Every minute 250 babies are born around the world. In many instances it is a time of great celebration and joy. In some it can be a time of trouble, sorrow, and difficulty. The differences surrounding childbirth can be striking, even in contexts that appear similar.

In Europe, much of the public discussion surrounding pregnancy and childbirth focuses on the issues related to low birth rates and declining fertility. While it is true that the average number of children a woman in Europe will have is less than 2 and below replacement rates, trends in birth rates and the factors that contribute to both high and low fertility vary across the Region.

Evidence shows that in the majority of European countries declining fertility rates are not due to a lack of desire for children. The contributing factors are rather delayed childbearing due to educational attainment, lack of a 'suitable' partner, older age at onset of childbearing, limited family friendly services, as well as financial issues - all factors affecting family size. Understanding the factors that contribute to the gap between wanted family size and how many children people actually choose to have is a critical first step in enabling policy makers and governments to address the issue and develop the needed settings and family friendly policies, such as parental leave and financial subsidies, which are proven to be directly linked to fertility rates and the number of babies women choose to have.

However, birth is much more than rates and trends. As individuals and as a society it is also important to recognize and understand the complexities of factors that shape women's and their families' experiences of childbirth itself. We need to look at how women are able to access care, who is able to provide the care for them (midwife, family physician, obstetrician), where they can deliver (home, hospital or birth centres), the quality of the care they receive and the varying cultural or religious practices that influence the process of childbirth. Throughout Europe we are witnessing an increasing medicalization of birth – for example, lack of choice on where and how to deliver, increasing rates of cesarean section – which tend to make childbirth an overly technical procedure rather than an emotional, joyous experience. While we of course want specialized medical care and adequate interventions available to ensure appropriate care and positive outcomes for high risk and complex pregnancies and births, there is a danger - and an economic loss - in applying practices that are required for complex pregnancies and birth when it is not medically necessary. Luckily many European countries are working to negate this trend by promoting midwifery lead care, mother friendly hospitals with room for family and the breastfeeding friendly hospital initiative.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe has, in partnership with other UN agencies, Governments and civil society organizations, been working throughout the Region to ensure that childbirth is as positive an experience as possible. Training workshops (theoretical, practical, clinical), dissemination of tools and training materials and encouraging countries to share their experiences are some of the many ways in which the WHO Regional Office is supporting this important work. The upcoming 4th Women Deliver Conference (www.wd2016.org), to be held in Copenhagen May 16-19 2016 will provide an exciting opportunity for the WHO, as well as other key European actors to share their contributions in this area, as well as broader SRH issues for girls and women, in relation to the new post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

As you read through the articles in this birth issue of Entre Nous, I would suggest that you take time to pause, reflect and remember this: choice is key and it is a human right of women and couples to be able to choose if and how many children they want and when they want them. Often the best childbirths are those where women and their families have choices to have the kind of birth they want. I have no doubt that all of the Member States in the WHO European Region share this notion and this goal and that they are working together to ensure that in every country all childbirths will be wanted, safe and celebrated. Women deliver – and not only babies. They deliver for themselves, their families, their communities and their countries. It is time for countries to deliver for them.

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