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## Women, fertility and the new economy

**Lois Bryson**

School of Social Science and Planning  
RMIT University  
Melbourne

*Lois Bryson, Women, fertility and the new economy*

**Introduction**

While motherhood remains a largely taken-for-granted institution in Australia, it has recently been propelled onto the public agenda by evidence of dramatic and continuing falls in fertility levels in virtually all advanced industrial societies (Bryson and Warner-Smith, 1998a). While falling rates are a long-term world trend, in some countries both in Europe and Asia, rates have fallen to far below population replacement levels. Alarm at the national implications of the continuation of such a trend has resulted in a flurry of policy attention. The most dramatic response to date is a large cash bonus offered to married women under thirty in Singapore, to have a child. Though there have been moral panics about falling birth-rates in Australia in the past (Cass, 1977; Quiggan, 1988; Mackinnon, 1997) this is the first to occur in a 'post-feminist environment'. It thus provides a significant and strategic opportunity to revisit the general issue of fertility especially as this is also fundamental to gender equity. Hopefully today governments will prove more ready to listen to women's points of view than in the past (Mackinnon, 1998) when, though motherhood and control of fertility have always been of vital concern to women, the discourse, in the public realm at least, was controlled by men.

Two major emerging national patterns of fertility which have been identified in Europe are referred to as the Southern and the Northern European patterns or models (Murphy-Lawless and McCarthy, 1999). The Southern European pattern involves very low levels of fertility (e.g. 1.2 in Italy and Spain and 1.3 in Greece), the Northern European involves rates that though falling remain considerably higher (e.g. 1.7 in Denmark and Finland, 1.8 in Norway and 1.5 in Sweden) (World Population Data Sheet, 1999). The picture for Australia is that levels of fertility have remained reasonably high, broadly in line with the Northern European pattern. It has been suggested that these higher rates can be attributed to a significant extent to reasonably well developed policy approaches to gender equity (McDonald, 1997, 1998) which facilitate the combination of motherhood and employment. The low rates of the Southern European model on the other hand are associated with a policy failure to facilitate women in the dual roles of worker and mother.

This dichotomous model inevitably cannot be applied to all countries. It clearly does not address issues for economically less developed countries, which for decades have been the focus of policies to reduce birth-rates, often with scant regard for women's rights. The model even oversimplifies the European pattern, particularly with respect to former communist countries. For example the Northern European country of Latvia has a fertility rate of 1.1 (Estonia's is 1.2). This highlights the importance of both economic and political factors though a detailed analysis of these is beyond the scope of this paper. None the less, while we must recognise the limitations of the dichotomous model, it is useful for alerting us to matters that are crucial for understanding the factors affecting motherhood in contemporary Australia (McDonald, 1997, 1998).

The following discussion teases out some of the connections between fertility rates and the new economy as this is the broader canvas of social change against which motherhood must be understood in Australia at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Some observations about the likely future of fertility are also made.

### **Fertility and motherhood in a twenty first century context**

When we consider the bigger picture we are confronted by a degree of change which challenges most former taken-for-granted notions of family and parenthood. But in this bigger picture, we must recognise continuity as well as change. Falling birthrates represent a very long-term, effectively a normalised, trend. The much discussed post World War 2 baby boom quickly proved an atypical feature. Feminist history has also shown that the issue of falling birth rates has been the subject of periodic concern and even moral panics (Quiggan, 1988; McKinnon, 1997). For example a NSW Royal Commission in 1903 blamed women's use of contraception on their 'selfishness' and 'love of luxury'. Some of the reasons for concern about falling fertility that were raised earlier are also likely to feature in contemporary discussions, including the 'threat from the north' and maintaining a prosperous workforce (Cass, 1977). But despite some broad continuity between today's fertility issues and those of earlier times, the economic, social and cultural contexts of the twenty-first century are inevitably different. The effects of a profound social revolution are now evident and recent demographic trends offer a clear indicator that motherhood is centrally implicated in this.

Social change renders many former ways of interpreting the world either obsolete, or at best in need of significant renovation. Social analysts have been trying to come to grips with the emerging societal form. In the sociological literature 'post' features prominently - post-colonial, post-feminist, post-structural, post-modern, post-industrial. Such labeling in terms of past trends exposes a tentativeness to the analysis. But each concept does draw attention to important trends and issues. The most discussed changes involve the 'new' economy, with particular focus on globalisation, marketisation, flexibilisation, and the emergence of an information society. But discussions of the economy alone do not help us understand what is happening to contemporary parenthood. Apart from the notion of post-feminism, none of the prominent strands of the contemporary debates focuses explicitly on women's position, even though as Giddens and Hutton point out, the 'emancipation of women is itself a main feature of the processes of globalisation' (2000, p. 216).

There is certainly a great deal of public interest in women's position and dilemmas as regular media discussion of, for example, the combination of home and workforce roles shows. Despite some important academic research on the issue of domestic labour (Bittman, 1995, 1998; Baxter, and Western, 1998; Dempsey, 1992), most academic social analysis remains primarily concerned, as historically has been the case, with the public sphere, and notably the economy. Yet extensive feminist theorising has shown that women's position cannot be contextualised without reference to the private sphere (Pateman, 1988). This is clearly central to twenty-first century fertility, as such decisions in Australia are ultimately made by individuals and within the private sphere. What is needed therefore is a focus on the relationship

between the public realm and the private realm of family that specifically takes account of globalising trends in the economy as well as the information and technological revolutions. Technology and information underpin the reliable contraception which now makes decision making to restrict family size far more feasible and reliable than in the past (Bryson, Strazzari and Brown, 1999). This still leaves us with the question of why the reduced fertility we see reflected in the international statistics when research shows, that though few young women want more than two, the vast majority do aspire to having children (Wicks and Mishra, 1998; de Vaus, 1997).

A strand of the current analyses of emerging societal forms that is of key relevance for the consideration of motherhood directs us to processes of individualisation (see Beck, 1992; Giddens 1991a, 1991b, 1998). This can be broadly defined as personal fulfillment and satisfaction taking precedence over family and community obligations. As Hochschild (2000, p. 132) observes though, the discussions of individualisation to date tend to 'focus on people in the aggregate' and do not 'shed a strong light on individual human relationships', instead the links are made between 'global trends and individual lives'. But the concept of individualisation does potentially encompass change in both public and private realms thus illuminating women's situation specifically and the private realm more generally. Individualisation turns our attention to a diminution of the centrality of gendered family status and an increasing centrality for individual status. But, as feminists have repeatedly shown, the form of individualisation remains heavily influenced by the liberal model of citizenship which underpins civil society in the western democracies. And this is based on a male subject (Pateman, 1988; Phillips, 1993) which can only be expected to ultimately have a range of consequences for motherhood and for falling fertility rates in particular. The fully-fledged citizen, who gains most rewards both economic and status is the paid worker not the family worker. This context renders futile any attempt to prevent further decline in fertility by trying to recapture a largely mythological era of women living in 'contented suburban domesticity'. The very extent of change also suggests that even sensible and modest policy approaches, such as promoting family friendly workplace policies, while necessary, alone are unlikely to bring about much change.

Ulrick Beck (1992) sees individualisation as fundamental to the development of contemporary society or what he terms a *Risk Society*. In a risk society, individuals are cut loose from the restrictions and restraints of ascribed status and the associated conventional ways of doing things. There is a 'compulsion to lead your own life, and the possibility of doing it' (Beck, 2000, p. 165). The emerging 'risk' society is underpinned by what he terms reflexive modernisation, a social form involving continuing self consciousness or self reflection. This form must be distinguished from earlier forms of modernisation partly on the basis of changes to traditional gender roles and relationships (Beck, 1992: chap 4).

Beck's point about the role of gender in earlier forms of modernisation is in line with the position taken by feminist theorists such as Carol Pateman (1988). They have emphasised that, as modernisation developed in western societies, women did not gain access to the new modernised form of citizenship afforded to men. Women's position remained determined by their ascribed gender status, and this has been essentially a

feudal family relationship rather than a status individually achieved in the public sphere. John Rawls (1985) also makes this point about women's dissonant status in his influential treatise, *A Theory of Justice*. He points out that 'the principle of fair opportunity can be only imperfectly carried out, at least as long as the institution of the family exists' (Rawls, 1985: 74). Beck sees reflexive modernisation as ultimately superceding the restrictions imposed by this family form, though clearly recognising a time lag and a continuing strong drag factor from more traditional ideas and practices.

Beck (1992) points to the way the new economy underpins the trend to individualisation within reflexive modernisation by pointing to the logic of the market. This he sees as best served by individuals who are in employment and housed alone so they have maximum income, maximum flexibility to meet market requirements and high consumer demands. The 'market model of modernity implies a society without families and children...the market subject is ultimately a single individual "unhindered" by a relationship, marriage or family' (Beck, 1992: 116). It could be argued that though this logic has always been incipient in capitalism, earlier there was not the capacity to employ the majority of the population and thereby construct them as market consumers. And therefore there was not the capacity to consume the potential output. 'Training' was necessary to develop the wants and desires that have turned the general public into committed consumers. This took many decades and the development of a sophisticated and extensive advertising industry. The processes of converting the population into committed consumers are historically ones in which women have played a central role (Kingston, 1994), paradoxically as part of their traditional family role.

But women's role as consumer is only one aspect of women's gradual absorption into the new market, their absorption as worker is a key part of the broader picture. It has provided women with an major avenue into the public sphere and the capacity to achieve greater equality and crucially to survive without male economic support. This has made not marrying/partnering, as well as leaving marriage much more feasible. It has also altered the imperatives which affect the construction of a couple relationship. The possibility has been opened for women who are in relationships to make independent decisions about their careers. A female partner's employment decisions are no longer necessarily contingent on the male's and an important, though minor trend for independent mobility within couples, even across continents (the role of technology is clear here). This can be seen among a few women of higher socio-economic status in their choice of a commuting family relationships to accommodate their employment. Among poor women this may be seen in working in another country with better wages often in domestic or sex work, in order to remit support for their family in their home country (Hochschild, 2000). While these trends among very different socio-economic groups, seem likely to remain minority ones for the immediate future, they vividly reflect lead directions of the new globalising economy.

In light of the effects of globalisation, coupled with feminist insights into the masculinity of the global citizen, then falling birth-rates quantify the baby bust 'we had to have'. Overall the changes open up a far wider range of possibilities for women, beyond the roles of wife and mother, as well as posing more possibilities for men, beyond the father/breadwinner role (the current public acknowledgment of

homosexual lifestyles can be seen as part of this trend). However, the opening up of wider possibilities to make decisions less constrained by convention, also involves its own risks and uncertainties. As Beck (1992: 116) puts it, the situation of reflexive modernisation is moving to the point where the 'option of not deciding is tending to become impossible', where the taken-for-granted is challenged.

This additional freedom leaves women in particular with a dilemma. The social framework within which individual women must make life-shaping decisions involves a form of citizenship with traditionally male cultural characteristics. It is the classically male roles that offer more power, status and economic rewards, and which therefore have considerable attractions. Caring and cooperation remain less highly valued and it is within this environment that women and their partners make decisions about parenthood as well as about care for family members who have a disability or are ill or frail. The affect is reflected in greater wariness about having children at all, or at least the postponement of the decision, by some individuals or couples until a more convenient point in the life cycle. The latter is likely to ultimately lead to fewer children in the family and both trends means falling fertility rates.

This leads right back to the classic dilemma that has been central to feminism. How do we bring about cultural change so that issues that women have traditionally been concerned about and responsible for are valued, and thus viable choices, without serious social costs, for both men and women in the twenty-first century? The current concern about loss of social capital is one of the recent attempts to focus on this issue (Putnam, 1993).

The complexity of economic and other associated change makes it clear why having family friendly workplaces, while important cannot be the whole answer to falling fertility. Such a policy direction to an extent even compounds the issue by reinforcing the dominant place of paid employment. This in turn maintains an under-valuing of unpaid care work and issues of community integration. Also to focus only on family friendly workplace policies fails to take account of the fundamental changes in the fabric of social life represented by reflexive modernisation. It is really just more of the same, reflecting long-held views. We saw this for example in 1965, when post World War 2 fertility patterns dipped for the first time. In letters to the *Melbourne Sun* newspaper in 1967 (specific date unavailable) people were proposing similar, though less sophisticated, family friendly policies. One letter to the Editor, for example, recommended 'provision by the community of appropriate incentives for child bearing' (including higher child support payments), and 'much greater community responsibility for the provision of facilities such as creches, kindergarten and domestic help services'.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, how might we address motherhood and thus falling fertility rates in twenty-first century. The discussion suggests that the fertility trends of recent years, which are causing so much interest and concern, must be seen as largely inevitable given the development of the new economy. As feminist writers have recognised, with contemporary citizenship embedded in a masculinist model it should come as no

surprise that in seeking equal citizenship women are inevitably forced into this mould. Women come closest to equality with men when they do not have children. Feminist activism has been most, though far from entirely, successful when demands have been for a piece of the employment action, including the education to support this, which of course is in line with the direction of the development of capitalism. Feminist activism has been least successful in changing cultural values away from the economic and the competitive, towards the supportive, caring and integrative. Over recent years the debate has been recharged by the new focus on 'social capital' but this concept remains shadowy and contested. None the less this is encouraging, though there is a long way to go before any policies that might address aspects of the problem receive significant official attention.

In considering motherhood and falling fertility rates, the issue that must be focused on is not an increase in the birth rate per se. Indeed there is considerable debate about the wisdom of this from an environmental point of view. Also in the past such an intention has not recognised women's right to choose the nature of their life course. An appropriate course of action is to facilitate women's capacity to choose motherhood without suffering significant disadvantage. Such an approach would steer towards genuinely equal opportunity and citizenship for women regardless of their parental status. This means a change in the fundamentals of citizenship, which has traditionally been based on a male citizen, and this, though a familiar goal for feminists, is 'a big ask'.

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