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A bold idea to raise the birthrate

Make parenting less torturous

For the past few years, I've kept a running list of hare-brained schemes various governments and officials have proposed to raise the birth rate in their ageing countries. Some of the most creative ones come from Russia.

The mayor of a city in southwest Russia encouraged men to 'sneak up on their women so that 10 000 children will be born in exactly nine months.' Some regions are giving lump-sum bonuses to women who become mothers while they're still in school, and a Russian version of MTV's '16 and Pregnant', which originally discouraged teen pregnancy, has been rebranded as 'Mom at 16', in order to promote it. One politician encouraged women to wear miniskirts to increase births, while an official in the country's Education Ministry advocated 'school discos' to foster 'romance for children'. A regional health minister has told Russians to have sex during work breaks.

Now, a hodgepodge of religious conservatives and techno-futurists are leading the United States into the fray. The ideas reportedly under consideration by the Trump administration – government prizes for mothers of six or more children, sex education focused on teaching women when they're fertile, a $5 000 payment upon delivery of a child – may sound comparatively tame, but they share a quality that unites many unsuccessful natalist attempts thus far: They fail to demonstrate even a passing familiarity with the lives and concerns of modern women.

What do America's women actually need?

To date, no government policies have significantly improved their nation's birth-rates for a sustained period — at least no policies whose lessons are easily transferable to other countries. That doesn't mean such policies couldn't exist. It means lawmakers are looking in the wrong places. In a recent report, the head of the United Nations Population Fund noted that around the world, people are unable to have the families they want. In response, she suggests, 'all of us, including policymakers,

should ask what people want and need — not as an afterthought, but as the first and most important inquiry when considering population issues.'

America has made parenting unusually, needlessly hard. Child care and rent are unaffordable; medical care, even when subsidised, is a nightmare of red tape; family leave is too short and too rare; everyone feels overextended and underachieving.

As the climate activists Meghan Elizabeth Kallman and Josephine Ferorelli have observed, the United States 'is already an anti-natalist country in everything but name'. Instead of trying to persuade women to churn out huge broods under punishing circumstances, America's leaders should start by making it easier to have whatever number of kids women choose to have. In the process, they just might find that women want to have more.

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Surveys conducted over the past few years show that Americans already want more kids than they are having; they'd like between 2.1 and 2.7 children on average, depending on the gender and age group questioned, which is half to a full child more than the 1.6 that women are actually having at present. Until someone figures out how to make artificial wombs (and believe me, many people are trying), no natalist policy is going to get any traction if it doesn't start with two questions: 'What is it that is making this hard for women right now?' as Corinne Low, a Wharton School expert on economics, public policy and gender, said in conversation with me recently, 'And how do we solve those things?'

So what do America's women actually need? Or to put it another way, is there a way to be natalist without also being patriarchal?

First, some facts about American women. A growing share of them are single; by one estimate, more than half of non-college-educated women born in the mid-90s will be single when they're 45. Among women of reproductive age, a vast majority work. Women are increasingly having children in later years. And despite women's growing earning power, they still do the lion's share of housework, even when their husbands are unemployed.

But fewer women are marrying, at least in part because they're having

trouble finding appealing men. In addition to the partnering problem, many women report financial concerns as a major obstacle to having kids (or having more kids).

Helping heterosexual women have children, then, will require tackling toxic gender dynamics before and within marriage, and committing real, ongoing financial support — not a one-time 'push present' that women I've spoken to, from across the political spectrum, find downright offensive as an incentive to have a child.

The approach that President Trump is being pitched – a sprinkling of incentives combined with a doubling down on conservative gender roles – has failed precedents all over the world. Women are unlikely to willingly cede their newly won educational gains, financial independence and reproductive autonomy, no matter how loudly policymakers insist that what women actually want is eight children, a useless husband and a medal from the government.

Not just a US problem

These efforts are not subtle. In Hungary, where the government has thrown serious money behind its natalist efforts to little avail, Katalin Novak, then Hungary's minister for families, released a videotaped speech in 2020 advising women not to seek pay or positions comparable to their male counterparts'. 'Do not believe that we, women, must always compete with men', she admonished.

China has liberalised its one-child policy to three children, but its ham-handed push to get women to revert to a subservient gender role is finding few takers. Single women in China are not even allowed to freeze their eggs. Like the US, both Hungary and China have tightened access to abortion.

In 2016, South Korea's government created a map showing the number of reproductive- age women in each region, underscoring its instrumental approach to female fertility. In response, outraged women created a 'Men With Sexual Dysfunctions Map' and the 'Korea Sex Buyer Map'. In the decade since, the country's gender divide has deepened, so it is no surprise that all of the country's natalist spending on things like baby bonuses doesn't seem to be working. Now, 4B, a small but influential movement of feminist activists calling for the boycotting of heterosexual dating, sex, marriage and childbirth, has gone viral globally, catching fire in the United States in the wake of Trump's re-election.

In the country of Georgia, Patriarch Ilia II of the Georgian Orthodox Church offered in 2007 to personally baptise any third or higher-order birth to a married Georgian Orthodox woman. That seems to have worked. In the decade after those mass baptisms kicked off, the birth rate for married Georgian Orthodox women increased by 42 per cent.

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Georgia's policy succeeded because it was quite literally preaching to the converted: Roughly 80 per cent of the country's population is part of the Georgian Orthodox Church, and Patriarch Ilia is the country's most widely respected public figure. In the United States, the most reliably fertile communities are also religious ones. The economist Catherine Pakaluk's book *Hannah's Children*, based on dozens of interviews with American women who have had five or more children, concludes that bringing forth more babies requires expanding the role of religion in public life. Young women, though, increasingly want no part of organised religion.

It's possible that within the MAGA bubble, some aspiring tradwives might genuinely be motivated by the prospect of a medal, or perhaps a memecoin, from Trump (though whether they'll get all the way to baby No. 6 by the time his term ends is an open question). Overall, though, existing Trump policies will almost certainly achieve the opposite of what they intend.

One longstanding survey of consumer sentiment found that women's confidence in the economy has tanked since Trump returned to office, falling far more steeply than men's confidence. This pessimism is hardly likely to drive an already anxious cohort of reproductive-age women into motherhood. In Italy, demographers have found that bad economic news is associated with declining fertility, while positive news about the economy is associated with rising fertility. Telling parents they can't buy their children as many dolls surely won't help, either.

After the rollback of reproductive rights because of the Dobbs abortion decision, for which Trump takes credit, the number of women obtaining permanent contraception, such as tubal sterilisation, increased, as did the number of abortions performed. 'If you look at other places in history, coercing women to have babies doesn't work', said Lynn Paltrow, the founder of Pregnancy Justice. 'Women will do whatever they need to do to protect not only their own lives and health but the family that they're responsible for', she pointed out, alluding to the fact that most

women who have abortions already have at least one child.

Real support

The most woman-friendly and birth-friendly regime I have come across so far is in Denmark, where child care is subsidised and extensive parental leave is provided. The public health ministry, which has offered free in vitro fertilisation for single women as well as couples until the woman turns 41, recently started to cover treatment for a second child. Today, medically assisted reproduction accounts for roughly 12 per cent of Denmark's births, compared with just over two per cent in the United States.

Dr. Soren Ziebe, who helped oversee Denmark's largest public fertility clinic for two decades, said policymakers are focused on helping people – women and men – who want to have families realise that dream, including by helping them overcome infertility. I had emailed him to see if he wanted to talk about natalism and the country's recent expansion of its I.V.F. program, but he hadn't heard natalism used in a Danish context and had to explain what it meant to some of his female colleagues, who had never heard the term before. 'I tried to look it up', he told me when we spoke, but he found a few different definitions. In Denmark, he said, 'The pronatal discussion is not a discussion that we have at all.'

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Denmark's policies haven't changed the trajectory of the nation's falling birth rate, which now stands at about 1.5 per woman. But they have offered real support to those who do have kids. Could an approach like that produce a measurable increase in the American birth rate? This country has never even tried.

American women are at a breaking point; an overwhelming majority of them, irrespective of party, say they want paid family and medical leave. As the sociologist Jessica Calarco has observed, other countries have safety nets. The United States has women.

The ideas currently being floated do nothing to address the obstacles stopping women from having children they already want to have. Instead, they prompt mockery and horror, at least among my cohort of reproductive-age women. 'This is nuts', said one friend, responding to a recent news article. 'God help us', wrote another. A suite of proposals that included affordable child care, universal health care and paid family leave would most likely prompt a different reaction: Relief. Security. Maybe even another baby or two.

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Anna Louie Sussman

Anna Louie Sussman writes about gender, economics and reproduction. She is working on a book about family building in an age of uncertainty.