative advocacy groups that profit from the culture war. But America’s youth do not. On both sides, fear-based advocacy subtly disrespects the young.

We are better than this as a nation, and those among us who are younger Americans deserve deeper level of trust and respect from our elders. Conservatives? Embrace our freedom of choice. Liberals? Embrace our need for moral reasoning. In a time of aspirational morality, freedom is the new reality. Free individuals will decide for themselves. Morality, now, must earn its way. It must be about higher principles, not just the enforcement of raw prejudice.

“But what about abortion?” conservatives will protest.

Of all the tender subjects in the cultural disputes of our time, this is the most tender. The center knows the answer, though its wisdom is seldom honored by those who are the most inflamed on this issue. The center knows that a late term abortion takes the life of a baby that could survive outside the womb, and ought not be permitted unless the mother’s physical health is in great danger. The Left disagrees, but the Left is wrong, and should make its peace with the Center.

The center also knows that a newly fertilized embryo is but a potential person, not an actual person, and that it spends the first week after fertilization setting itself up as a placenta. By rights what is called a “human embryo” would as accurately be called a “placental embryo.” Even in the next few weeks, it is a great stretch to say that a tiny fetus is the same thing as a person. Should government strip a woman of her right to decide for herself whether to continue her pregnancy or end it, especially if she acts promptly and ends the pregnancy at the earliest possible date? The center doesn’t want government to be that powerful and intrusive. On this point, the Right disagrees with the Center, but the Right is wrong, and it too should make its peace with the Center.

The deeper problem with this debate is that everyone ignores context. Women become pregnant less often if they have been properly instructed in how to avoid getting pregnant. Use condoms, use the pill, don’t have sex with a man unless you know he’s HIV negative, or abstain from intercourse altogether. Know when you’re going to be tempted, know in advance when you might succumb, and know how to negotiate the ground rules so that no one passes along a sexual disease and so that you don’t get pregnant. Furthermore, don’t get pregnant too many times. The day of large families is past. We have a moral obligation to have smaller families.

The entire Catholic hierarchy generally strives to wish away context. Where is the Catholic social teaching on avoiding over-population? Where is the Catholic social teaching on responsible family size? Where is the Catholic social teaching on responsible sex? A church that opposes condoms and favors runaway population growth shouldn’t wonder that it loses its audience on the matter of abortion. Context matters for everyone. The Pope and his Cardinals and Bishops have no more right to cheat on the common good than anyone else. It is time for everyone to back up a bit. Overpopulation is bad for the Earth – that’s where we start. Pregnancy is wonderful when it occurs within marriage and a commitment to small family size; otherwise it is to be avoided. Every woman of child-bearing age needs to have at her disposal the full range of tools for making good choices and negotiating properly with her special man. Should things go awry, should the woman get pregnant in spite of everything, she should either do the abortion as swiftly as possible, or she should carry the pregnancy to term. The Center knows this already. The Left gets a beginning-of-pregnancy window of opportunity for abortion; later in the pregnancy the Right gets to close the window. These are the rules that promote the common good. It is time for everyone to shake hands and get on board. We need freedom, we need moral responsibility, we need an Earth-safe population level, and we need each other.

Public Health in Today's World

What sort of belief system should public health officials worldwide use as their guide? It is a presumptuous question for any American to pose, but that has not stopped an important American constituency from insisting that sexual abstinence outside marriage is the only form of public health work that ought to receive American funding. Rules-based morality lives on as their beacon. Aspirational morality fills them with anxiety, even today.

It is not the proper role of a public health official to be a Sunday School teacher. To narrow the responsibility of public health officials to the preaching of sexual morality is to turn them into morality officers, not public health officers, and to switch their assignment from the saving of lives in this world to the saving of souls for the next world. There is a place for moral argument on behalf of sexual abstinence, but it is a role for churches, not governments. From a public health standpoint, abstinence messages alone are not especially effective at limiting sexual activity and preventing unwanted pregnancy, and their track record of ineffectiveness disqualifies them as the central message to be delivered by public health officers.⁴

Public health is one of government's central responsibilities. Children with infectious diseases need treatment so that they do not die needlessly. Young adults most at risk for the spread of HIV/AIDS need strong and frequent messages about their conduct to steer them away from the most risky behaviors, slow the spread of HIV/AIDS, and limit the number of children who are orphaned when parents die from AIDS. And women need strong support on how to take care of their health, protect the health of their children, and limit the number of children they choose to have.

Which message works best in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS is partly a function of culture, and it will vary a bit from one region and country to the next.

In Thailand, Mechai Viravaidya took on the issue of responsible sex in a rather unique way. He decided that the stigma had to be removed from condoms. He declared that condoms have to become as common as cabbages, and later founded a restaurant chain called Cabbages and Condoms, featuring the rather unusual value proposition that "Our food will not make you pregnant." He encourages cab drivers to hand out condoms. Outside one of the Cabbages and Condoms restaurant, not far from Thailand's Golden Triangle border with Burma and Laos, Viravaidya has put up a billboard festooned with cartoonlike condoms and the slogan "Welcome to the Rubber Triangle."⁵ Restaurant profits support the education organization Viravaidya created, the Population and Community Development Association. His success with fertility rate reduction has been extraordinary. Thailand's fertility rate is now 1.85,⁶ roughly half what it was when he began his campaign in the early 1970s. In 2007, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation honored Viravaidya for his work.⁷

Thailand, of course, remains deeply conflicted. For centuries the monarchs kept harems, and were imitated by those men wealthy enough to afford harems of their own. Men of modest means imitated this assertion of male privilege by visiting prostitutes. Not only is prostitution a major industry in Bangkok, popular well before the war in Vietnam gave American servicemen their own introduction to its ways, rural life in northern Thailand is so desperately poor that a great many families send their daughters to Bangkok to be prostitutes. It is said that four billion dollars a year

flows north to an impoverished countryside from the red light district in Bangkok.⁸ Poverty as the driver for teenage prostitution is, of course, a global shame; Thailand is hardly alone in tolerating this vicious and deadly practice.

My larger point is that each society needs its own Viravaidya, a local campaigner with the drive and creativity to get the message out in ways that young women and young men will understand and cooperate with. As Americans, it is not our role to dictate anyone's local message, but it does make sense for us to provide meaningful support for the goals of HIV/AIDS prevention, fertility rate reduction, and the protection of children from infectious diseases. Those countries with the highest fertility rates should be at the top of our priority list.

If the first priority is a global campaign to end the spread of HIV/AIDS, bring down fertility rates, treat children with infectious diseases, and rescue teenage girls from sex slavery, the larger and lasting priority is to win peoples of all cultures to the First Zero of Sustainability, Zero Net Increase in Population. Large families were a blessing, in their day, but that day is over. It is time for every culture and every faith and every people to sign on to the principle that smaller family size is now everyone's moral obligation. Large families cheat on the common good. If we are to be proper stewards of planet Earth, our birth rates have to be just as low as our death rates.

If we get our beliefs right, we can get our practices right. And if we can get our practices right, we honor Mother Earth by limiting our numbers to a size she can handle.

¹ United Nations Population Division, 2008 Annex Tables.

² United Nations Population Division, 2008 Annex Tables, author's analysis.

³ United Nations Population Division, 2008 Annex Tables, author's analysis by religion and by geography.

⁴ See Margaret Talbot, "Red Sex, Blue Sex." *The New Yorker*, November 3, 2008.

⁵ I observed this personally in December 2005. As a family, we traveled to Thailand for our Christmas-New Year's vacation.

⁶ United Nations Population Division, 2008 Annex Tables.

⁷ Wikipedia, Mechai Viravaidya article (May 14, 2009).

⁸ On our Thailand vacation in December 2005, we had a guidebook that offered this account of the red light district in Bangkok and how it fits into the larger culture.