

POLICY BRIEF

Addressing Low Fertility
in the Maldives



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United Nations Population Fund

INTRODUCTION



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The Maldives is currently grappling with a compelling demographic conundrum marked by declining fertility rates. This discernible trend carries profound ramifications, spanning the domains of society, economy, and demography, significantly influencing the nation's trajectory ahead. This policy brief undertakes the task of elucidating the pivotal factors underpinning the low fertility rates in the Maldives and subsequently proposes a range of recommendations to effectively tackle this multifaceted issue. By advocating for a comprehensive strategy that integrates targeted interventions, bolstered social support mechanisms, and impactful awareness campaigns, this brief envisions a path toward cultivating sustainable population growth and a harmonised demographic framework. In doing so, the Maldives can anticipate a future that upholds social well-being, economic dynamism, and the enduring equilibrium of its demographic landscape.

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TOTAL FERTILITY RATE IN THE MALDIVES 2014 TO 2022

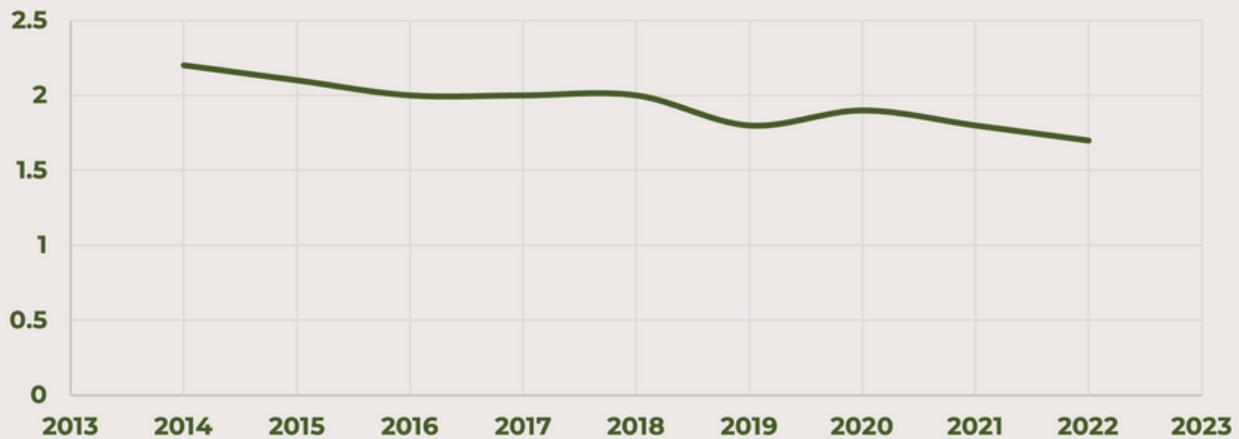


Figure 1 - Total Fertility Rate in the Maldives - 2014 to 2022 [1]

TREND IN FERTILITY

In the Maldives, there has been a significant trend of declining fertility rates over the past few decades. This decline is characterised by a decreasing number of children born per woman of childbearing age. Factors such as changing societal norms, increasing emphasis on education and careers, economic pressures, housing, and limited access to reproductive health services have contributed to this trend. While fertility rates are decreasing, the country is simultaneously grappling with various challenges related to its demographic composition. These include skill shortages, an abundance of migrant workers compared to the local population in the Maldives, and housing conditions. As a result, the Maldives is currently undergoing a demographic shift towards an ageing population, and will likely face numerous challenges associated with this trend in the future. This is primarily due to the rapid decline in fertility rates and the increased life expectancy of the Maldivian population. Consequently, there will be potential labour force shortages and significant changes in the demographic structure. Addressing this evolving trend now itself is crucial to ensure sustainable population growth and maintain a balanced age distribution in the years to come. In addition, the uncertainty around how climate change could impact the factors above could have devastating impacts on the country.

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[1] 2014 to 2021 from VRS; 2022 from 2022 Census

TREND IN FERTILITY CONT'D

Figure 1 illustrates the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) reaching replacement level of fertility (TFR = 2.1), but subsequently falling below that threshold in 2016. It stabilised around 2 until 2018, although it should be noted that TFR typically fluctuates when it reaches replacement level or dips below it, as seen in 2019. However, TFR increased again before declining further to 1.7 children per woman. It is essential to recognize that without the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, TFR would likely have remained around 1.8.

FACTORS INFLUENCING LOW FERTILITY

The decline in fertility rates in the Maldives is attributed to a complex interplay of various factors that collectively shape family planning decisions. Shifts in societal norms and cultural dynamics have led to a postponement of marriages and childbearing, as couples prioritise education, careers, and personal aspirations. The pursuit of higher education and professional goals, particularly among women, has reshaped the timing of parenthood. Economic pressures, including high living costs and housing challenges, contribute to couples opting for smaller families. Gender disparities persist in both the workplace and domestic responsibilities, impacting women's choices in family size as they seek to balance work and family commitments. Limited access to comprehensive family planning information and reproductive health services, including their high costs, further complicates decision-making. As urbanisation and globalisation influence lifestyles, the traditional emphasis on larger families gives way to newer ideals focused on quality over quantity in child-rearing.



KEY CHALLENGES

Continuously declining fertility rates in the Maldives can pose several significant challenges for the nation's future:

1. The Low Fertility and Health Nexus: Addressing low fertility in the Maldives requires a comprehensive strategy considering demographic complexities and health concerns, including the early onset of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). This urgency gains emphasis from a noticeable trend highlighted by the National Transfer Account (NTA)[2], which reveals a progressively younger onset of NCDs due to evolving lifestyles. Seamlessly integrating these aspects into policy discussions can boost fertility rates and promote healthier lifestyles, positively impacting population dynamics and public health in the Maldives.



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2. Ageing Population: A sustained decline in fertility leads to an ageing population with a higher proportion of elderly individuals. According to population projections for the Maldives, the nation's rapid social and economic progress in recent decades is expected to drive a shift in its population dynamics, notably towards an aging population in the upcoming decades. This demographic shift can strain healthcare systems, pension programs, and social services, as the demand for elderly care and support increases.

3. Labor Force Shortages: A shrinking workforce due to low fertility can result in labour shortages, affecting economic growth and productivity. Industries may struggle to find skilled workers, potentially leading to reduced competitiveness and economic stagnation.

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[2] National Transfer Account <https://maldives.unfpa.org/en/publications/national-transfer-accounts-maldives>



KEY CHALLENGES CONT'D

4. Economic Impact: A declining working-age population can slow down economic expansion. Reduced consumer spending, lower tax revenues, and decreased economic output can collectively hamper the country's economic vitality. The issue of low fertility in the Maldives presents a complex interplay with the country's economic landscape, notably exacerbated by the substantial rates of foreign migration. With only 30% of the workforce comprising Maldivians, the prevailing reliance on foreign labour underscores a critical challenge. Tourism policy expansion affects fertility and workforce: Growing tourism leads to more Maldivian, especially female, exits from the workforce due to societal pressure for more childbirth. This strains the labour market and economic impact of low fertility, highlighting the need for balanced policies boosting local workforce and fertility rates amidst economic growth.

5. Support Ratio: A diminishing ratio of prime age workers in comparison to dependents within the population places (support ratio) substantial strain on the working population, imposing both financial and social burdens to support a larger non-working segment. These diverted resources could be utilized to cultivate the human capital of the youth, enhancing their preparedness as a skilled workforce entering the labour market.



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KEY CHALLENGES CONT'D

6. Healthcare and Social Services Burden: Confronting low fertility in the Maldives underscores the pressing need to address healthy ageing and its impact on social welfare. With only 30% local workforce, redefining ageing positively is urgent. Balancing fertility boost, active aging, and social welfare needs an integrated solution. Propose innovative strategies for sustainable well-being addressing low fertility and empowering the aging population in the Maldives. This also requires equal access to services across the country and address the intricate vulnerabilities that the elderly population face in the island communities.



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7. The Youth and Fertility Resilience Challenge: Nurturing Healthy Futures in the Maldives: In addressing Maldives' low fertility issue, focus on its impact on the youth. Fast-food culture has led to reproductive health issues like PCOS, PMS, and infertility. Promote nutritious consumption at all stages to mitigate these health problems and enhance fertility, ensuring a healthier future. Propose innovative strategies linking youth, nutrition, and fertility for a resilient nation.

8. Cultural and Social Changes: Lower fertility rates can influence family structures and cultural dynamics. Smaller family sizes might lead to changes in family traditions, values, and community cohesion.



KEY CHALLENGES CONT'D



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9. Brain Drain: If young individuals choose not to start families due to economic or career concerns, there's a risk of a "brain drain" as young talent seeks opportunities abroad, impacting the nation's intellectual and human resource pool. The decision of young individuals to delay or avoid starting families due to economic or career worries can trigger a "brain drain" as these talented individuals seek better opportunities abroad, ultimately depleting the nation's intellectual and human resource pool. This exodus of talent can impede domestic innovation, economic growth, and demographic stability.

10. Economic Inequality: Low fertility can perpetuate gender inequalities in the workforce, as women may face greater pressure to balance work and family responsibilities. This could limit their career opportunities and earning potential. This means that low fertility rates lead to a smaller future workforce, prompting increased pressure on women to balance work and family roles. This perpetuates gender inequalities as women face expectations to prioritize caregiving over their careers due to traditional gender roles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following are recommendations for policymakers in the Maldives to address the challenges posed by continuously declining fertility rates:

1. Family-Friendly Policies: Introduce policies that support work-life balance, such as flexible work arrangements, parental leave, and affordable childcare services. These measures can alleviate the challenges faced by working parents and encourage family planning.

2. Reproductive Health Services: Improve access to high-quality reproductive health services and education. Ensuring that individuals have accurate information about family planning methods and reproductive health contributes to informed decision-making. This includes comprehensive information and assistance related to issues of infertility, which should be accessible to all, regardless of economic constraints, through affordable pricing or coverage under a national health insurance scheme.

3. Gender Equality: Implement initiatives that promote gender equality in the workplace and at home. Encouraging shared responsibilities for domestic tasks and child-rearing can empower women to make family planning choices that align with their personal and professional aspirations.

4. Affordable Housing: Address housing affordability issues, as adequate housing is crucial for family planning decisions. Develop policies that make homeownership more accessible to young families with a reduction in home loan interest rates comparable to internationally prevailing rates. The current high housing interest rates are a concern, putting people who seek such facilities in a debt trap. It's imperative to alleviate this burden by advocating for reasonable interest rates that enable individuals and families to pursue their housing goals without being overwhelmed by financial strain.

5. Youth Engagement: Create awareness campaigns targeted at young adults to highlight the benefits of timely childbearing and the advantages of maintaining a balanced demographic structure for the nation's future.



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RECOMMENDATIONS CONT'D

6. Education Initiatives: Integrate family planning and reproductive health education into school curriculum to ensure that young individuals are well-informed about their options and responsibilities including the importance of and the means to a healthy lifestyle in the curriculum.

7. Elderly Care Programs: Develop comprehensive elderly care programs to support the aging population. This can help alleviate the strain on families and encourage young individuals to start families knowing their elderly relatives will receive proper care.

8. Community Support Networks: Foster community-based support networks that provide assistance and guidance to families, especially young parents, akin to the prenatal and postnatal care provided in more developed countries. These networks can enhance social cohesion and provide resources for navigating parenthood, including home visits during antenatal and postnatal periods.

RECOMMENDATIONS CONT'D



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9. The Holistic Wellness and Equitable Growth Challenge: Revitalising Fertility in the Maldives: In addressing low fertility in the Maldives involves robust dialogues on nutrition's role in holistic well-being and a shift toward equitable economic policies prioritising wellness. This challenge calls for innovative integration of nutrition policies and thoughtful economic reforms to bolster fertility rates, enhance well-being, and forge a harmonious and prosperous society, aligning with our commitment as stakeholders to craft comprehensive solutions for a sustainable future.

10. Research: Collect evidence on drivers of low fertility and its inter linkages with other broader factors such as climate change and global warming to inform policy change

11. Investing in Human Capital: Identify the market for different skills in the country and initial training the young generation at an early age. Prioritize different skills needed at different regions within the country and mobile resources to build Maldivians in these areas.

12. Long-Term Planning: Establish a comprehensive national population policy that addresses demographic challenges and outlines strategies for sustainable population growth, taking into account economic, social, and environmental factors.



RECOMMENDATIONS CONT'D

13. Partnerships and Collaborations: Engage with non-governmental organisations, community leaders, religious institutions, and international agencies to create a holistic approach to addressing fertility challenges.

14. Data Collection and Monitoring: Invest in data collection and analysis to continuously monitor fertility trends, allowing policymakers to adapt strategies based on real-time information.



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CONCLUSION

Addressing low fertility in the Maldives requires a multi-faceted approach that considers socio-cultural factors, economic conditions, and healthcare access. By implementing a combination of policies that support families, promote gender equity, raise awareness, and improve reproductive health services, the Maldives can overcome the challenges posed by low fertility rates. A collaborative effort from policymakers, community leaders, and civil society can create an environment conducive to sustainable population growth, ensuring a balanced demographic structure and a prosperous future for the nation.

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