

EPISODIO 2 – ALESSANDRA MINELLO

“Who Will We Be Tomorrow? A New Demographic Equilibrium”

Disclaimer:

This podcast was produced in collaboration with Generali.

Opening teaser:

We have a house that was designed for a family of six. Today, however, it may be home to an elderly couple, a couple without children, a single mother, or someone who has come from far away. The household has changed, and so has the way we think about and use that home.

Teaser:

Since 1893, we've been telling the story of a changing world, one Bollettino at a time. Through revolutions and innovations, people and ideas. Today, that story continues in a new format: six episodes, six voices, and six themes defining our present. We approach them with the same spirit as always: to better understand the present, so that we can better face the future.

In this episode, Alessandra Minello takes us through the challenges of demographic change.

This is Connessioni, the voice of Bollettino Generali.

Episode

I'm Alessandra Minello, a demographer at the Department of Statistical Sciences at the University of Padova. I write books, and my latest, published by Laterza, is titled Senza figli (“Childless”).

I edit *Le Equilibriste*, Save the Children's annual report on motherhood. My research focuses on motherhood, particularly on how experiences and events during the reproductive years influence the decision to have children or not.

A few days ago, I was at a conference where a retired lawyer was described as the person who knew the local demographic changes better than anyone and was therefore best qualified to talk about them.

And then, whenever I scroll through social media, there's always someone explaining why we're having so few children. I actually think that's fantastic: demography has become part of everyday conversation, and people have become genuinely interested in it.

The only risk I see is that if we talk about the numbers without looking at the bigger picture, without considering how things have changed over time, we risk letting those numbers fuel nothing but fear.

What's fascinating about demography is that it can help us understand all kinds of changes. We often hear about economic, technological, or even health-related changes, but beneath all these shifts in society lies the population itself.

Demography can tell us, for instance, how many pensions we'll need to pay in the future or how big or small our schools are likely to be. We should bear in mind that these figures affect the present, describe the past, and help us imagine the future.

Yet these figures can be quite frightening. At the moment, there are eight billion of us in the world. The global population is still growing. And yet, all around us, there is anxiety about depopulation. That's what happens when we fail to look at things in perspective.

Just think: in a famous speech in 1905, Roosevelt warned of a demographic crisis and blamed women for not having enough children. Then, in the 1960s, attention turned to the fear of a population explosion. Today, by contrast, the fear is depopulation. Our responses to demographic trends tend to be cyclical.

Demography, meanwhile, follows the course of life itself: we are born, we may move from place to place, and we die. Those are the three core processes at the heart of my discipline.

These three processes can tell us a great deal about what's happening globally.

If I had to describe the century we're living in through these three processes, I'd say that fertility is declining, international migration is increasing, and life expectancy is rising. But that's not all there is to it.

If we talk about fertility, for example, at the global level the average fertility rate, that is, the average number of children per woman, is around 2.1 to 2.2. In fact, 2.1 is the

threshold needed for one generation to replace the next, and globally we are slightly above that threshold. But half the countries in the world are below it.

But in 1990 that figure was 3.3. So it is clearly declining. And it's doing so in every country.

Even in countries such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, which we tend to think of as having very high birth rates. And indeed they do: the average is four children per woman, but in the 1990s it was six. So the number of births is declining there as well.

Globally, when it comes to fertility, we're in a situation where many different factors are at play at once. There are parts of the world, for example, where people would like to have more children but are unable to. There are parts of the world where people still lack autonomy over their reproductive choices, and parts of the world where people are unable to have the children they want.

There are many different realities, all existing side by side. What's fundamental, though, is that choice is beginning to enter the picture. And that's a positive change, an important one.

The second demographic process is population movement, or migration. More than 280 million people around the world migrate. What we're not often told, however, is that most of this migration actually takes place within the same continent.

Migration has grown so quickly, so rapidly, that it has outpaced global population growth. The number of refugees is rising as well. It has increased by ten million in just three years.

International mobility is changing rapidly. Certainly, a large proportion of people move out of necessity. But there are also people who move by choice, because they decide to pursue a path that they believe will lead to a better life.

This, too, is something we tend to overlook when we take a closer look at migration, yet it is one of the opportunities this moment in history offers us.

And then there is mortality.

Mortality, in fact, also means longer life expectancy. Never before has life expectancy been so high. By 2020, there were more people over the age of 60 than children under the age of five. The number of older people had grown enormously.

Between 2015 and 2050, the number of people over the age of 60 is expected to more than double, rising from 12% to 22% of the world's population. This means that we are entering a world in which the share of older people is clearly on the rise.

We are also living in a world in which the number of people over 80 is increasing. People are living longer.

We've reached these levels of life expectancy thanks to advances in health, medicine, and hygiene.

So we're at a time when these changes, which are often seen in a negative light, can in fact also be viewed as opportunities. And that's precisely what demography teaches us.

Demography points to two scenarios: one in the short term and one in the long term. In the short term, we know that we're facing a decline in births, an increase in migration, and rising life expectancy. In the long term, we know that a new equilibrium is taking shape.

And then there is the relentless force of demography. These broad changes are extremely difficult to hold back. Sometimes they unfold quickly; more often, they happen slowly. Either way, they are hard to stop. Yet people often try to do just that, whether by seeking to raise birth rates or by restricting migration.

Such goals are very difficult to achieve. It's simply not working.

Take a country like Sweden. We often think of it as the perfect place to have children: salaries are high, the welfare state is strong, and there are plenty of services. Yet fertility there is low too, at 1.34. That's close to the 1.3 threshold that separates the very lowest-fertility countries from the rest, a group that includes Italy.

Some people deny that this change is occurring. They deny the existence of a strong social component, even though it helps explain why countries like Sweden and France are beginning to see fewer births, and why projections suggest that, in the future, fewer and fewer children will be born everywhere.

The fear is that, if we admit that there is a cultural change underlying all this, no one will invest in welfare to support families anymore. But no. That's exactly the point. Once choice becomes one of the factors shaping people's lives, that's precisely where investment is needed. That's where we need to ensure that people are genuinely able to pursue the lives they want to lead, whether that means having children, not having children, or moving elsewhere. We need to make those choices possible, and easier.

More often than not, however, our welfare systems are built around a demographic pyramid that no longer exists. In countries like Italy, they rely heavily on support and care being provided within families. But families are no longer horizontal, with large numbers of people belonging to the same generation. Instead, they have become vertical, spanning many generations but with fewer people in each. As a result,

sustaining systems of care, which will be crucial in the century ahead, becomes more difficult. Ultimately, demography doesn't give us all the answers. But it does help us ask the right questions and better understand the future that lies ahead.

We have a house that was designed for a family of six. Today, however, it may be home to an elderly couple, a couple without children, a single mother, or someone who has come from far away. The household has changed, and so has the way we think about and use that home. So we have two choices: we can either keep complaining that we can no longer use it as we once intended, or we can start renovating it and adapting it to the needs of the families who live there today.

The last century was the century of growth; this century is the century of transformation. Those who can best manage that transformation will build a better future for the people who inhabit this world.

See you next time, and until then, stay connected with Bollettino Generali.

Credits:

This episode of Connessioni was written and performed by Alessandra Minello.

Presented by Monica Provini, Generali Group Head of Media Relations, Content and Digital.

For the Bollettino Generali, editorial consultants: Ilaria Invernizzi and Luca Agnellini.

Editorial supervision: Alessandra Bruno.

Brand integration: Lorenzo Lemos

Cinematography: Neverest.

Video Production Manager: Martina Annoni.

Audio production manager: Danny Stucchi.

Set designer: Martino Pastori.

A One Podcast production in collaboration with Generali.