

# Family ties make Faroese women Europe's top baby makers

June 19 2018, by Pierre-Henry Deshayes

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The Faroe Islands has had the highest birth rate in Europe for decades, with around 2.5 children per woman, according to World Bank figures

Gunnhild Helmsdal's mailbox has six names printed on it and will soon add a seventh: having a big family is nothing unusual in the Faroe Islands

where women have the most babies in Europe despite also having the highest rate of employment.

The economically prosperous and autonomous Danish territory in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean has had the highest birth rate in Europe for decades, with around 2.5 children per woman, according to World Bank figures.

In the rest of Europe, women usually give birth to less than two children on average, its data shows.

When Helmsdal, 41, gives birth to her fourth child a few weeks from now her [family](#) will grow to seven members, including her husband and his daughter from a previous union.

"Children are the greatest gift of all, I think. I've always wanted to have several kids," Helmsdal, who is a doctor, tells AFP at her home.

"Large families are maybe a bit chaotic but, in the end, happy families," she says, with a smile while her two-year-old son Brandur seeks her attention. His name means "sword" or "fire" in the Old Norse language.

Her two neighbours, who live across the street in this residential area of Hoyvik, near the capital Torshavn, have six and seven children respectively.

## **Shortage of women**



Faroe Islander Gunnhild Helmsdal (L) is awaiting the birth of her fourth child which will bring her family up to seven, including her husband and his daughter from a previous relationship

The archipelago has long suffered from a deficit in women as many have emigrated since World War II and not returned.

The trend has changed in the last five years as the job market, which was historically heavily focused on fishing, has diversified.

Faroese society, traditionally dominated by conservative values, has also become more liberal—same-sex marriage was legalised on July 1, 2017.

When asked about the reason for its remarkable fertility rate, locals

often jokingly say: "There's nothing else to do here."

However, the throwaway remark does not reflect the reality: participation in the Faroese labour force is the highest in Europe, especially among women, according to Hans Pauli Strom, a sociologist at Statistics Faroe Islands.



For a long time after WWII women tended to leave the Faroe Islands but the trend has started to change in the last five years with a diversification of the job market

Eighty-three percent of the Faroese hold a job, compared to 65 percent in the European Union—of which the territory is not a member—and 82

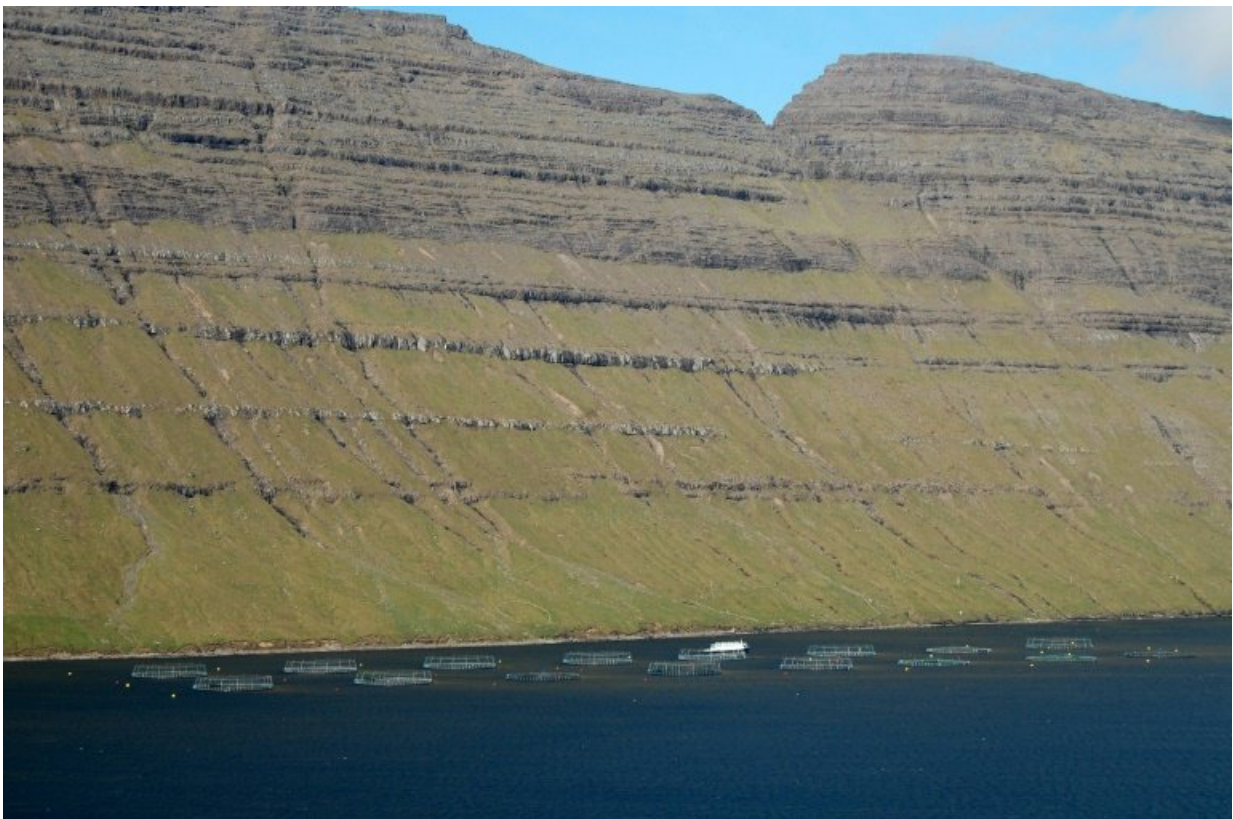


percent of Faroese women work, compared to 59 percent in the bloc.

More than half of Faroese [women](#) work part-time, Strom said, adding that "it's not because they're struggling to find a full-time job but a preference and a life choice".

Local authorities highlight favourable social measures to partly explain the phenomenon: a 46-week parental leave, which authorities want to extend to one year, abundant and affordable kindergartens and tax allowances, among others.

Incidentally, taxes on seven-seat vehicles were reduced a few years ago.



Before a recent diversification, the labour market in the Faroe Islands was traditionally heavily focused on fishing

## SOS families

Faroese family policies may seem generous compared to the rest of Europe, but they are not very different from the measures in place elsewhere in the Nordic region, where fertility and labour activity are significantly lower.

So what is the secret to their formula?

The Faroese have an extremely strong family bond and they live very close to each other, making it easier to get extra help from relatives, say sociologist Strom, as well as residents.

"In our culture, we perceive a person more as a member of a family than as an independent individual," Strom said.



Participation in the Faroese labour force is the highest in Europe, especially among women, according to local data

"This close and intimate contact between generations makes it easier to have children," he said, adding religion only played a marginal role.

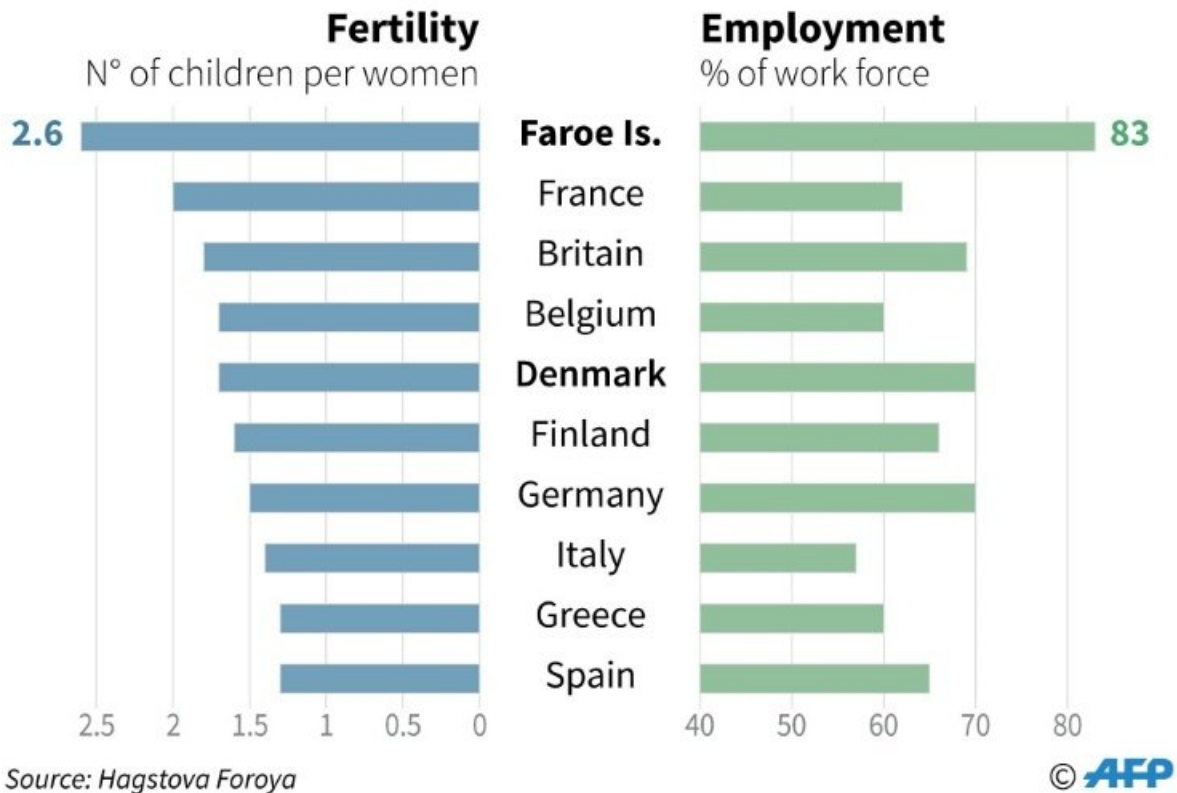
Working up to 50 hours per week at her own medical practice, Gunnhild Helmsdal often worries she won't be able to leave on time to pick up her children.

Luckily, her parents are a last-minute phone call away from helping out

and taking the [children](#) to their activities.

"Because we have such close family ties, we help each other a lot... my parents live only a five- to 10-minute walk from here, so that helps," she says with a chuckle.

## Faroe Islands: record births and jobs



Fertility and employment rate in the Faroe Islands compared to a selection of European countries



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Citation: Family ties make Faroese women Europe's top baby makers (2018, June 19) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-06-family-ties-faroese-women-europe.html>

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