

"The ability to opt out of—or at least to postpone well into their 30s—the challenge of working while still having children means few young women today are motivated to demand changes in social policy or even to demand that men do more housework."

## Does Lower Fertility Threaten Feminism?

LEONARD SCHOPPA

Women in the advanced industrialized nations (and in many developing countries as well) have fought over the past several decades to achieve autonomy and equality in two separate but related realms. They have struggled to control their own bodies—their fertility in particular. And they have struggled to achieve economic equality and the power over their own lives that this promises to give them. In most countries women's movements have fought for both goals simultaneously since they are closely related, but the emphasis has not always been the same, and some countries have seen much greater progress toward one goal than the other.

Some advanced industrialized nations, exemplified by the United States and Sweden, confronted the challenge of helping women achieve economic equality at a time—the 1960s—when women still had high fertility rates (partly because they had not yet gained full control over their fertility). Most women at that time married young and had several children before they began struggling to balance work and family and fighting for improvements in their conditions that would make this struggle easier.

Other nations—contemporary Japan and Italy, for example—are latecomers to the gender role revolution but have low fertility rates. Only now are they confronting the most significant barriers to economic equality—at a time when women are able to control when they have children and have used this power to postpone (or opt out of) motherhood in large numbers. Most women in these countries now put off marriage until their late 20s (if they marry at all), and many work for a decade or more

before they face decisions about how (and whether) to balance work with family.

Has this made a difference? My research suggests it has. We are seeing different patterns of behavior in the advanced industrialized nations that are confronting gender role issues in an era of low fertility in comparison with those that pioneered the struggle for economic equality in times of high fertility.

The question of how low fertility rates are shaping women's movements and the policies and norms affecting the ability of women to balance work and family is of critical importance. Low fertility rates pose a major challenge to the economic sustainability of social welfare programs in numerous countries. Fertility rates in Japan, Italy, Germany, and Spain—as well as many nations in Eastern Europe—have fallen below 1.3 children per woman. At rates this low, working-age populations in these countries are on track to shrink by 30 to 40 percent by 2050. Policy makers and citizens alike worry about how smaller cohorts of workers will support large contingents of retiring baby boomers.

What should worry us most, however, is the possibility that some nations have steered themselves to a "low fertility equilibrium" whereby low fertility rates *reinforce* social policies that push women to choose between work and family rather than balancing both. What if policies that force women to choose between work and motherhood push down fertility rates further and aggravate labor shortages in ways that reinforce the policies that are leading to this behavior? This troubling prospect should direct us to take a close look at how fertility rates shape women's responses to their situation.

### LATE TO THE REVOLUTION

Women's movements and changing values have opened up economic opportunities for women in all advanced industrialized nations over the past sev-

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eral decades, but the movement toward equal opportunity and gender-equal societies has not taken place at the same rate. At the start of the 1990s, Italy and Japan stood out among this group of nations in a number of respects. The gender gap in labor force participation rates between men and women in Italy and Japan was the largest among the major Western industrialized nations. The employment rate of women was especially low among those with children, with just 36 percent of Japanese mothers of children under 7 years old employed and 41 percent of Italian mothers of children under 6.

Another measure of the slower rate of progress toward a gender-equal society in Italy and Japan could be seen in the unusually low rates of male contributions to child care and housework in these countries. Surveys from the early 1990s showed that Italian fathers of children under age 5 spent an average of just 36 minutes a day on child care and another 1.2 hours on unpaid household tasks—half the contribution of Swedish and Canadian fathers. Japanese husbands spent even less time on housework, an average of just 2.5 hours *per week*, compared with the 33.5 hours put in by their wives. Japanese husbands' contribution toward total housework, 7 percent, was far below the 21 percent contribution rate of American husbands. (The surveys focused on housework that has traditionally been gender-typed as "female," including cleaning, cooking, laundry, and shopping.)

During the 1990s, these largely unreconstructed male-breadwinner social structures collided with the rising expectations of Japanese and Italian women. In Japan, the proportion of young women advancing to four-year universities grew from just 14 percent in 1985 (compared with 39 percent for men) to 34 percent in 2003 (compared with 48 percent for men). Most of the women finishing college entered well-paid full-time jobs: fully 92 percent of unmarried women ages 25 to 29 were in the labor market by 2000. Many of these women aspired to continue working after having children—a sharp change from attitudes that had prevailed in the 1980s, when 34 percent of single women who were asked to describe their "ideal life course" reported they would like to be "full-time housewives." By 2002 the proportion expressing this aspiration had fallen to 19 percent.

The aspirations of young Italian women were also rising. Between 1980 and 2000, the number of women in higher education grew from 25 percent below that of men to 27 percent *above* the number of men. Young Italian women (aged 25 to 29) were also economically active at higher rates.

Most Italian women continued to leave the workforce after having children: in a 2000 survey, 43 percent of families with children under age 6 reported living in traditional male-breadwinner households. But just 11 percent of the women said this was their preferred lifestyle. Half of Italian mothers reported that they would prefer to be working full-time if they could, far more than the 35 percent who were actually succeeding in living out this life course. Thus, young Italian women who aspired in increasing numbers to combine work with child-rearing reacted to the country's frustrating social structures in large part by settling for a second-choice lifestyle, mainly by giving up on the work side of the balanced life they hoped to live.

Japanese women were making similar choices. The work rate for Japanese women recorded in 2000 went from 92 percent for unmarried women aged 25 to 29 down to 22 percent for women with children younger than 3 years old, with just 12 percent working 35 or more hours per week. While some of the Japanese women leaving work after having children certainly did so because that was their preferred choice, surveys suggest that many were doing so under duress.

Half of the unmarried Japanese women who reported in a 1997 survey that they ideally would like to continue working after marrying and having children also told the survey team that they expected they would only be able to go back to work after giving up their careers for several years to raise children. Another 11 percent reported that they expected to end up as full-time housewives. Likewise, almost a third of those who hoped to leave work temporarily to raise children and then return expected they would end up as full-time housewives. These young women were already steeling themselves for the choice they expected they would have to make once they married and had children: giving up work at least temporarily, and perhaps permanently.

### OPTING OUT OF MOTHERHOOD

Of course, Japanese and Italian women, like women in most societies, have been compromising their career ambitions under the pressures of maternal responsibilities for many years. The choice to give up work could at least be reversed (by returning to some kind of work) at a later date. What is more distinctive about the individual coping strategies chosen by these women is their ability and growing willingness to postpone childbearing until well into their period of fertility, in some cases

beyond the point where (biological) motherhood was no longer an option.

The recent trends toward later childbearing, smaller families, rising numbers opting not to have any children, and declining fertility have all been made possible by past policy decisions that have given women the ability to control their fertility. While Italy and Japan are both socially conservative societies, both have adopted policies that allow women to enjoy significant reproductive autonomy. Japan only legalized the pill in 1999, but other forms of birth control have been widely available for many years and are used without religious or social sanction. Abortion has been available on demand (for "economic reasons") since the government legalized the practice in 1948. Italy legalized abortion in 1978, and the procedure is now available free of charge and without restriction as to reason during the first 90 days of a pregnancy. Among women exposed to the risks of pregnancy, contraceptive use in Italy is close to 90 percent—among the highest levels in the world.

In addition to government policies making it easier for women to control their fertility, Italy and Japan over the past two decades have witnessed a variety of economic developments and changes in values that have made it easier (less costly) for women to postpone or opt out of marriage and motherhood. Many Japanese and Italian young men and women today come from families that have the living space and income enabling them to board their children in the family home into their 20s or 30s. Exiting from marriage and the responsibilities of parenthood does not look like much of a sacrifice when one has a mother at home who is willing to continue cooking and cleaning for you. Also making an extended single life easier is the relaxation of social pressures that used to compel young women in Japan, for example, to marry before their 25th birthday if they wanted to avoid becoming "Christmas cakes"—desserts that lose most of their value after December 25.

Faced with social structures oriented around male breadwinners that still make it difficult to continue in careers after having children, Japanese and Italian women have shown they are quite willing to take advantage of their ability to control and limit their fertility. The much lower numbers of births to Japanese women in their 20s translate into a dramatic increase in the number of young women who are childless in their 20s and well into their 30s. Whereas the average Japanese woman aged 34 had 2 children in 1970, the average woman that age today has just 1.2. Half of women in their late 20s today are childless.

Population projections issued by the Japanese government in 2002 predict that, based on current trends, 31 percent of the young women who are just entering their period of fertility now will reach the end of their childbearing years with no children (compared with 10 percent of women born in 1950 who did not have children).

Some of the women opting not to have children certainly choose to pass on motherhood because this is their preferred life course. But a Japanese government survey of young unmarried women suggests that the proportion describing the unmarried/no kids option or the double-income/no kids (*DINK*) option as their "ideal life course" totaled no more than 9 percent in 2002. If 31 percent of these women will end their periods of fertility with no children, it suggests that over 20 percent are making uncoordinated, individual decisions to settle for a second-choice lifestyle.

The drop in age-specific fertility has been even more dramatic in the case of Italy. In 1970, the average 34-year-old Italian woman had 2 children; in 2000, she had 0.97. Italian women, like Japanese women, are ending their periods of fertility childless at a growing rate. A rapid rise in the proportions of childless women in cohorts born since 1950 suggests that this number will continue growing for younger cohorts; they are likely to reach the age of 45 childless at rates well above the 31 percent predicted for Japan's young women.

### **JAPAN'S SILENT REBELLION**

How have women's movements and social policy in Italy and Japan been affected by the growing frustration of young women in these countries with social structures organized around male breadwinners? To what extent have these frustrations reinvigorated women's activism and energized social movements aimed at changing policies and social structures that force women to choose between work and family?

Women's groups in Japan reflect the bifurcated choices that women have made in response to the male-breadwinner status quo. The largest and oldest groups, such as *Shufuren* (the Housewives Association), are made up of women with breadwinner husbands who do not work outside the home or do so only part-time. They devote their energies to causes like food safety that are related to their roles as the cooks and consumers in their families.

Japan does have groups that are recognizably "feminist," fighting for equal treatment of women in the workplace and abortion rights, but these are

much smaller and are staffed by the small minority of Japanese women who continue full-time professional jobs. Women who are active in these groups bemoan the complacent acceptance of the male-breadwinner status quo on the part of the majority of women in their country.

A Japanese scholar, examining the tendency of so many young women to delay and opt out of marriage and motherhood, has called theirs a "silent revolution": the effect of large numbers of individual decisions that has not produced any loud and clear voices calling for change. The question is whether a silent revolution of this type is capable of producing the kind of social change needed to overturn entrenched social structures organized around male breadwinners.

In fact, Japanese officials have been worrying about a looming labor shortage and declining fertility for some time. In the case of the labor shortage, these concerns peaked in the late 1980s when the Japanese economy was surging and employers were un-

able to find enough high-quality young employees. Hoping to encourage a larger proportion of women to stay in the workforce after having children, bureaucrats in the Ministry of Labor proposed that the government initiate a child-care leave program to provide parents with the option of taking a full year off of work after the birth of a child, with the guarantee that they could return to their old job at the end of this period.

Such a program was initiated in 1992. Unfortunately, a number of compromises introduced during policy deliberations ended up reinforcing traditional gender roles by disallowing or discouraging men from taking leave. For example, the program considers only the parent who is primarily responsible for child care in a dual-income family to be eligible for leave. Male breadwinners with stay-at-home wives are therefore not eligible for any leave.

If leave benefits had been a policy demanded by working women who had used the political process to call for this change, the Labor Ministry might have structured the program more like Sweden's—which provides 80 percent of pay for 14 months and requires men to take 10 weeks leave if the couple wants to claim the full benefits. Instead, without an active women's movement demanding this change, most of the negotiations took place

between the Labor Ministry and the country's major employers association, guaranteeing that the program would not challenge the male-breadwinner status quo. As a result, it has done nothing so far to increase the proportion of women staying in the full-time workforce after having children.

If bureaucrats had trouble figuring out how to influence women's decisions to stay in the workforce, we should not be surprised that they had even more trouble trying to interpret and influence their decisions to have children. At first, demographers were certain that declining fertility was only a temporary reflection of Japanese women's decisions to postpone childbearing. Only in population projections issued in 2002, many years after young women began reducing their fertility, did demographers admit that the shift in behavior was more fundamental. Large numbers of Japanese women were going to end their

periods of fertility childless, many more than in the past were going to have just one child, and Japan was likely to see its fertility rate stabilize at a level of around

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1.4. Japanese bureaucrats also held off declaring declining fertility a "problem" because many were sensitive to concerns that any effort to increase fertility rates might be perceived as a return to the controversial prewar *umeyo fuyaseyo* (go forth and multiply) policies associated with the militarist past.

If women frustrated with the difficulties of combining work with family had voiced their concerns themselves, they would have done so much sooner and without worry about being associated with prewar policies. When they reacted instead by exiting—that is, by individually opting out of the children-and-career path—they ended up having to rely on uncertain and tentative bureaucrats, whose first proposals for responding to the decline in fertility in the 1990s, a program known as the "Angel Plan," focused almost exclusively on a modest expansion in publicly subsidized child-care services.

This initiative was hampered by a lack of information about how exactly to achieve an increase in fertility and by a lack of mobilized support for fundamental change. Bureaucrats in the Ministry of Health and Welfare went out into communities in search of ideas of what to do. But they could not find organized groups of young, unmarried women to tell them what it would take to convince them to have children. The government published posters

calling on men to do more housework and take child-care leave, but this too could not substitute for a movement by working women with children pressuring their husbands to reduce their work hours and do more to help out at home.

Recent years have seen a modest increase in spending on child-care services and the introduction of some changes in labor laws calling on firms to offer parents of young children flextime and reduced hours. Yet Japanese women aspiring to combine career work with motherhood continue to face a social structure that makes this course seem unattainable. In 2004, Japan's fertility rate fell below 1.29, to the lowest level ever.

### ITALY'S BIRTHRATE PAINS

Italian women's groups chalked up major policy victories in the 1970s, taking on the Catholic Church and winning hard-fought campaigns to overturn longstanding bans on abortion and divorce. They also secured progressive changes in the nation's maternity leave program in 1977, modifying the rules so that employee husbands of full-time working wives were eligible for paid leave to care for their infant children. (As in Japan, the extremely low number of Italian men who have taken this option has made the policy change largely symbolic.)

The legalization of abortion and divorce gave Italian women much greater control over their bodies and their lives. Yet the women's movement made only modest progress in opening up equal work opportunities for women with children. At the start of the 1990s, just 5 percent of children under age 3 were in state-subsidized child care, employment rules restricted the creation of part-time jobs, and male partners did very little housework—a combination of circumstances that pushed the vast majority of young women either to postpone marriage and child-bearing or exit the workforce after having children.

As in Japan, veteran activists in the Italian women's movement report that young women resorting to these choices have not emerged as a significant force or revitalized their social movement, in part because Italian women postponing or opting out of child-rearing are not experiencing the barriers that confront working women with children. As the University of Turin's Chiara Saraceno writes, "This cohort has never been directly confronted by or involved in public issues concerning gender. . . . [S]ince almost all specific policies and measures addressing women are defined according to the dual roles of adult women as mothers and workers, they do not address directly the experience of the unmarried young."

Saraceno goes on to note that precisely because the younger women have been able to take advantage of "the gains that the preceding cohorts obtained," including the ability to control their fertility, these women no longer identify with the "goals to which the older cohorts adhered. Older feminists often complain that communication with those under 30 is difficult or lacking."

Policy analysts examining the debate over child-care policy in Italy have similarly expressed frustration that young women have not emerged as important advocates for this policy. The absence of such a movement is not that surprising if one considers how women are affected by their exit choices: if they have not yet experienced motherhood or have had children but left their jobs, why campaign for expanded child-care services?

When examining the policy impact of women's exit decisions in Italy, the first striking pattern is the complete absence of concern about a labor shortage. Unlike Japan, where the emergence of a labor shortage at the end of the 1980s led authorities to create a child-care leave program in hopes it would keep more mothers in the labor force, the decisions of many young Italian mothers to leave work has not sparked similar initiatives. The obvious reason: Italy has been experiencing a prolonged period of very high unemployment. Jobless rates for the workforce as a whole averaged 9.8 percent between 1990 and 2004, one of the highest rates in the advanced industrialized world. Unemployment rates were even higher for women: 13.6 percent, versus 7.5 percent for men. In this environment, it is not surprising that authorities were not motivated to introduce initiatives making it easier for young mothers to work after having children.

The decline in Italy's fertility rate, on the other hand, has generated national angst, as it has in Japan and many other nations. Italy's fertility rate actually fell sooner and deeper than Japan's, reaching a level of 1.2 in 1995. Italian politicians, from the local to the national level, have bemoaned this trend and worried about what it means for Italian society, including the disappearance of many villages and the difficulty of paying for generous pension promises. These concerns have produced a few efforts to make motherhood more attractive by paying a bonus for extra children. One mayor of a small Italian village arranged to pay \$14,000 for every baby delivered in the town, and the national government authorized one-time payments of \$1,300 for women who had a second child.

Italy's fertility troubles have also generated a plethora of studies describing the more substantial policy changes that scholars believe are needed to boost the fertility rate: expanded public child care for children under 3; more flexible labor markets that will produce the part-time jobs young mothers are most likely to pursue; more generous child allowances; mortgage market reforms designed to reduce the cost of purchasing a new home for young couples.

The Italian government has, however, been slow to take up any of these proposals. As in Japan, bureaucrats appear to have been hampered by concerns that any efforts to aggressively promote childbearing will cause women to recall controversial policies of the past: fascist government policies under Mussolini and the Catholic familialism that Italian women have been fighting throughout the postwar period. They have also been hampered by uncertainty about whether these policies actually will boost the fertility rate. Perhaps most important, the government

has held back out of worry about the fiscal costs of these policies. The commitments that Italy made to the European Union in order to come into the euro currency zone required it to cut social spending. This meant that any increase in spending for child care would have to be accompanied by even larger cuts in pensions or some other social program supported by vested interests.

Ironically, Italy's most recent policy development affecting fertility rates reaffirms a policy that makes childbearing more difficult. The Catholic Church and the government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi both supported efforts in the spring of 2005 to defeat a referendum that would have ended Italy's ban on fertility treatments for men and women who want children and are not able to have them for medical reasons. Clearly, the fall in fertility rates in Italy has not been sufficient to generate a serious policy response by the nation's political leaders.

### THE FERTILE FEMINISTS

The contrast with America and Sweden's experience is striking. Accounts of the progress that American and Swedish women made toward equal opportunity in the 1960s justifiably focus on the role that women's movements played in pressing for change. In the United States, the National Organi-

zation for Women (NOW), founded by Betty Friedan and other pioneers of the postwar women's movement, played a critical role in pressing for the enforcement and broadening of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Although the 1964 act banned discrimination based solely on gender in hiring, promotion, firing, compensation, terms, and benefits, the law initially did not apply to local and state governments, small firms, or educational institutions, and was only weakly enforced. In the late 1960s, NOW and other women's groups led a campaign of lawsuits, demonstrations, and lobbying aimed at expanding the reach of the law and forcing the government to enforce it vigorously.

By 1974, the movement had achieved most of its objectives in the area of work discrimination. Title VII was applied more broadly; the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission had been

empowered to pursue remedies more aggressively; and a series of court decisions in class action suits had awarded women who were the victims of discrimina-

tion settlements, including commitments to put in place affirmative action measures designed to redress past wrongs. Aided by changes in employment practices, American women—including many mothers—began flooding into the labor market and establishing inroads in professions that had been completely closed to women just a decade earlier.

Advances toward equal opportunity in Sweden were first set in motion in the 1950s and 1960s as employers and the government turned to married women as a new source of labor after rapid postwar growth created labor shortages. When discriminatory barriers were removed in Sweden, therefore, it was not the women's movement so much as employers and bureaucrats who were leading the process. Once these women entered the labor force, however, they soon began calling for far-reaching changes in society and social services designed to make the job of balancing work with family easier. Working through their representatives in the unions and the Social Democratic Party, women were able to secure the expansion of public day-care facilities in 1965, expanded parental leave (open to fathers) in 1974, and extended leave and flextime in 1978.

While the success of women's groups in the United States and Sweden has been widely attributed to the political opportunity structures in

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place in these countries, comparing these early women's movements with the contemporary situations in Japan and Italy suggests that we should not ignore *economic opportunity structures*—the ways in which women can deal with their situation through uncoordinated individual actions. These structures helped motivate American and Swedish women to push for social change by giving them no way out—while leaving their late-marrying, low-fertility counterparts in twenty-first century Italy and Japan more exit options.

By “no way out” I refer to the demographic fact that the women being drawn into the labor force in Sweden and the United States in the 1960s *already had children*. The average Swedish woman of 29 in 1960 had 1.5 children, whereas the average Italian woman that age today has only half a child. The equivalent data for the United States and Japan show an even greater contrast: an average 29-year-old American woman in 1970 had 1.9 children; an average woman that age in Japan in 2000 had just .72 children.

Analysis of labor market data for Sweden and the United States shows that a large portion of the increase in

employment of women in the 1960s and 1970s involved women with children entering work. Some of these women were single mothers, but many were married, drawn into the labor force either because they needed extra income to supplement the wages of their husbands or because their higher levels of education and rising aspirations made them feel working was part of their identity and expectations.

In the United States and Sweden, the increase in the proportion of women in the labor force between 1960 and 1980 was driven primarily by enormous increases in the shares of women aged 25 to 44, including women with small children in the home. The fact that these women had children was a critical factor motivating them to demand social change through women's groups and other available political structures.

It is doubtful that Swedish women would have pushed for expanded public day care centers if the women in their 20s and 30s being drawn into the labor force in the 1960s had been primarily childless. Neither would the Swedish business community have played a critical role in pressing the government to develop social services in support of working mothers if these employers could have met

their workforce needs by hiring large numbers of single and childless women. Swedish women with children entered the labor force in the early 1960s even though there was inadequate public day care for children. It was frustration that led them to make this a priority in subsequent union and political party campaigns.

Similarly in America during this era, feminism took hold only after large numbers of women, many with children, entered the labor force and experienced the disconnect between the lives they were living and traditional norms that said women should devote themselves to their children and take care of the home. As the political consultant Ethel Klein has written, “It was at this juncture, and not before, that a feminist movement demanding sex equality could find a mass constituency to support and further its aims.”

Because large numbers of Swedish and American women experienced the movement into work as

mothers of young children, the social reforms they sought went beyond equal employment conditions. In Sweden they fought for the rapid expansion of high-quality day care centers that

they needed for the care of their children and for revisions in the parental leave program explicitly designed to enable and pressure men to accept their share of child-care responsibilities.

Since 1978, leave benefits in Sweden have provided 80 to 90 percent of income for most parents—making it financially affordable for husbands who are paid more than their wives to take their turn caring for children at home. That Swedish men do more housework than Italian and Japanese men is in large part a product of the efforts of a generation of working mothers who insisted that their husbands do a larger share of the work.

The American women's movement is known for favoring gender neutrality in the way the state and employers treat women—in contrast to Swedish women's efforts to force the state and employers to compensate for the extra care burdens that women often bear because they are mothers. Even in the United States, however, a women's movement led by working mothers and backed by large numbers of working mothers at the grass roots level has played a critical role in pressing for the social changes needed to support their dual role. The women's movement has pressed for tax subsidies of

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child-care expenses, work-based day care, employment conditions that do not discriminate against mothers, and work rules that are flexible enough to accommodate working mothers. Like their Swedish counterparts, working American mothers have also led the effort to demand that their male partners help out more at home.

State and local governments in the United States may not spend much money on child care, and important gaps and inequalities certainly remain in this system, but the social changes that women have pressed for have allowed large numbers of women to hold on to, or reenter, challenging careers and well-paid jobs.

### EXIT STRATEGIES

Japan and Italy are frequently described as "late developers," and it is certainly true that many of the economic and social changes these two nations have experienced over the past century have come a generation or two after the most rapidly industrialized nations. It is tempting, therefore, to imagine that it is only a matter of time before the emergence of "postmodern values" in these nations sweeps away the male-breadwinner social structures that have been entrenched there—just as they did decades ago in Sweden and the United States. Indeed, there is evidence that younger cohorts of women in contemporary Italy and Japan have extended their educational and employment aspirations in much the way Swedish and American women did in the 1960s and 1970s.

Political changes in Italy and Japan—including the collapse of one-party dominant conservative regimes in both countries in the 1990s—also have improved the political opportunity structures facing women in Italy and Japan. Italy was ruled for several years during the 1990s by political parties of the center-left. Japan has seen the emergence of a viable opposition in the Democratic Party of Japan, which has been making efforts to eat into the conservative Liberal Democratic Party's majority by appealing to female voters. Japan has a much more vibrant civil society than it did several decades ago, with large numbers of nonprofit organizations representing a diversity of views.

All of this makes the slow pace of change in the social structures affecting the ability of women to balance work with family—employment rules, work conditions, child-care policy, and gendered housework norms—quite puzzling. Why have we not seen vibrant women's organizations pushing for

these changes in the way women of Sweden and the United States did in the 1960s and 1970s?

I believe at least part of the explanation lies in variations in "exit costs," or economic opportunity structures, facing women in the two eras. We cannot assume that the rise of postmodern values and the associated shifts in gender role aspirations will play out in Italy and Japan the way they did 40 years ago in Sweden and the United States since in the interim all of these nations have seen broad shifts in fertility patterns.

Women made their push for equality in Sweden and the United States at a time when the vast majority of them had children at a young age. Securing equality under these circumstances—with no ability to exit from having children—forced women in both nations to fight for social changes that would allow women to balance work with family. The two nations have gone in quite different directions in terms of the policies and social structures they have adopted, but women in both places have battled for and won accommodations that allow mothers to hold on to careers.

In contrast, the ability of Italian and Japanese women to win the battle for control over their bodies, and in particular their fertility, before securing far-reaching changes in male-breadwinner social structures has left the current generation of young Italian and Japanese women with very different economic opportunity structures. Faced with work rules and child-care policies that still make it difficult to pursue careers with children at home, women can and are now opting in large numbers not to have children or to have just one in order to minimize the difficulties of balancing work and family.

The ability to opt out of—or at least to postpone well into their 30s—the challenge of working while still having children means few young women today are motivated to demand changes in social policy or even to demand that men do more housework. They can exit the system instead. The social structure thus goes unchallenged, or changed only very slightly and slowly, even as the fertility rate drops lower. The lack of structural change in turn prompts many younger women to delay or opt out of motherhood, a self-reinforcing dynamic that seems to be producing a "low fertility equilibrium" in these societies. Without women's groups telling politicians and bureaucrats what is wrong and using their muscle to push for change, authorities have been sorely tested in their ability to engineer a gender role revolution from the top-down. ■