

Low-birth Greece takes a further hit from crisis

April 21 2013, by John Hadoulis

In a nursery of a private maternity hospital in Athens, three mothers feed their newborns while another three babies nap nearby. The room has only a few cots, and yet a number lie empty.

Sunk in [recession](#) for the past six years and struggling to steer its economy through painful austerity cuts, Greece now faces a fertility crisis as well.

"Benefits have been cut, the cost of living has risen, wages are down and there is great uncertainty," says Leonidas Papadopoulos, managing director of the Leto hospital and a veteran [obstetrician](#).

"Couples think twice nowadays, not only for a second child but even for their first... It looks like there will be 10,000 fewer births next year," he adds, citing estimates drawn from state and private studies.

According to state statistics agency Elstat, the [fertility rate](#) in Greece has fallen from 2.33 children per woman in 1975 to 1.4 in 2011.

The replacement rate, the number of births at which the population remains stable, is 2.07 children.

Papadopoulos also cites a recent study by the University of Athens which found that the rate of [miscarriages](#) has doubled to four percent in the last two years.

And births have gone from 118,000 in 2008 to 101,000 last year, he notes.

"At this rate, Greece will be much smaller in a few years," Papadopoulos says.

The European Union fertility leader is Ireland with 2.05 births in 2012, followed by France with 2.01 children.

In one of its projected scenarios, Elstat sees the population of Greece dropping to 9.7 million in 2050 from 11.29 million in 2012.

A jobless rate of over 27 percent—and over 30 percent among women—compounds the difficulty facing couples today.

"Policies to protect maternity are easier to apply in good (economic) periods," says a high-ranking state welfare official who declined to be named.

"In the private sector, mothers very frequently do not make use of their rights because unemployment is very high," the official added.

In Greece's more easy-going civil service, staff can take up to 14 months in fully paid maternity leave—and have been known to obtain extra time for difficult pregnancies.

In the private sector, mothers can on paper claim up to 15 months of non-consecutive maternity leave—four of them unpaid—not including holidays.

In reality, however, employees rarely push to obtain full maternity leave for fear of losing their job, officials note.

The Greek ombudsman's office highlights the problem in its latest report for 2012.

"Women who are pregnant or just back from maternity leave, run higher risks of...unemployment and precarious employment," the report said.

"In many cases they accept a violation of their labour rights to avoid losing their job," it noted, adding that having children was also likely to adversely affect a woman's pay and career prospects within a company.

"We even have extreme examples of couples who have been trying to have a child for years, undergo costly treatment and then want to have an abortion because the husband just lost his job," [Papadopoulos](#) said.

The 'money is so little that it cannot even cover bread and milk for the children'

Paradoxically, the axe has fallen the hardest on large families.

Until last year, mothers could claim a lump sum of 2,000 euros (\$2,618) upon the [birth](#) of their third child, and the same amount for each child thereafter.

Then there were additional child support benefits of up to 4,700 euros a year, depending on income and the number of children, which were accessible to even moderately wealthy families.

These were eliminated in 2012 and replaced with a new, means-tested system.

From January 1, families are theoretically eligible for child support benefits of up to 5,880 euros—but they would need to have six children

and be on the verge of starvation to claim it.

Spain is a similar example of a once-generous welfare gone for good—a 2,500-euro handout per baby was eliminated in 2011.

In Germany, parents receive 184 euros per month for their first two children. For the third child, the state pays 190 euros and for additional children 215 euros.

In Greece, even for couples who are not in dire straits, supporting a large family is tough.

"We cannot meet the needs of our three children and our parents are having to contribute from their pensions," says Georgia Kitsaki, an unemployed hotel worker from Thessaloniki.

Georgia and her husband Nikos, who is also unemployed after a labour accident, received a monthly jobless benefit of 470 euros until December, and child benefit of 276 euros. The latter has since been suspended.

"In any case, this money is so little that it cannot even cover bread and milk for the children," she adds.

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