

Feminism as the New Natalism: 21st Century Prescriptions for Addressing Low Fertility

By Leonard Schoppa

Abstract:

When marriage and fertility rates first began falling in Europe and Japan, feminists applauded this evidence that women were finally taking advantage of new freedoms afforded by the relaxation of social norms that had pressed earlier generations of women into the roles of wife and mother. As fertility rates reached record lows in Germany, Southern Europe and Japan, however, feminists in these societies soon joined the conversation about why birth rates had fallen so low and eventually began to articulate a feminist explanation for the trend and a prescription for addressing the problem. This paper traces the emergence of “feminism as the new natalism” and evaluates the studies and arguments that are the basis for these claims that fertility will only recover when societies that have defined marriage and motherhood in traditional ways open up to embrace diverse types of families and work-family balance. It then examines the uneven efforts to put these prescriptions into practice in low-fertility societies, with a particular focus on recent family policy changes in Japan, Germany, and Italy.

Fertility rates have been falling in most of the developed world since the 1950s, falling below the replacement rate of 2.1 in many countries in the 1970s before reaching “lowest low fertility rates” of 1.2-1.4 in Japan, Korea, Germany, Austria, Italy, Spain, Greece, and many of the former Socialist Eastern European nations in the first decade of the 2000s (see Table 1). For much of this period, this “second demographic transition” has been celebrated as a rational result of the birth control technologies and wealth that have enabled families in the industrialized nations to reduce the size of their families in order to invest in the education and nurturing of a smaller number of children. We celebrated the fact that, in the industrialized world at least, mankind has been able to avoid the threat of over-population forecast by demographers since Malthus made his predictions of disaster 200 years ago.

Table 1 Total Fertility Rates (Average for 2000-2008)	
Korea	1.21
Slovak Republic	1.24
Czech Republic	1.27
Poland	1.29
Hungary	1.32
Italy	1.32
Japan	1.32
Spain	1.33
Greece	1.34
Germany	1.35
Austria	1.39
Portugal	1.42
Switzerland	1.43
Canada	1.54
Luxembourg	1.65
Netherlands	1.73
Sweden	1.74
Belgium	1.76
United Kingdom	1.76
Finland	1.78
Denmark	1.80
Australia	1.81
Norway	1.85
France	1.92
Ireland	1.96
New Zealand	2.01
Iceland	2.04
United States	2.06

By the 1990s, however, policymakers and social commentators in several of the countries with the lowest fertility rates had begun worrying that the fall in rates had gone too far. After the total fertility rate (TFR) in Japan fell to a record low of 1.57 in 1989, one government commission forecast that Japan would become extinct as a nation if the rate

remained that low for several centuries. “Just as in the last days of the Roman empire,” it intoned, “the decrease in the number of children is a sign of the decline of civilization.”¹

While these reactions were extreme, the concerns were based on real economic and demographic calculations. According to the formulas used by demographers, a sustained TFR of 1.3 will reduce the size of a nation’s population by 75 percent over the course of a century.² A falloff in births of this pace threatens to upend the finances of pension and health insurance programs that rely on tax-paying workers to cover the cost of providing benefits to retirees. These programs were designed to be self-sustaining under stable population growth, with worker-to-retiree ratios on the order of 4:1. Policymakers in charge of these programs warned that low fertility rates would produce worker-to-retiree ratios below 2:1 that would put a crushing tax burden on the small younger cohorts that would be called upon to cover their elders’ pension and health obligations.

Since the 1990s, therefore, policymakers in nations with the lowest fertility rates have been studying the forces that have driven their rates to record lows. Noting that fertility rates were 1.70 or higher in many OECD countries (see Table 1), officials and analysts in those with the lowest rates have begun devoting significant energy to exploring ways in which they might push rates up to a level where the nation would not have to deal with such a rapid decline in the working age population. In this paper, I examine this policy debate, focusing in particular on the emergence of a feminist policy prescription which has called on the governments of nations with traditional male-breadwinner-oriented labor market policies and gender norms to adopt work-family reconciliation policies such as expanded childcare services, childcare leave policies that encourage fathers to take time off from work after the birth of each child, and reforms in labor-market rules to make it easier

for mothers and fathers to move flexibly between “fast-track” jobs with long working hours and part-time or flex-time work more compatible with the care obligations of parents with young children. Ironically, I argue, feminists who initially celebrated the decline in birth rates as a sign that women were taking advantage of new freedoms to choose roles other than mother have recently become the “new natalists,” selling work-family reconciliation policies as a tonic to cure the problem of too-low fertility rates.

The paper is organized as follows. In the first section, I examine the attitudes of feminists toward the population debate when low fertility rates first began to be described as a problem. I then look at how they gradually came to embrace a policy line, growing out of studies conducted under the purview of the OECD that revealed that higher fertility rates in the industrialized world were correlated with high rates of work and pay for women. In this section, I lay out this policy prescription and examine the evidence that has been put forth by feminists and others to support taking these steps in order to boost birth rates. Finally, in the third section, I look at the track record of those who have advocated this policy prescription, emphasizing the limited degree to which advocates have been able to leverage fertility concerns to move policy sharply in the direction they favor. I focus in this section primarily on the record of reform in Japan, Germany, and Italy.

Is it a “Problem”?

When fertility rates first fell below 1.60 and conservatives began forecasting the end of civilization, Japanese feminists’ first reaction was to disagree with the characterization of falling rates as a “problem.” Chizuko Ueno, a sociologist specializing in gender issues, took the lead, titling an article “The Declining Birthrate: Whose Problem?” The view that a

nation's strength depended on the size of its population, she argued, was an "antiquated idea of the nineteenth century."³ If there were not enough workers to cover the costs of retirement programs, this problem could easily be solved by bringing more immigrants into the country. She noted that the decline in fertility in Japan closely tracked the decline in marriage rates, but she argued that this development should be celebrated. It was the earlier pattern, when 97 percent of men and 98 percent of women in cohorts coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s married at least once during their lives, that was abnormal. It was "normal for any society to have a 'remain single' population at the 10 percent level," she argued, and welcomed the falling marriage and fertility rates as a sign that "as social pressure for marriage is now being relaxed, people consider marriage as an option in life."⁴

Yuriko Ashino, a leader of the Family Planning Federation of Japan, was similarly adamant, asking "what is wrong with the low birthrate?"⁵ Population control deserved praise rather than criticism, she argued, vowing that "you won't find today's women having babies for the sake of their country or because someone told them to."⁶ Her reference to "today's women" recalled, by way of contrast, yesterday's women who had been victims of Japanese wartime policies that restricted access to birth control and exhorted women to "go forth and multiply" (umeyo, fuyaseyo) in order to produce the manpower needed to fight the war and increase wartime industrial production. Many parents struggled after the war to feed their large families, generating a powerful allergy to any suggestion that the government might once again be trying to boost the fertility rate. Ueno, Ashino, and other feminists worried that if the government succeeded in characterizing the fall in fertility rates as a "problem," it might then use this pretext as a basis for rolling back abortion rights or access to family planning services.

Early reactions to hand-wringing about falling fertility rates in Germany and Italy were greeted similarly in these nations, which had also seen wartime governments attempt to boost fertility rates in the “national interest.” Italian feminist Mariarosa Dalla Costa echoed several of the points made by Japanese feminists in writing that those who worry about Italy’s low fertility rate should remember that “women's refusal to function as machines for reproducing labour-power, demanding instead to reproduce themselves and others as social individuals, has represented a major moment of women's resistance and struggle.”⁷ [Need a few more references here]

From “Not a Problem” to Opportunity

Even as women’s movement leaders and activists were arguing against any quick move to label steep fertility declines a “problem,” however, they also began using the trend as a hook for promoting the Scandinavian model of work-family reconciliation. Keiko Higuchi, a commentator known for being outspoken on women’s issues in Japan, was one of the first to point to Sweden’s high fertility rates in Japan’s debate about the causes of the fertility decline.⁸ At the time she voiced this argument, in 1995, some conservatives in Japan were blaming the drop in births on women’s rising labor market participation and higher levels of education. Sweden’s high rates of fertility gave lie to this claim, Higuchi argued, for that nation had seen fertility rates rebound and reach levels close to 2.0 even though 80 percent of women in their thirties were in the workforce, in comparison to just 50 percent of women in the same age bracket in Japan. More education and more work did not directly lead to low fertility.

As Japanese academics and officials began exploring the forces that were pushing fertility rates to record lows there, they soon began to focus more closely on the puzzle posed by the comparison of Sweden and Japan. Why was it that higher educational levels and working rates among young women were associated with a falling fertility rate in Japan while high rates of working coexisted with higher fertility rates in Sweden, France, and the United States? It came down to “opportunity costs,” according to labor economist Machiko Osawa, who published a mass market book promoting this explanation in 1998.⁹ Japanese career jobs—the ones that came with job security and seniority wages—demanded long hours and uninterrupted commitment to the employer. Government support for childcare leave and services, and husbands’ support at home, was not sufficient to allow most mothers to live up to these employer demands, so most new mothers quit their jobs upon the birth of a child. If a new mother left a career job in this way, she was usually unable to find a job with similar pay or benefits and was instead consigned to poorly-paid part-time work. As a result, motherhood imposed a stiffer price on Japanese women than on women in many other industrialized nations. That was why the fertility rate had fallen so low.

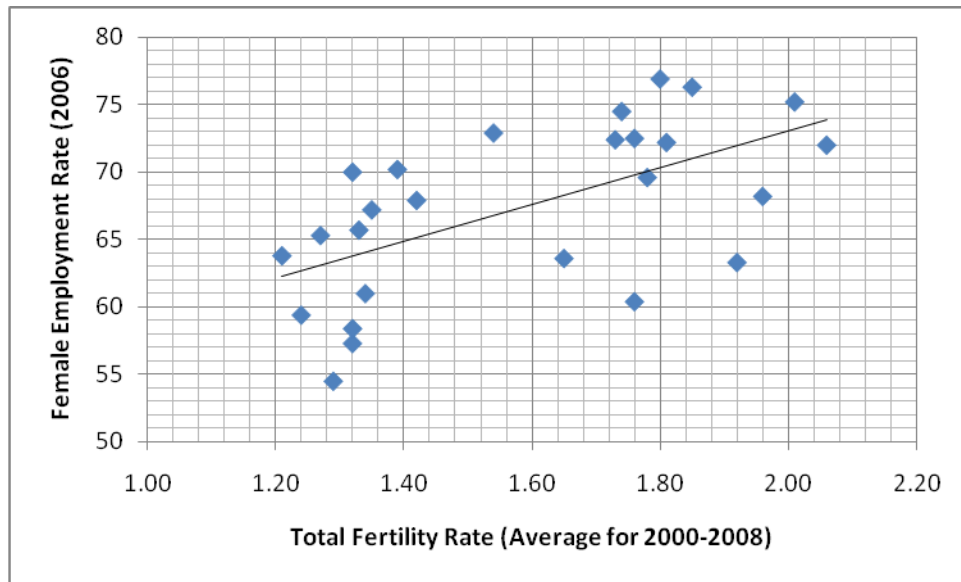
In no time, this argument became the mainstream view among policymakers and scholars, promoted not only by women’s movement figures such as Higuchi and academics with similar sympathies like Osawa but also by mainstream economists and career officials inside Japan’s Ministry of Health and Labor. A particularly vocal advocate of the opportunity cost argument was Naohiro Yashiro, whose 1999 book Economics for a Declining Fertility / Aging Society, advanced a similar line of argument.¹⁰ Yashiro was known as an advocate of liberal, market-oriented reforms (and not a feminist), so when he

advanced an argument in favor of gender equality on economic grounds, it gave the view added credibility. Of course, as an advocate of market-oriented reforms, Yashiro did not prioritize increased government spending or services. Instead, he pointed to ways in which tax and benefit rules could be changed to reduce women's opportunity costs. He pointed out that tax and pension rules offering special deductions to "dependent" spouses (with limited income of their own) created incentives for wives to cut back on their working hours, artificially limiting their earnings and adding to the opportunity costs they paid for being mothers. For similar reasons, he called for reforms to Japan's employment rules that gave (mostly male) career workers job protections in exchange for complete loyalty and long hours—a system that forced men to rely on wives to do everything at home and made it difficult for mothers to stay in these jobs. The fertility decline, he argued, was a result of a "market failure" created by policies like these.

Like Higuchi, Yashiro pointed out that fertility rates were higher in places where women's career work did not force many of them to give up motherhood. But rather than using a single case, like Sweden, to make his point, Yashiro included in his book a figure showing that this pattern reflected the experience of industrialized nations in general. The two dimensional figure correlated each nation's gender equality (he used the "gender development index") and its fertility rate, showing that fertility rates were highest in places like Norway, France, Canada, and the United States where the GDI was highest and were lowest in places like Japan and Italy where the GDI was low. Regression lines of this type subsequently appeared in a variety of government reports, reinforcing this message. The one in the Gender Equality White Paper, published by the Prime Ministers' Office in 2000,

showed higher fertility linked to higher employment rates for women aged 25-35. I have reproduced a similar figure, updated to reflect more recent data, in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Relationship Between Women’s Employment and Fertility



At around the same time, officials within the Ministry of Health and Welfare were struggling to draw up “declining fertility countermeasures” (*shōshika taiasku*). This task had been given to them after the nation’s official demographic projections issued in 1997 showed that fertility rates were trending even lower than had been projected five years before. After that earlier projection, the same bureaucrats had drawn up “The Angel Plan,” which called for an expansion in childcare services. But by the late 1990s, officials under team leader Michiko Mukuno had come to realize that reducing “opportunity costs” for mothers would require more than marginally-longer childcare hours.¹¹ They needed to reform labor market rules so that new mothers would have an easier time taking a leave of

absence and returning (with flexible hours) to their workplace. They needed husbands to help out more at home. They needed a more gender equal society.

Toward this end, the ministry published a white paper in 1999 that focused on the declining fertility problem and linked it to the unequal distribution of childcare and housework in the family. Japanese fathers of children under six spent just 17 minutes a day, on average, on childcare and only 37 minutes on housework. Women spent over 10 hours a day on these tasks.¹² Even when the mother worked fulltime, she spent many more hours on caregiving than the father. Listing specific tasks, the white paper reported that the work was rarely split evenly or done primarily by the father: just 27 percent of the time with diaper changing; just 7.4 percent of the time with cooking; just 18.3 percent of the time with pick-up from the childcare center; just 19.2 percent of the time taken off from work when the child was sick.¹³ The report made no attempt to suggest a legislative solution to this problem, but by linking the unequal distribution of childcare and housework burdens to the declining fertility problem, the government was implicitly taking the side of the feminists, and this was at a time when Japan was still ruled by a predominantly male and very conservative Liberal Democratic Party.

The European nations dealing with the lowest low fertility rates were going through a similar embrace of “feminism as the new natalism” during these same years. Writing for an OECD publication about declining fertility concerns in her native Italy and other “lowest low fertility” nations, Chiara Saraceno noted already in 1997 that the relationship between the level of women’s participation in the labor market and fertility rates had flipped. In the 1970s, the nations with the highest fertility rates were those (like Ireland) with the lowest rates of women in the workforce. Yet, Saraceno pointed out, the

most recent data showed that “the fertility rate is now lowest in countries where women’s participation in the labour force is lowest.”¹⁴ Like Higuchi in Japan, she mentioned Sweden as an example of how “some countries which have a high level of labour participation by women...also have the highest levels of fertility.” Saraceno jumped straight to the policy implications of this data: “This must be due not only to cultural differences, but also to the different ways in which national policies deal with family obligations and have responded to the growth of female employment.”¹⁵

The “flipping” of the relationship between women’s work and fertility would go on to be one of the most-reproduced findings in European publications on family policy and fertility over the next several years. In its high-profile report on new social policy challenges in 1999 (*A Caring World: The New Social Policy Agenda*), the OECD featured a pair of correlation figures showing how the relationship between labor force participation for women and completed fertility for mothers went from clearly negative for mothers born in 1930 to strongly positive for mothers born in 1960.¹⁶ The OECD stopped short of drawing a clear policy lesson from this data, noting that “such simple comparisons do not prove that increasing female labour force participation will inevitably increase fertility rates,” it did recognize that the data at least should increase confidence that nations should be able to increase women’s labor force participation without worrying that this would cause fertility rates to drop further.

In 2001, the OECD *Employment Outlook* included a more extended analysis of the connection between women’s employment and fertility. The analysis began by noting that in virtually all OECD countries, the correlation between women’s work and fertility over time has been negative. Earlier cohorts of women worked less and had more babies than

recent cohorts, suggesting that women's work was driving the trend toward lower fertility rates. Juxtaposing this finding with the cross-national correlation which showed a positive correlation (the Caring World figures), the report went on to investigate how to reconcile these two patterns. The authors of the report ultimately reconciled them in this way: many countries (like Japan, Italy, and Spain) had indeed seen women have fewer children as they entered the workforce in slightly higher numbers, but the cross-national pattern was driven by the ability of a few countries (the authors mentioned "the United States and the Nordic countries") to create environments in which there was less of a tradeoff between work and family so that women were able to both work and have children at higher rates.¹⁷

The personnel involved with these OECD reports, especially Willem Adema, went on to lead the OECD's well-known Babies and Bosses studies of work-family reconciliation policies.¹⁸ This set of four reports, published between 2002 and 2005, focused closely on how policies in thirteen countries eased (or did not ease) the ability of parents to reconcile work with their child-rearing responsibilities at home. A synthesis published in 2007 included data on a more comprehensive set of countries and featured the project's most important findings. As Riane Mahon, who has written about the Babies and Bosses project, notes, the policy lessons drawn by the OECD staff overseeing the series of country studies evolved over the course of time.¹⁹ The project had grown out of earlier OECD efforts to advise member countries on how to bring more women into the workforce in order to reduce women's poverty (especially of lone mothers) and avoid a looming labor shortage as populations aged. As the quotes from the Caring World report above suggest, the OECD's earlier work touched on fertility rates only in order to assure members that more women could be brought into the workforce without pushing fertility rates lower.

As the project began investigating the relationship between women’s work and fertility and looking closely at problems in specific countries, however, the project team began to present work-family reconciliation as a way of actually increasing fertility rates. Thus the Babies and Bosses synthesis report concludes that “systems which provide a continuum of support to families—support for parents at home when the child is very young, leading on to a childcare place, pre-school, school and out-of-school-hours care activities—perform best in helping parents reconcile work and family life. Such an approach stimulates birth rates as parents can realistically plan their work and family commitments.”²⁰

Equally striking is the menu of policies the synthesis report recommends. As Mahon has noted in her study of the project, the OECD team initially focused mostly on the need to offer new mothers childcare leave and childcare services to ease their transition to motherhood without ending their attachment to the workforce, but as the team investigated problems in “lowest low fertility” countries such as Japan, they concluded that more far-reaching changes of the kinds advocated for many years by feminists were needed before the opportunity costs paid by mothers could be reduced to the point that more would choose motherhood. In places where tax and benefit systems favored the male-breadwinner model, with the wife staying at home to care for the children, the report recommends changing these rules “to give both parents in couple-families equally strong incentives to work.”²¹

Equally striking were the report’s recommendations on how to design childcare leave policy in order to maximize women’s labor market participation and fertility. The report concludes that paid leave policies, which in some countries encouraged women to

stay home with their children for three years, needed to be of “moderate length,” which it defined as a period of four to six months: “If leave periods are shorter, mothers are often not ready to go back to work, while the use of longer leave periods by mothers can permanently damage their labor market position.”²² Behind this recommendation was the correlation the authors of the study had observed between generous leave policies in places like Germany and Austria and low women’s work and fertility rates in these places. But adjusting leave lengths, the report found, was not enough. Leave policies needed to be changed to draw more fathers into taking leave and thereby developing a more equitable sharing of childrearing work from the earliest stages of an infant’s life. It was not enough to make fathers eligible for leave. Neither was it enough to give fathers a week or two of leave when a child was first born. The report had the most praise for Iceland, which has gone the furthest in creating “paid leave entitlements that are non-transferable between the parents” so that parents who wish to maximize their leave benefits have an incentive to split the leave evenly.

The report’s remaining recommendations called on OECD member nations to make high-quality childcare, preschool, and after-school-care available so that mothers and fathers would more easily be able to balance work and family commitments after the mothers’ and fathers’ periods of leave were over, and to supplement these programs with incentives for businesses to offer family-friendly policies (flextime, part-time, sick leave). Interestingly, the report praised the Nordic countries for providing high quality care to a large segment of children but deemed the Nordic model “not directly exportable to other OECD countries.” Instead, it recommended the Australian and Dutch approach of providing parents with vouchers that could be redeemed for a variety of care services that might be

more closely tailored to their needs.²³ Finally, the report argues that good policies in the area of childcare leave and services are not enough to help women reconcile work with their family obligations when “the workplace is not family-friendly.” If holding onto a job requires long hours, offers little flexibility to parents of young children, and features a seniority-based wage system that penalizes workers who take time off to care for their children, workers will be unable to “balance work and caring activities.”²⁴

Before concluding this section on the policies that define “feminism as the new natalism,” I need to touch on one more far-reaching “policy” that has been recommended explicitly or implicitly by some feminists as a way of increasing birthrates—but was not featured in Babies and Bosses. A variety of demographers have observed that fertility rates are highest in countries that have a more flexible view of marriage: where cohabitation is high, single-parenthood is high, and divorce rates are high. The United States and Sweden, for example, score high on all of these dimensions, while Japan, Italy, Spain, and many of the other nations with the lowest low fertility rates have the lowest rates in the OECD on these measures. Ueno Chizuko was one of the first observers in Japan to note this pattern, observing in her 1998 article that the low fertility rate there was no doubt driven in part by the fact that “the age when Japanese couples begin living together may well be the oldest in the industrialized world.” Although she admitted that the Japanese government would never consider this solution, she suggested that “encouragement of out-of-wedlock children is an option to increase the birthrate.”²⁵

By 2000, a demographer employed by the Japanese government, Miho Iwasawa, was arguing in a mass market monthly that virtually all of the difference in birthrates between Japan and the high fertility industrialized countries was accounted for by children

born and raised outside of traditional marriage. The number of children born inside marriage had declined everywhere, but in some places such as Scandinavia and the United States, this decline was offset by a rise in births outside marriage. If Japan truly wanted to increase birth rates, she argued, it needed to create a society that welcomed these alternative family arrangements.²⁶

European investigations into the forces driving the fertility decline there have similarly focused on the connection between traditional family norms (and laws) and low fertility. As Joelle Slesbos wrote in her OECD working paper, “OECD countries where divorce and out-of-wedlock birth are more frequent have, at the end of the 1990s, lower fertility rates than other countries.” She pointed to Sweden and the United States as examples of places where high out-of-wedlock birthrates were associated with higher fertility rates and Italy and Spain as places where the opposite pattern prevailed. These patterns, she wrote, “suggest that marriage laws that are more neutral with respect to the form of relationship may be an important condition for sustaining fertility.”²⁷

Efforts to Implement the “Feminism-as-New-Natalism” Agenda

The previous section documents the surprising degree to which policymakers and other opinion leaders—even in nations with entrenched male-breadwinner traditions—have embraced the view that increasing women’s participation in the labor force promises to be an important means of boosting fertility rates. Despite this “paradigm shift,” policymakers in the lowest-low fertility nations have had persistent difficulties in moving policy in this direction. In this final section, I focus on “progress,” or the lack thereof, in Japan, Germany, and Italy. As Table 2 shows, some twenty years after concerns about falling fertility rates

reached the top of the agenda, and almost a decade after the OECD and top policymakers identified “reducing opportunity costs for mothers” as an important strategy for reversing this trend, the three low fertility countries continue to be characterized by: 1) a tendency of new mothers to leave the workforce; 2) large gender gaps in pay; and 3) low rates of young children in formal care and preschool. Fertility rates too, have not budged much from lows early in the decade. In 2008, rates were up to 1.37 in Japan, 1.38 in Germany, and 1.41 in Italy.

Table 2: Work-Family Reconciliation Data for High and Low Fertility Countries							
Country fertility 2000-08	Mothers of <2 in work force	Mothers of 3-5 in work force	Gender Pay Gap 2006	Children 0-2 in Formal Care	Children 3-5 in Care or School	Births Outside of Marriage	Cohabitation Among Those Aged >20
Italy 1.32	47.3	50.6	**	28.6	99.4	20.7	2
Germany 1.35	36.1	54.8	23	13.6	89.3	30	5.3
Japan 1.32	28.5	47.5	33	28.3	87.6	2.1	2.1
Sweden 1.74	71.9	81.3	15	45.3	85.6	54.7	**
France 1.92	53.7	63.8	12	42.9	100	50.4	14.4
USA 2.06	54.2	62.8	19	31.4	58.4	38.5	5.5

Source: Fertility data from Table 1; Work rate data for 2006 from OECD, *Babies and Bosses Synthesis*, 2007, p. 16; the gender pay gap is for median earnings of fulltime employees; the

formal care for children rates are for 2006 (2005 for US); births outside of marriage data are for 2007 (2006 for Japan); cohabitation data is for 2000; all but work rate data are from the OECD Family Database, online at <http://www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database> (accessed February 11, 2010).

Each nation, however, has seen policymakers adopt some policy changes in line with the policy recommendations made by the OECD Babies and Bosses project. Prior to 1990, Japan offered no childcare leave benefits beyond the eight weeks of maternity leave guaranteed to all new mothers, and childcare services for newborns were in short supply. In 1989, just 4.4 percent of newborns aged zero to 1 and a just 13.2 percent of children 1-2 were in childcare, and waiting lists in suburban areas of large cities were so long that many new mothers were forced to give up work because of their inability to find a childcare spot.²⁸ Over the course of the 1990s, the government addressed both of these deficits to some degree. It created and expanded a childcare leave program so that new parents today are entitled to 10 months of leave beyond maternity leave, at 60 percent of their pay (but note that this leave is only available to one parent, the one who is primarily responsible for childcare, and only when both parents work fulltime). Meanwhile, it increased funding for childcare services in order to create more spaces for children 0-2, increasing the proportion of this age group in care to 28.3 percent in 2006. It also introduced changes in labor law asking employers to “endeavor to take necessary measures” on behalf of workers with children under age six, such as flex-time. In addition, one of the tax breaks available to dependent spouses was removed, reducing financial incentives of second-earners to cut back on hours worked in order to stay below a threshold of around \$10,000 a year.²⁹

Despite these changes, however, the proportion of mothers of young children in the Japanese labor force remains at just 28.5 percent. Since 90 percent of single childless women work, this means that over 60 percent of women continue to leave employment after marriage or motherhood, foreclosing the opportunity to climb career ladders in a Japanese labor market that continues to give seniority wages and other preferences to “lifetime employees” who do not interrupt their careers. This means mothers continue to pay a steep opportunity cost for the decision to marry and have children (which continue to go together in most cases).

Analysts attribute the lack of progress to a number of ways in which Japanese policies, labor market practices, and gender role norms about the division of work at home continue to fall short of the “gender equal society” that is supposed to reduce opportunity costs and deliver higher fertility rates. Leave benefits, at just 60 percent of pay, discourage the primary earner—usually the husband—from taking leave, so that just 0.55 percent of new fathers took leave at the start of the 2000s. When Junichirō Koizumi took over as prime minister in 2001, he vowed to encourage more fathers to take leave. Under his “Plus One” plan, employers were encouraged to allow new fathers to take up to five “daddy days” (available regardless of their wife’s employment status) and to set targets for their workers aimed at boosting the proportion of fathers taking at least five days of leave to ten percent. Some employers did so, but as of 2008, just xx percent of fathers were taking even five “daddy days” of leave from their work. The proportion claiming regular childcare leave remained just xx percent. This “daddy day” push, although designed to increase father’s involvement in childcare, clearly has not proven sufficient to challenge expectations on the part of employers, parents, and society that mothers will be the ones taking virtually all of

the childcare leave. Nothing like Sweden's two-month "daddy quota" or Iceland's system encouraging an even split of childcare leave has been proposed, much less implemented, in Japan.

Reforms have been similarly tentative in many other areas affecting the ability of mothers in career track jobs to meet employer expectations. Employers have an obligation only to "endeavor" to offer programs like flextime. Firms that refuse to be flexible, and even those that penalize mothers who claim leave benefits or go out of their way to force mothers out of the workforce by demanding that they accept transfers, face few sanctions. As a result, just 58 percent of women who continue working and are eligible for leave take the full leave to which they are entitled. The latest surveys on the division of housework between spouses continue to show that mothers do the bulk of the work, even when she works fulltime. One sign of how far Japan still has to go to challenge traditional gender role patterns was the decision of the new Democratic Party of Japan government, elected in August 2009, to spend virtually all of its budget aimed at improving the welfare of families on child allowances. The proposed expenditure, coming to about one percent of GDP and giving every child under 13 an allowance of \$276 a month, is significant, but this money may actually encourage more mothers to quit their jobs, by giving them the income support to do so, rather than sustaining their attachment to the workforce. With the new generous child allowances, Japan's policies will actually resemble most closely Germany's program encouraging mothers to stay home with their under-three children—a program that is blamed for sustaining a gender segregated labor market there. Japan has not yet done enough to be a "test case" for the argument that "gender equality" will significantly boost fertility rates.

The stories of policy change in Germany and Italy are similar. Influenced by the paradigm shift captured in the Babies and Bosses series and under pressure from the European Union to change policies in the areas of childcare leave and childcare services to improve work-family reconciliation, both nations have adopted some reforms, but they fall far short of the “feminism as the new natalism” prescription. In 1996, the European Union issued a directive requiring all member states to provide at least a minimal level of parental leave, and in 2002, it followed up with a recommendation that members improve support for childcare services to the point where at least 33 percent of children under three were in formal care by 2010.³⁰ While both Italy and Germany have adopted some reforms in response to these EU initiative and national dialogues about how to improve work-family reconciliation, neither comes close (yet) to the Babies and Bosses ideal.

In Germany, a set of policies encouraging mothers to leave the workforce and stay home with children under three has been blamed, for some time, for perpetuating gender inequality and lowering fertility rates. Starting in 1986, the German government began providing a generous childcare leave allowance to new mothers that (in 2000) gave them a flat payment of €307 a month for 24 months, with an option to take another year of leave.³¹ As Henninger et al explain, “in combination with gendered norms, tax penalties for dual-earner couples, gender discrimination on the labor market, and a lack of child-care institutions, the benefit created incentives for mothers to stay at home and care for their children and made it difficult for them to return to the labor market afterwards.”³²

In response to criticism that this leave system pushed mothers to separate from the labor market for so long that their careers were often sidelined, the German government began considering changes designed to increase “both the labor-force

participation of women and the birth rate.”³³ After studying a variety of reform proposals, the grand coalition government finally pushed through changes in 2007 that made the German parental care leave system resemble much more closely the Swedish model. The leave benefit is now available for only 14 months, and it is pegged to income at a rate of 67 percent so that it comes closer to replacing the income lost by higher-earning women and men taking time off from their careers to care for their newborns.³⁴ In addition, the new system requires that a second parent take two months of care leave if the couple wish to claim the full 14 months (“daddy moths”), thereby mimicking the Nordic effort to draw fathers into splitting childcare leave with mothers.

While German reforms come close to bringing parental leave system into line with the Babies and Bosses recommendations, the government has been unable to expand childcare services at a sufficient pace to fill in the gap working parents need to have filled if they are to stay in fulltime work after the parental leave period is over. Because childcare services are the responsibility of the Länder and local governments and care services for small children are very expensive, the central government had difficulty pushing them to expand. A 2007 compromise provides for the central government to help fund expansion in exchange for the Länder’s commitment to provide enough childcare spots to serve 33% of all children under three, but the target date for implementation was put off to 2013. At mid-decade (2004), only 10 percent of children in the western Länder were being served by childcare facilities, so it remains to be seen if this target will be reached.³⁵

Finally, an examination of policy change in Italy suggests that it has seen the least change. The area where Italian reforms have been most significant is in the area of parental leave. In 1999, largely in response to the EU directive in this area, Italy created a

program offering 10 months of parental leave, at 30 percent of pay, in addition to the five months of maternity leave available previously. Furthermore, to encourage fathers to split this leave with mothers, if offered an extra month of leave to fathers who took at least three months of leave. Nevertheless, sizable gaps remain in Italy's work-family reconciliation policies—especially the lack of affordable childcare services for children under three and rigidities in the labor market that make it difficult for mothers (or fathers) to adjust work hours to meet family needs. Spaces for children under three in formal care centers are extremely scarce in Italy, with just 7.4 percent in this type of care (just two percent in the far south) at the start of the 2000s.³⁶ In addition, the available care services for under-threes have been expensive: about €460 a month.³⁷ The other problem making work-family reconciliation difficult in Italy have been rigidities in the labor market that have made part-time work difficult to find and made taking time off from work unattractive because the high unemployment rate and job protections make firms reluctant to hire workers.³⁸ While these problems have been on the agenda, the Italian government has done little to address them.

These brief surveys of efforts to implement the “new natalist” agenda in response to steep fertility declines in Japan, Germany and Italy shows that none has been able to implement the full set of recommended reforms. As result, these nations have seen limited increases in women's workforce participation and only slight increases, in the last several years, in fertility rates. This uneven record raises a number of questions about the “new natalist” reform agenda. First, the claim that these reforms will deliver higher fertility rates is based on the cross-national correlation between high fertility and high rates of women in the workforce in places like Sweden, France, and the United States. But we don't know

exactly which of the work-family reconciliation policies in place in these nations are necessary and sufficient to bring about the promised fertility increase. Will partial reforms of the types adopted in Japan, Italy, and Germany begin to boost rates, or does it take the “full set?

Second, the uneven record of reform in Japan, Germany, and Italy raises questions about whether they have the political will to implement policies that attempt to radically change gender roles, merely to boost birth rates. Feminists have played a role in criticizing current male-breadwinner-oriented policies, but they do not have the political clout in these countries to push through reforms on their own. Technocrats, informed by the OECD studies and other analysis have joined them, but it remains to be seen whether this coalition can implement a top-down “bureaucracy-led gender role revolution” in the name of long-term population growth.³⁹

Finally, we know that high fertility nations such as Sweden, France and the United States have other characteristics in common besides work-family reconciliation policies. In particular, all of them have higher rates of out-of-wedlock births and a more flexible view as to whether children need to be born only in the context of a traditional marriage. What if it turns out that higher fertility rates in these countries are largely a product of these liberal attitudes toward marriage and childbirth? Even if Japan, Italy, and Germany come to adopt the full set of “new natalist” reforms, they might still find that fertility rates stay low if they, at the same time, maintain conservative attitudes toward “family.”

ENDNOTES

¹ Quoted in Kazue Suzuki, "Women Rebuff the Call for More Babies," Japan Quarterly 42:1 (January-March 1995), p. 14.

² McDonald 2002 cited in Esping-Andersen.

³ Chizuko UENO, "The Declining Birthrate: Whose Problem?" Review of Population and Social Policy 7 (1998), p. 106.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁵ Ashino, quoted in Suzuki, "Women Rebuff the Call for More Babies," p. 20.

⁶ Ashino, quoted in Suzuki, *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷ Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "Capitalism and Reproduction," Capitalism, Nature, Socialism 7:4 (December 1996), pp. 111-121.

⁸ Higuchi, quoted in Suzuki, p. 17.

⁹ Machiko OSAWA, Atarashii kazoku no tame no keizai gaku Tokyo: Chuo Shinsho, 1998.

¹⁰ Naohiro Yashiro, Shōshi kōreika no keizaigaku Tokyo: Tōyō Keizai Shinpōsha, 1999.

¹¹ See Leonard Schoppa, Race for the Exits: The Unraveling of Japan's System of Social Protection (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 174. See also Ito Peng, "Social Care in Crisis: Gender, Demography, and Welfare State Restructuring in Japan," Social Politics Fall 2002, pp. 425-426.

¹² The 1999 White Paper, titled "Reflections on Declining Fertility: Creating a Society Where Having and Raising Children is a 'Dream'" (Shōshi shakai wo kangaeru: kodomo wo umi sodateru koto ni 'yume' wo moteru shakai wo), did not present any correlation analysis or other quantitative evidence linking declining fertility to housework patterns, but it implied the connection by devoting almost 20 pages to the topic in a volume focused on the declining fertility problem. The father's housework minutes reported here can be found on p. 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁴ Chiara Saraceno, "Family Change, Family Policies and the Restructuring of Welfare," in OECD, ed., Family, Market and Community: Equity and Efficiency in Social Policy (OECD, 1997), p. 85.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁶ OECD, A Caring World: The New Social Policy Agenda (Paris: OECD, 1999), p. 17. The OECD has continued to feature this pair of charts showing the "flipped" correlation between women's work rates and fertility in more recent publications, including Joelle Sleebos, "Low Fertility Rates in OECD Countries: Facts and Policy Responses," OECD Social, Employment, and Migration Working Papers, 15 (2003), p. 20; and the synthesis volume Babies and Bosses: Reconciling Work and Family Life (Paris: OECD, 2007), p. 35.

¹⁷ OECD, 2001 Employment Outlook, p. 153.

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- ¹⁸ Rianne Mahon, "Babies and Bosses: Gendering the OECD's Social Policy Discourse," in Rianne Mahon and Stephen McBride, eds., The OECD and Transnational Governance (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), p. 26.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 260-275.
- ²⁰ OECD, Babies and Bosses: Reconciling Work and Family Life: A Synthesis of Findings for OECD Countries (Paris: OECD, 2007), p. 18.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 20.
- ²² Ibid., p. 21.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 22-23.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 24.
- ²⁵ Ueno, "The Declining Birthrate: Whose Problem?" p. 121.
- ²⁶ Miho Iwasawa, "Kekkon shinai henjintachi: Hikongata kappuru wo mitomeru shakai e," *Chuō Kōron* 115:13 (December 2000), pp.
- ²⁷ Sleebos, "Low Fertility Rates in OECD Countries," p. 21.
- ²⁸ Zenkoku Hoiku Dantai Renrakukai, Hoiku hakusho (Tokyo: Sōdo Bunka, 1990), p. 252.
- ²⁹ Schoppa, *Race for the Exits*, pp. 162-182.
- ³⁰ Gerda Neyer, "Family Policies and Low Fertility in Western Europe," Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research Working Paper 2003-021 (July 2003), p. 4. On the EU role in shaping policy in this area, see also Rianne Mahon, "Child Care: Toward What Kind of 'Social Europe,'" Social Politics (Fall 2002), pp. 344-379.
- ³¹ Kimberly J. Morgan and Kathrin Zippel, "Paid to Care: The Origins and Effects of Care Leave Policies in Western Europe," Social Politics (Spring 2003), p. 54.
- ³² Annette Henninger, Christine Wimbauer, and Rosine Dombrowski, "Demography as a Push Toward Gender Equality? Current Reforms of Germany Family Policy," Social Politics 15:3 (Fall 2008), p. 288.
- ³³ Ibid, p. 293.
- ³⁴ The income replacement formula applies to income up to €2,700 a month, yielding a benefit of up to €1,800 (much higher than the flat €307 available previously) for one year (instead of two), but note that the benefit under the new arrangement can actually be lower for parents who did not have income prior to birth, who are given just €300—Henninger et al, "Demography as a Push Toward Gender Equality?" pp. 295-296.
- ³⁵ Ibid, pp. 294 and 300.
- ³⁶ Daniela Del Boca, Marilena Lacatelli and Daniela Vuri, "Child Care Choices by Italian Households," IZA Discussion Paper No 983 (January 2004), p. 5.

³⁷ Daniela Del Boca, "The Effect of Child Care and Part Time Opportunities on Participation and Fertility Decisions in Italy," IZA Discussion Paper No 427 (February 2002), p. 5.

³⁸ Del Boca, "The Effect of Child Care and Part Time Opportunities on Participation and Fertility Decisions in Italy," pp. 3-4.

³⁹ I argue in my book Race for the Exits that in Japan, at least, the "exit" of women from the work-family reconciliation challenge by opting out of motherhood or work has forced the nation to rely on this (largely ineffective) top-down approach, which is a poor substitute for a gender role revolution led by mothers struggling to balance work and family and driven by their difficulties to demand change from their employers, husbands, and government.