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From the Los Angeles Times

ALMOST MOTHER'S DAY

The childbirth divide

Northern fears of plummeting birthrates will be helped by Southern prosperity.

May 13, 2006

IT'S NOT JUST NATURE THAT abhors a vacuum; man does too. That sucking sound you hear is the noise made by thousands of young immigrants as they travel from the overpopulated Southern Hemisphere to the more prosperous Northern Hemisphere in pursuit of employment. The phenomenon is putting pressure on economies from Oslo to Okinawa, and it is fueling raucous worldwide debates about immigration and motherhood. But amid all the hand-wringing, an important fact is getting lost: Globally, the greater concern is too many babies, not too few.

Overpopulation has long been a source of great anxiety to many demographers and social scientists. Yet to listen to world leaders today, at least those on the northern half of the globe, you'd think the problem was the opposite.

Russian President Vladimir V. Putin on Wednesday proposed paying nearly \$10,000 to women who have a second child, as well as higher payments for women on maternity leave. Bribing women to have children is becoming a common practice from Europe to Japan, where plummeting birthrates and aging populations are fueling fears not only that there won't be enough working people to support the elderly but that, eventually, entire cultures will simply become extinct.

The fact that the United States hasn't hit this pitch of desperation is because of immigration, legal and otherwise. American birthrates are slightly above the replacement point, meaning the population continues to grow, but birthrates among the native-born don't differ much from those in Europe.

The reasons for this are straightforward: Wealthy, industrialized countries present more opportunities for women to get an education and work outside the home, prompting many to choose not to have children. As immigrants are assimilated, they too stop having as many children — but there will be plenty more behind to replace them. And that's the real problem.

Even though birthrates in much of the Northern Hemisphere are stable or dropping, that doesn't make up for the growth in much of the Southern Hemisphere. Europe and Japan may be deeply resistant to immigration, but outsiders are going to try to go there by the millions anyway.

Rather than worrying about declining childbirth, industrialized countries should be far more focused on reducing birthrates in less-developed nations. The only effective way to do that is to raise living standards there — essentially giving women in the Southern Hemisphere the same choices as those in the Northern Hemisphere. That means more development assistance. But even more important is the removal of trade barriers that prevent Southern economies from growing.

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