



UNFPA state of world population 2023

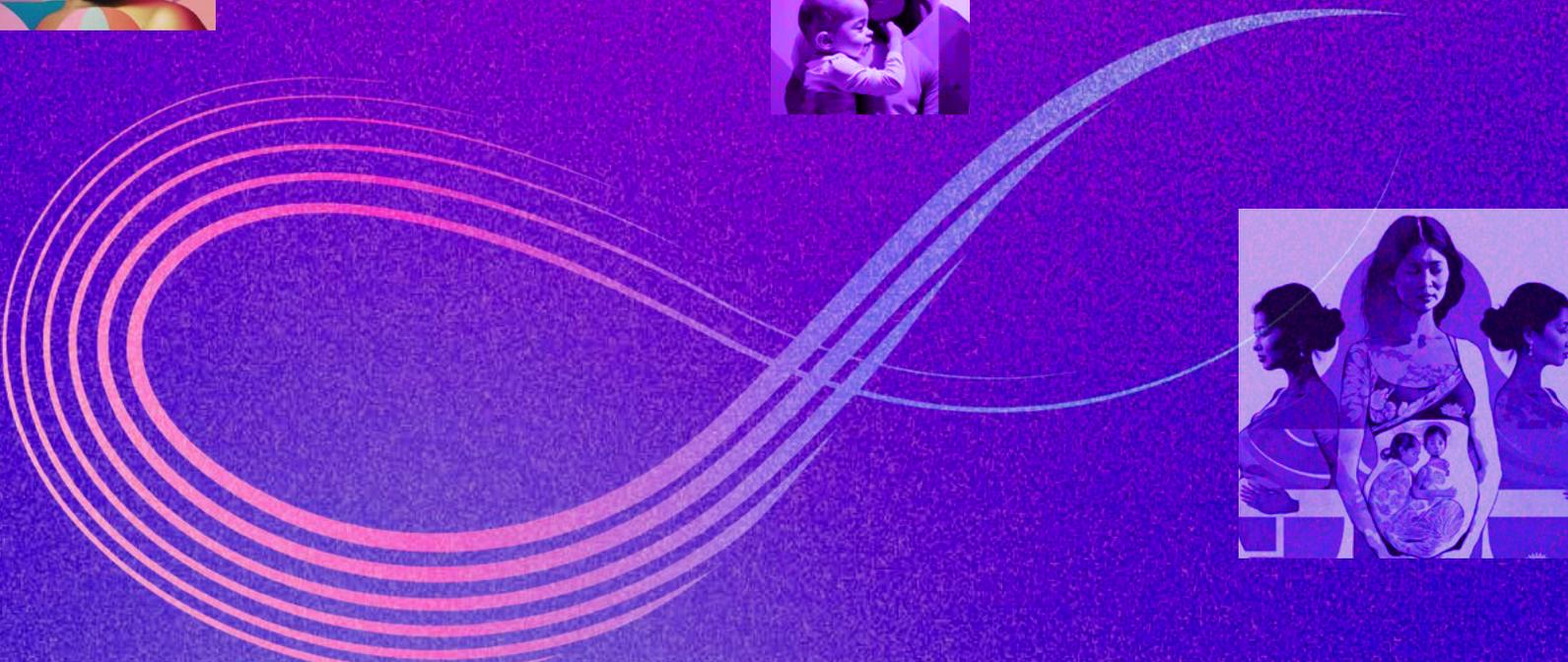
NEW VOICES in the population debate

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> In November of 2022, the world population surpassed 8 billion people.

As expected, the milestone kindled considerable interest among policymakers and mainstream media, whose pronouncements ranged from serious concern to cautious optimism. While it is relatively easy to gauge the stances of these more prominent voices – and see that they usually carry a fairly pessimistic view of the globe’s current population size – little is known about how the general public views population issues, or if they care about population issues at all. Furthermore, little is known about whether views held by individuals vary by their country’s population size or fertility context, which is critical given the globe’s current levels of impressive demographic diversity. Crucially, little is known about whether views held by individuals vary based on their exposure to recent rhetoric amid the widespread media climate of demographic anxiety.

To fill this knowledge gap, and more importantly, to give visibility to what everyday citizens think about the population issues that affect them, UNFPA commissioned eight unique YouGov polls. The eight surveys asked a total of 7,797 adults in Brazil, Egypt, France, Hungary, India, Japan, Nigeria and the United States for their views on a variety of population issues (see Technical Note on page 175 of the State of World Population 2023 report for more information). The eight countries cover a diverse set of regions, population sizes and fertility profiles, and while not globally representative, they do provide representative samples of the adult populations of the eight selected countries. As such, they offer a rare glimpse into what the general public thinks about some of the most fundamental and pressing demographic issues facing our world today.

A selection of the YouGov survey results was highlighted in UNFPA’s State of the World Population 2023 report, “8 Billion Lives, Infinite Possibilities: The case for rights and choices.” This present data supplement offers a compendium to that report, and has a twofold purpose:

1. to review some of the striking findings in the YouGov surveys pertinent to the State of the World Population 2023 report, and,
2. in the spirit of transparency and open data, make the YouGov survey information accessible. For closer examination, data files with individual responses are available upon request.

The survey results reveal that although a fair amount of demographic anxiety has percolated into popular opinion, there is appreciable diversity and complexity in the general public’s views. No single, simple narrative can capture what individuals think about – and how they experience – population issues, not least because views often differ considerably across country contexts as well as by gender and age. Furthermore, the survey results indicate that, when thinking about the impacts of population change, concerns around human rights and policies surrounding sexual and reproductive health and rights are among the most commonly selected concerns for many individuals, even though these issues receive comparatively little media attention. Such findings point unmistakably to the relevance of the State of the World Population 2023’s message of hope that arises from a regrouping of the population debate in respect of the rights and choices of individuals in building demographic resilience, rather than seeking demographic control as we enter a world of 8 billion and its infinite possibilities.

Population issues of most concern

A particularly crucial survey finding arose when respondents were asked to identify which 3 out of 20 issues were of greatest importance to them when thinking about population change within their own countries (in addition to the options “don’t know” and “none of these”). UNFPA then classified these issues into eight thematic categories: Labour market shortages, increased competition for jobs, changes to wages, higher cost of living, inequality and impacts on public services were categorized as economic issues. Environmental impact, food shortages and large-scale disasters (e.g. pandemics) were classified as environmental issues. Loss of human rights, policies on family size or number of children, and policies on abortion and reproductive healthcare were classified as concerns about sexual and reproductive health policies and human rights. The impact of specific ethnic groups, racism, and impact on traditional culture in the country were categorized as issues of culture, ethnicity and racism. Conflict or tensions between different groups within the country and conflict or tensions between countries were classified together as conflict and tensions. The options of population decline (such as in rural areas or overall) and increased spread of slums and urban areas (i.e. urban sprawl) each formed their own categories. Finally, the options other, none of these, and don’t know were grouped together.

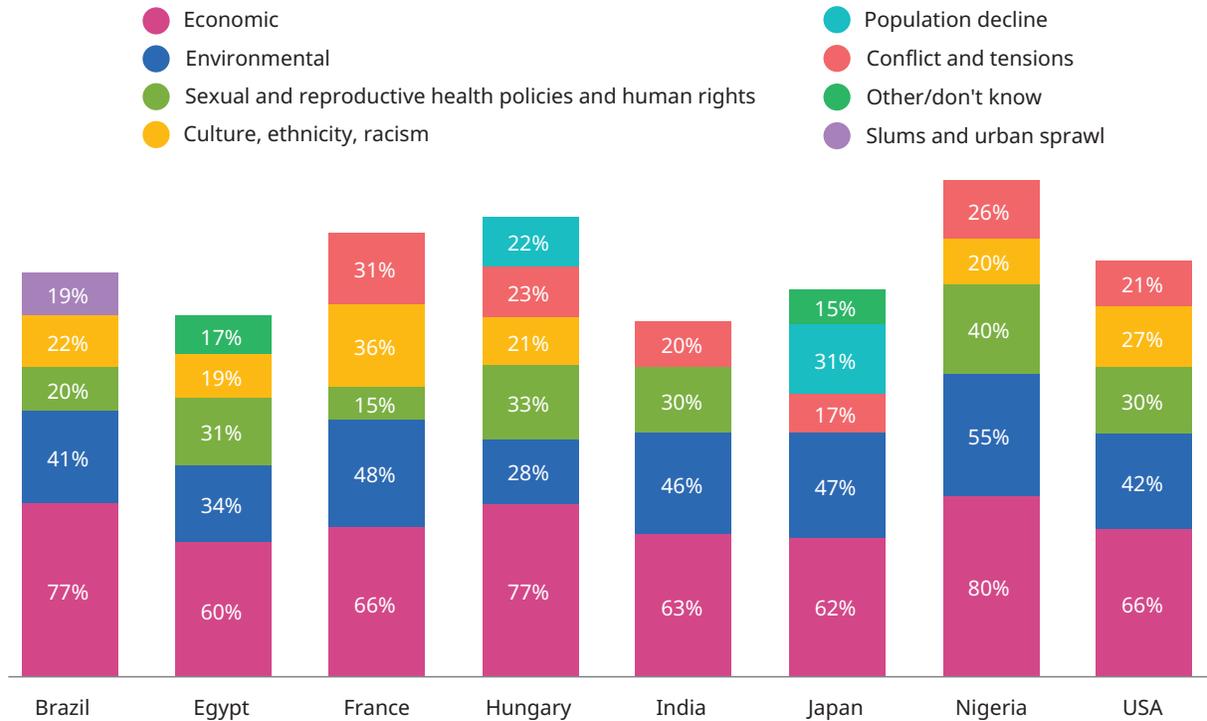
When analyzed this way, approximately two thirds or more of adults named economic issues as top concerns for population change (See Figure 1). Environmental concerns were the second most commonly cited priority in all countries except Hungary (where sexual and reproductive health and rights policies ranked as the second most commonly cited concern, followed by the environment). Concerns over sexual and reproductive health and rights policies and over human rights generally ranked as the third most commonly selected priority, while issues of culture, the impact of ethnic groups and racism generally took fourth priority.

In many countries, concerns also varied across age groups. In Hungary for example, population decline was considered a top-five priority among older respondents, but not among younger ones, while the reverse was true for environmental concerns. In the United States, respondents aged 35 years and older indicated conflicts and tensions between different groups within the country as a top-five priority, while those younger than 35 did not. Finally, in France, respondents aged 45 years and older ranked urban slums as a top-five priority, while younger respondents were more concerned about the loss of human rights.



> FIGURE 1

Concerns about possible changes to population in countries surveyed



Source: UNFPA/YouGov survey, 2022.

Note: Proportions add up to more than 100% because respondents identified their top 3 concerns out of a list of 20 options (plus "don't know" and "none of these"). Authors classified these into the 8 broad categories above. More information available at www.unfpa.org/swp2023/YouGovData.

Ultimately, these survey findings are important because the centrality of rights rarely finds its way into discourse about population change as expressed by politicians and the media. Notwithstanding the relative lack of media attention, it appears that rights and policies are nearly as present in the public's mind as are their concerns about the economic and environmental impacts of population change.

Views on population size

In every country surveyed, the most common view among respondents was that the global population is too large. In fact, in six of the eight countries surveyed (Brazil, Egypt, France, Hungary, India and Nigeria), a majority of all respondents – 53 to 76 per cent – held this perspective. In the two remaining countries, just under half of respondents (49 and 47 per cent, respectively) held this view, meaning that while it may be the most commonly held opinion, it was not the view of an outright majority of adults in the United States and Japan.

Nevertheless, many respondents did not share the view that the current global population is too large, and there was appreciable variety across countries. For example, between 13 per cent (France) and 30 per cent (Nigeria) of respondents believed the global population was about right. Every country saw appreciable numbers of respondents who did not have an opinion one way or another about world population size, or who believed the global population to be too low.

Views about respondents' own domestic populations were much more varied: In Brazil, Egypt, India and Nigeria, the most commonly held opinion (between 50 and 83 per cent of respondents) was that the population in their country was too large. In the four remaining countries surveyed – France, Hungary, Japan and the United States – the most commonly held opinion (ranging between 37 and 52 per cent of adults) was that their own country's population size was about right (though in the United States, there was little difference in the proportion between those who said it was about right and those who said it was too high).

Some of these views are unsurprising. For example, all four countries that view their domestic populations as too large have indeed experienced significant growth – more than quadrupling in size since 1950. In contrast, respondents in the United States most commonly said their population size was about right even though it is currently the third most populous in the world and its population has more than doubled since 1950.

Instead, what is perhaps surprising is that the intensity of opinions about populations being too large do not neatly correspond to absolute population numbers. For example, in Egypt the majority of adults believed that its current population of 113 million was too high, while Brazil, Japan and the United States are more populous but have a smaller share of respondents who thought their populations were too large. India has the largest population of the eight countries surveyed (at 1.4 billion) and its concern about its population was the highest of all countries surveyed, even though its current rate of growth is much lower than Nigeria and Egypt's.

Interestingly, in five out of the eight countries (Brazil, France, Hungary, Japan and the United States), more respondents thought the world's population was too high than thought their own country's population was too high. This was particularly dramatic in Hungary and Japan. Respondents in two countries (India and Nigeria) were more likely to say their domestic population was too high than to say the global population was too high. In Egypt, respondents were equally likely to say that the population was too high on both a national and global level. These differences in opinions about global and domestic populations are starkly demonstrated in Figure 2, which further contrasts the diversity with opinions about current global and domestic fertility rates.

> FIGURE 2

Respondents' views on fertility rate and population size across eight countries surveyed



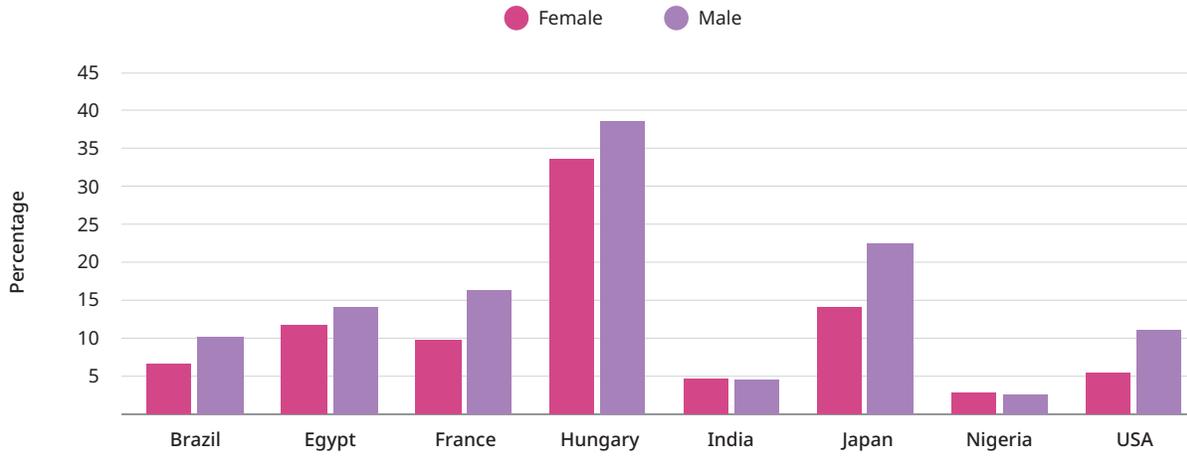
Source: UNFPA/YouGov survey, 2022

Anxieties about population numbers being too low appear to be a minority view. In every country, more people said their national population size was too high or was about right than said it was too small. The highest level of respondents saying that their population was too small – 36 per cent – was seen in Hungary, but even there it remained a minority opinion. (Hungary was also the only country surveyed that has seen consistently negative population growth over the past four decades.)

Nevertheless, a tellingly consistent gender difference emerged when looking at responses on the national population as being too small: In many countries these views were more likely to be held by men than women (Figure 3). The difference was particularly pronounced in France, Japan and the United States. In Japan, 22 per cent of men versus 14 per cent of women believed the country's population was too low. In France, this was 16 per cent of men and 10 per cent of women, while in the United States, it was 11 per cent of men versus 5 per cent of women.

> FIGURE 3

Proportion of men and women in eight countries surveyed who believed the current population size of their country was too low



Source: UNFPA/YouGov survey, 2022

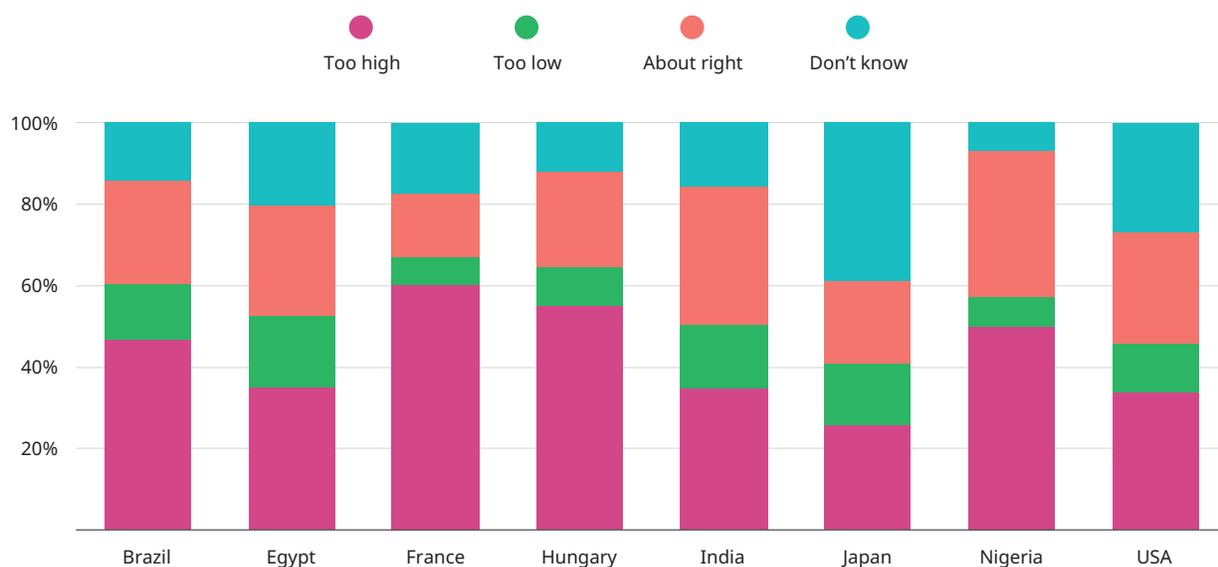


Views on fertility

In six of the eight countries, the most common view was that the global fertility rate is too high. In Japan, the largest share of respondents did not have an opinion about the global fertility rate. In India, nearly as many said the fertility rate was about right as said it was too high. Specifically, as seen in Figure 4, between 26 per cent (Japan) and 60 per cent (France) of respondents believed the global fertility rate (which is 2.3 children per woman) is too high. Nevertheless, many people did not share this view; every country saw an appreciable share of respondents who either thought global fertility is about right or too low or did not have an opinion one way or another.

> FIGURE 4

Views on global fertility rate held by respondents in eight countries surveyed



Source: UNFPA/YouGov survey, 2022

Views about respondents' own domestic fertility rates were much more varied. The most commonly held opinion in Brazil, Egypt, India and Nigeria was that the national fertility rate was too high. In France and the United States, the most commonly held opinion was that it was about right, while in Hungary and Japan, the most commonly held view – representing more than half of adults in both – was that it was too low. Not surprisingly, Hungary and Japan are the two countries with the lowest fertility rates of those surveyed. However, Brazil's current fertility is the third lowest of all countries surveyed, yet respondents' most common opinion was that the rate is too high.

When asked about the *impact* of potentially higher global fertility or higher domestic fertility, France, Hungary, Japan and the United States (all members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]) had more respondents viewing higher global fertility as harmful than viewing higher domestic fertility as harmful. In contrast, in Brazil, Egypt, India and Nigeria, slightly more respondents expressed concerns about the impact of higher domestic fertility than about higher global fertility. Interestingly, in all countries, more men than women believed higher domestic fertility rates would have a positive impact (though in Brazil and India, the gender difference was within the margin of error). Simultaneously, in many countries – and especially in France, Hungary and Nigeria – more men thought a lower fertility rate in their country would have a negative impact, whereas more women thought it would have a neutral impact.

Other notable gender differences appeared in the survey results. In most countries surveyed, more men than women said the global fertility rate was too high, with substantially more men than women holding this view in Hungary, Japan and the United States. Furthermore, in most countries, more men than women thought their national fertility was too low, with gender gaps especially notable in France, Hungary and the United States. In Hungary, 59 per cent of men felt the national fertility rate was too low, while 45 per cent of women believed the same. Meanwhile, 37 per cent of women in Hungary believed the fertility rate was just right while 28 per cent of men believed the same.

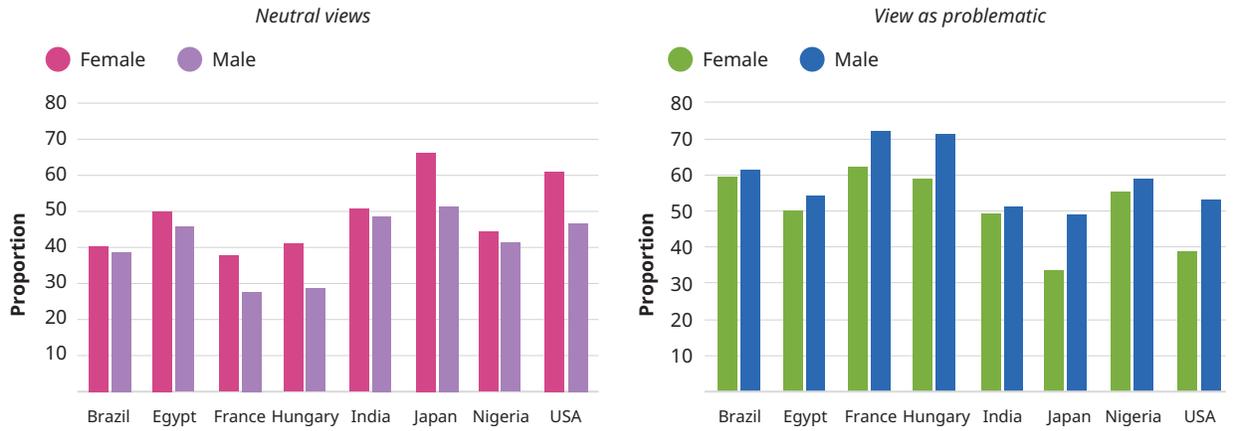
When the responses “too high” and “too low” are aggregated together into a category that sees fertility rates as problematic, and “don’t know” and “about right” responses are aggregated into neutral views (Figure 5), men are consistently more likely than women in all countries to see the global fertility rate as problematic (though in four countries this difference was within the margin of error). Men are also generally more likely than women to see the domestic fertility rate as problematic in the four countries where gender differences were not within the margin of error.

Although views from these eight countries cannot be globally generalized, the fairly strong consistency in gender differences suggests that women are generally less inclined to view global and domestic fertility rates as problems in need of solving. This makes sense if women identify more strongly than men as the individuals most immediately impacted by changes in fertility policies or childbearing norms.

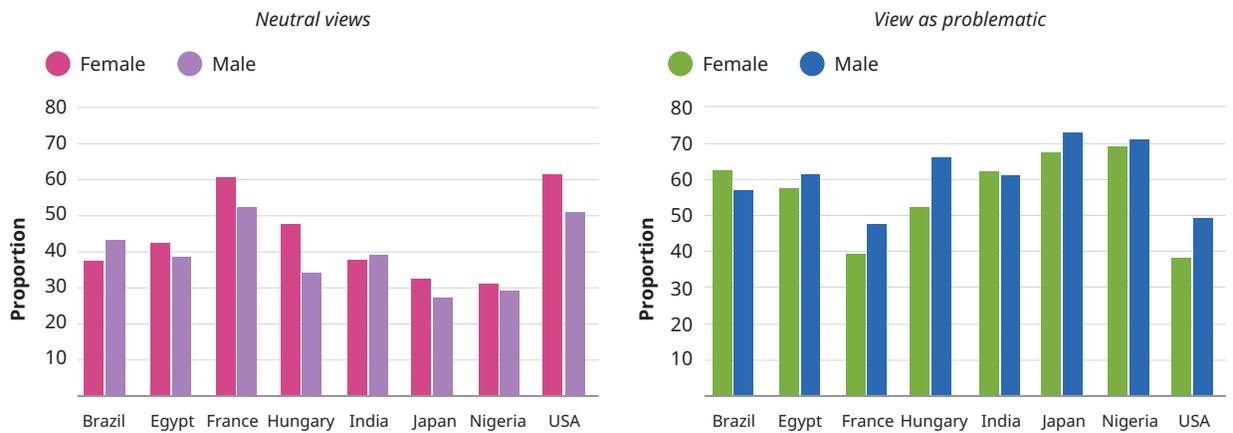


Proportions and views of men and women regarding the global fertility rate and their country's national fertility rate

Global fertility rate



National fertility rate



Source: UNFPA/YouGov survey, 2022.

The media and population anxiety

A final crucial finding was that exposure to messages and rhetoric about the world's population reaching 8 billion – whether via media, general conversation, or other modes of communication – was linked to greater concerns about population size, fertility rates and immigration. Although it is not possible to ascertain a causal relationship (rhetoric may contribute to population anxiety, for example, but people with population anxiety may also better recall or more actively consume information about population), the finding is noteworthy nonetheless.

In all countries, those who reported being exposed to media or conversations about the world's population in the past 12 months were substantially more likely to view the global population as being too high. This difference was most pronounced in Japan, where 68 per cent of those with media or messaging exposure believed the world population was too high while only 29 per cent of those without messaging exposure believed the same. Otherwise, in every country, those who had not seen any media coverage or messaging about the population reaching 8 billion were more likely to report “don't know” when asked for their opinion on global population size.

A similar pattern was seen with fertility and immigration: Those exposed to rhetoric or media messages about global or domestic population size were more likely to say the global fertility rate was too high. Finally, in every country except Hungary, exposure to rhetoric, messaging or media about global or domestic population size correlated to viewing immigration rates as too high.

Conclusion

Ultimately, these unique surveys, which give voice to what everyday citizens think about the population issues that most affect them, demonstrate that although the general public does have concerns about many demographic issues, their views are nuanced and diverse. They also reveal that respect for human rights and policies surrounding sexual and reproductive health and rights are a significant concern for many people. This points unmistakably to the importance of UNFPA's call for the full realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all 8 billion members of our human family.

More information

Further information on YouGov and the survey methodology on pages 172 and 173 of the report.

Read the full report:

www.unfpa.org/swp2023

Full tables available at the YouGov website:

https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/xn0kwsbzum/UNFPA_Population_Nov2022_topline_W.pdf

Breakdowns by country, gender, age and other groupings available upon request.



Ensuring rights and choices for all

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