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Some countries, such as India and China, are attempting to control their populations, while others, such as Japan, are trying to boost their populations (iStock)

## How social norms influence fertility choices

1 min read . Updated: 08 Aug 2019, 10:49 PM IST

[Sneha Alexander](#)

The decision to have smaller families is not entirely an economic choice, but also driven by social norms suggests a new study





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Across the world, some countries, such as India and China, are attempting to control their populations, while others, such as Japan, are trying to boost their populations. Traditionally, these differences in fertility have been associated with economics: as people get richer, fertility declines. However, new research suggests that it is not just economics, but social norms and behaviors that determine fertility choices.

In their study published in the National Bureau of Economic Research, Enrico Spolaore and Romain Wacziarg explore the reasons for the fertility decline in Europe between 1830 to 1970. Specifically, they use linguistic distances between European regions and historical fertility data from the Princeton European Fertility project to explain the diffusion of lower fertility across Europe.

The authors use linguistic distance because they believe it is a proxy for cultural and social behavior among societies: greater the linguistic similarities, lower the barriers for cultural exchange. Using this data, the authors show that the focal point of Europe's fertility decline was France. In France, fertility began to decline because of a shift from traditional religious values to secular values which withered the stigma attached to fertility control. These changed values then spread to other regions with the authors finding that the spread of the fertility decline was higher in those regions which were culturally closer to the French.



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Though lower fertility is also associated with factors such as higher education, lower infant mortality and urbanization, the authors argue that the fertility decline in Europe preceded these developments. Their research suggests that despite the economic rationale for having fewer children, fertility choices are highly influenced by social norms.

**Also read:** [Fertility and Modernity](#)

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