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The Double Whammy Making Italy the West's Fasting Shrinking Nation

Italy's population of elder Italians is soaring as its birthrate plummets, putting the country at the forefront of a global demographic trend that experts call the "silver tsunami."

By Jason Horowitz

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6 MIN READ

PIACENZA, Italy — On one side of a glass wall, three toddlers in a nursery school flattened play dough with plastic rolling pins. On the other, three old women in a nursing home tapped the pane to get their attention.

"Let's say hi to the nonni," the children's teacher said before leading them through a door that connected the two rooms.

The children stopped to play with the magnifying glass of a delighted 89-year-old woman who had been using it to read obituaries. Then the toddlers, all 2 years old, took an elevator upstairs, where nursing home residents waited to read them picture books in a small library.

"It's an extraordinary thing," said one of the residents, Giacomo Scaramuzza, 100. "People think we are from two different worlds, but it's not true. We are in the same world. And maybe I give them something, too. There is an exchange."

Piacenza's Elderly and Children Together, an experimental project in the country's most renowned region for childhood education and elder care, seeks to connect the vulnerable at both extremes of life. But it also puts Italy's two existential challenges under one roof.

The Italian government has pledged to address the needs of the country's aging population. Elisabetta Zavoli for The New York Times

Italy's population is aging and shrinking at the fastest rate in the West, forcing the country to adapt to a booming population of elderly that puts it at the forefront of a global demographic trend that experts call the "silver tsunami." But it faces a demographic double whammy, with a drastically sinking birthrate that is among the lowest in Europe. Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has said Italy is "destined to disappear" unless it changes.

This month, Ms. Meloni's government approved a new "Pact for the Third Age," which she said would lay a foundation for health and social overhauls for Italy's exploding population of old people. "They represent the heart of society, and a patrimony of values, traditions and precious wisdom," said Ms. Meloni, adding that the law would prevent marginalization and the "parking" of elderly in

institutions.

"To care for the old is to care for all of us," she said.

The overhaul essentially adopted, experts say nearly wholesale, a measure approved at the end of the previous administration of Prime Minister Mario Draghi. Critically, it followed Mr. Draghi's lead in wrapping the legislation into the European Union recovery fund program, which ensures that it will be enacted.

"This is the acknowledgment that long-term care is a welfare policy," said Cristiano Gori, who leads the Pact for a New Welfare on the Dependent, the umbrella organization that advocated the law.

A common hall at the nursing home. Italy's population is aging at the fastest rate in the West. Elisabetta Zavoli for The New York Times

The new law, he said, will fix a system that is "a mess," streamlining and simplifying government health care and social services, and getting local and national government into the growing field of long-term care. At the same time, it seeks to keep aging Italians in their own homes and out of institutions. A key innovation, he said, depends on funding by the Meloni government, but would give Italians a choice between unconditional cash benefits or larger in-kind contributions to be used for public care.

"The main shortcoming is that there is no money," Mr. Gori said. The hope, he said, is that Ms. Meloni's government, which sold itself to voters as being "family, family, family," will make the program a real priority and fund it. But without more young people to join the work force and pay into pension and welfare systems, the whole system is imperiled.

Ms. Meloni, who once ran for mayor while pregnant, is Italy's first female prime minister, and throughout her career, she has made raising the country's perennially low birthrate and helping working mothers a priority.

But critics say her "Italians First" opposition to immigration — she has gone so far as to warn against "ethnic replacement" — hurts population growth. And Ms. Meloni's government, slowed by local bureaucratic snags, has already delayed a program to build new nursery schools financed with 3 billion euros — or about $3.3 billion — in European Union recovery funds.

Giacomo Scaramuzza playing with children at the nursing home. Elisabetta Zavoli for The New York Times

If Italy does not get serious about encouraging young families and working women to have children, "it will remain and forever be a country that gets older," said Alessandro Rosina, a leading Italian demographer and an author of a "Demographic History of Italy."

The combination of low employment for women, the fleeing of young professionals and families, little immigration, low birthrates and radically increased life expectancy amounted to a demographic disaster, he said.

The reality of the gray new world poses a make-or-break test for Italy, making it a laboratory for many Western countries with aging populations, some experts said.

Some of Italy's regions hope to delay that demographic time bomb by prolonging the period in which older people can work, be self-sufficient and contribute, and not be a financial drain on society. The center in Piacenza has sought to invigorate them with its precious resource of children. Before Covid sealed the nursing home off, children in the center ate and even cooked with the older residents. Now things are opening up again.

The children use walkers in the corridor as racecars; they turn a lunch cart into a pirate ship; and they play in the gym while the residents do their fitness routines.

"The most significant relationships were born casually, where the child wanted to go upstairs to the old person's room, hop on their lap and read a book," said Francesca Cavozzi, 41, the project's coordinator. She said having the two extremes of the life span, both sharing sometimes uncertain gaits and a taste for juice, in a shared space was a "first step" toward making Italy's seniors feel engaged and useful.

"The old person feels that the adult looks at them with pity," Ms. Cavozzi said, "the child doesn't do this yet."

Francesca Cavozzi, the coordinator of Elderly and Children Together. Elisabetta Zavoli for The New York Times

Some, however, expressed skepticism that the children got much out of it.

"After five minutes, they refuse you," said Luisa Tani, 86, who reads to the children in part, she said, out of nostalgia for her early years as an elementary school teacher.

The center has received interest from academics. College students have written theses on the center's approach to intergenerational living, which Ms. Cavozzi says echoes the traditional Italian home, with the residents as the heads of the family, the staff as the adults and the children as the children.

She said she hoped researchers would study the effects on the elderly, but also in the long term, on the children, to see if they grow to be more sensitive to the old and vulnerable. But for now, she said with some bewilderment, "in Italy, it has not been replicated."

Even as Italy slowly comes to terms with the coming transformation, the issues it raises are hardly new to it.

When Benito Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922, the Fascists immediately got to work on increasing birthrates, stemming emigration and increasing Italy's population to 60 million (from 40 million) by 1950.

"If the number diminishes, ladies and gentlemen, you don't make an empire, you become a colony," Mussolini said in a 1927 speech calling growth a "destiny of the race."

Children stopping to play with the magnifying glass of a delighted 89-year-old woman. She had been using it to read obituaries. Elisabetta Zavoli for The New York Times

To address what it came to call Italy's "problem of problems," the regime introduced paid maternity leave, among other steps. But the obsession with birthrate by a man who threw in his lot with Hitler, demographers say, had the effect of stigmatizing social policy on the problem, leading Italy to invest less in assistance for young families than other European countries after the war.

"The belief that family policies had a Fascist echo had a role," said Mr. Rosina, the demographer.

In the 1950s, Italy's economy boomed, and so did its population, which filled with young workers. But generations of leaders largely failed to help Italians with programs like day care, prompting criticism that the country's conservative culture cared more about mothers staying home to give birth than helping women work and raise children.

In November, Ms. Meloni, who has roots in post-Fascist parties, encouraged couples to have children and businesses to hire women. She later announced a 50 percent increase in the "baby bonus" checks parents receive a year after a birth and a 50 percent increase in assistance for three years to families with more than three children.

"We continue to look at today," Ms. Meloni has said, "not realizing we won't have a tomorrow."

But despite billions of euros earmarked for nursery schools by the European Union, Italy has delayed the start date on 1,857 nurseries and 333 kindergartens, the majority in Italy's poorer south. If Italy fails to start building by the latest deadline, June 2023, it risks losing the money.

Mr. Scaramuzza, the centenarian, said he hoped some of the new nurseries would also share space with nursing homes, as his does.

"Not having had children or grandchildren," he said, "here, I have a great number of grandchildren."

The pedestrian area in front of the nursing home. Elisabetta Zavoli for The New York Times

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