

# Chapter 2

## Social Norms, Institutions, and Policies in Low-Fertility Countries

Anne H. Gauthier

### 2.1 Introduction

The reach and persistence of very low levels of fertility in the industrialized world are unprecedented and have led numerous governments to question how best to support individuals in their fertility decisions, and especially how to allow them to reach their desired family size (Gauthier and Philipov 2008). Such concerns about low fertility have been especially acute in some East and Southeast Asian countries where very low levels of fertility are perceived negatively by governments and have even led in some cases to the adoption of pronatalist policies (Chamie 2004). Despite these concerns and policy interventions, the low levels of fertility remain, leading some scholars to characterize as unique such countries and areas as Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Family Planning Perspectives 1987; McDonald 2008). This chapter reflects on the determinants of low fertility and its related policies. Its more specific aim is to situate East and Southeast Asia in a cross-national perspective and to consider whether Asia is indeed unique or whether a combination of factors, common to other countries, can explain the observed very low levels of fertility observed there.

The chapter is organized around five themes: financial obstacles to fertility, work-related obstacles, gender inequality in paid and unpaid work, normative obstacles, and other obstacles. Before examining these themes, I present some recent data on fertility in order to distinguish the regions to which I will be referring throughout the chapter.

---

A.H. Gauthier (✉)

Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI), P.O. Box 11650,  
NL-2502 AR The Hague, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [gauthier@nidi.nl](mailto:gauthier@nidi.nl)

## 2.2 Regional Fertility Patterns

Table 2.1 presents data on total period fertility rates for East and Southeast Asian countries, along with comparative data for five other geographical regions: Nordic countries, English-speaking countries, Western Europe, Southern Europe, and Eastern Europe.

Obviously the East and Southeast Asian regions are very heterogeneous in their levels of development. If the analysis is restricted to higher-income countries, the average number of births per woman drops to 2.0 for Southeast Asia and to 1.2 for East Asia. These levels clearly place these two Asian regions in the category of very low fertility from a cross-national perspective. These figures, however, likely underestimate, in most countries, their true cohort fertility levels. For example, in 2003 the tempo-adjusted rates were estimated to be 1.52 for South Korea and 1.46 for Japan (Suzuki 2005, p. 25), clearly higher than the nonadjusted rates, but still in the low fertility range.<sup>1</sup>

In the rest of the chapter I turn to an examination of the obstacles to fertility. In doing so, I maintain the cross-national perspective but for some indicators restrict

**Table 2.1** Total period fertility rates, arranged by decreasing order within each region: around 2006

Southeast Asia	East Asia	Other developed regions <sup>a,b</sup>
(Average = 2.8) <sup>a</sup>	(Average = 1.5) <sup>a</sup>	
Timor-Leste = 6.7	Mongolia = 2.3	Nordic countries = 1.90
Laos = 4.5	North Korea = 2.0	English-speaking = 1.88
Cambodia = 3.5	China = 1.6	Western Europe = 1.59
Philippines = 3.3	*Japan = 1.3	Southern Europe = 1.37
Indonesia = 2.6	*South Korea = 1.3	Eastern Europe = 1.37
*Malaysia = 2.6	Taiwan = 1.1	
Myanmar = 2.2	*Hong Kong = 1.0	
Vietnam = 2.1		
*Brunei = 2.0		
Thailand = 1.6		
*Singapore = 1.4		

Sources: For Southeast and East Asia: Population Reference Bureau (2008). For all other developed countries, see Table 2.2 in the Appendix

\*Indicates countries that were classified by the United Nations as having a high level of human development on the basis of the UN's Human Development Index. This information was not available for Taiwan

<sup>a</sup>The regional averages are unweighted for the size of each country

<sup>b</sup>Detailed data for all other developed countries are provided in Table 2.2 in the appendix

<sup>1</sup>See Table 2.2 for more information on the tempo-adjusted total fertility rates.

my analysis only to selected Asian countries (because of data availability). I also focus mainly on low-fertility countries and neglect the Asian countries that have still not completed their fertility transition.

## 2.3 Financial Obstacles to Fertility

In the economic model of fertility developed by Gary Becker in the 1960s, it is assumed that individuals weigh the cost of children, their own income, and their preference for children (as opposed to other “consumer goods”) when deciding whether or not to have a child (Becker 1991). Financial constraints, along with a major increase in the cost of children, are thus, according to this model, the main reason for the decline in fertility to very low levels. The questions therefore are: How much do countries differ in these financial obstacles to fertility? And to what extent can these differences account for the observed cross-national differences in fertility?

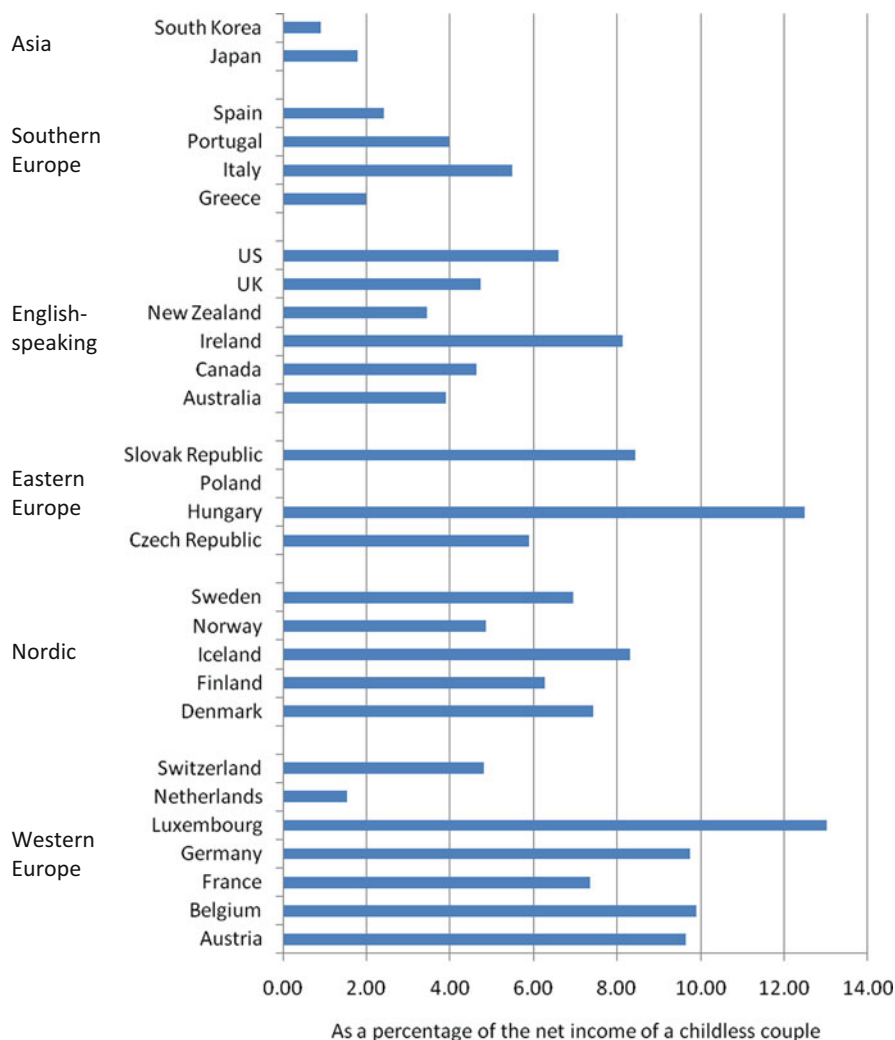
Let us start with the income constraint. In contrast to the 1950s and 1960s, when economies were growing rapidly and job opportunities were numerous, the trends over recent decades have been characterized by numerous ups and downs. Not only is there less economic certainty in today’s world, as illustrated by the recent financial crisis, but also earnings for some segments of the population have not kept pace with inflation. For example, the earnings of unskilled workers have stagnated since the 1970s and have even declined (in real terms) in numerous countries (OECD 1997). This differential trend in earnings translates into very large differences between individuals in their financial obstacles to fertility. Similarly, high levels of unemployment observed in some countries, especially among young adults, have reduced the purchasing power of individuals and have likely forced them to postpone or to reduce their childbearing plans.<sup>2</sup> The rising cost of living, high unemployment, and uncertainties regarding governmental support for families are likely part of the explanation for the very low fertility levels currently observed in Central and Eastern Europe (Rostgaard 2004; Stewart and Huerta 2006; Saxonberg and Szelewa 2007). In contrast, the relatively low unemployment, stable economies, and stable financial support for families that characterize the Nordic countries appear to be associated with much higher levels of fertility (Gauthier and Philipov 2008). What about Asia? Could financial constraints be one of the reasons for the observed levels of fertility there?

There is no unanimity in the literature regarding the direct cost of children, and there are hardly any cross-national estimates.<sup>3</sup> What we have, however, are data on governmental financial support for families in the form of cash transfers and tax relief. Figure 2.1 graphs the data for a two-child, two-earner family with

---

<sup>2</sup>One counter-example is the case of low-income individuals in the United States, who have above-average fertility despite their financial circumstances.

<sup>3</sup>For Asia, readers are referred to Ogawa et al. (2009) and their more recent work presented in Chap. 3 of this volume. For Europe, see Diprete et al. (2003).



**Fig. 2.1** Cash benefits to families: selected OECD countries, 2006 (Source: OECD (n.d. a). Notes: The data refer to the additional disposable income of a dual-earner, two-child family as compared with the disposable income of a dual-earner childless family; in both cases one of the spouse earns 100 % of the average earnings and the other 67 %. The benefits include both direct cash transfers to families with children and tax relief)

an average income as compared with an equivalent childless couple. Across all countries for which data are available, the average value is 5.9 %, which should be interpreted as the additional disposable income of two-child families as compared with childless couples. In other words, it is the amount of governmental financial support for families with children. The cross-national differences are wide, with

higher values (on average) observed in Western Europe and lower values in Southern Europe, Japan, and South Korea.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of these data, it is tempting to draw a causal relationship between cash support for families and fertility, since countries that provide higher levels of cash support for families tend also to be those where higher-than-average fertility levels are observed. The correlation is less than perfect, however, and does not explain, for example, the presence of higher levels of fertility in the English-speaking region despite average to low levels of cash support for families.<sup>5</sup>

The above figures capture governmental support for families and not the cost of children itself. As mentioned above, there are no cross-nationally comparable estimates of the total cost of children in all countries. What we do know, however, is that when it comes to the cost of education, there are very large differences across countries. For instance, data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reveal that the share of private expenditures on education in South Korea and Japan by far exceeds that of all European countries. While across all OECD countries the share of private expenditures is about 15 %, it reaches about 30 % in Japan and 40 % in South Korea (OECD 2008). Moreover, when the data are restricted to tertiary education, the share of private expenditures reaches 65 % in Japan and 75 % in South Korea, as compared with less than 30 % in most European countries.<sup>6</sup> In other words, when planning to have a child, parents and parents-to-be in Japan and South Korea anticipate having to spend a considerable amount of money for their children's education. In fact, the above figures likely underestimate the total private expenditures on education as they exclude expenditures outside educational institutions, such as private tutorials. This is a non-negligible component in countries like Japan and South Korea, where the competitive nature of the schooling system compels parents to enroll their children in after-school study programs and to hire private tutors. In large metropolitan areas in Japan, the estimates are that 70 % of middle-school age children are enrolled in after-school programs (Tsuya and Bumpass 2004).

---

<sup>4</sup>In Fig. 2.1 the US appears to have a higher level of cash support for families than do countries such as Japan, despite the absence of a universal family allowance program in the US. The explanation lies in the fact that the index captures both direct cash transfers to families and tax relief. The data in the figure are also very specific to the type of family chosen—that is, a dual-earner family with two children and average wages.

<sup>5</sup>Other studies (e.g., Bradshaw and Finch 2006) have also pointed to the bivariate correlation between fertility and cash support for families.

<sup>6</sup>Even in absolute figures, tuition rates for higher education in Japan and South Korea are among the highest in OECD countries (OECD 2008).

## 2.4 Work-Related Obstacles

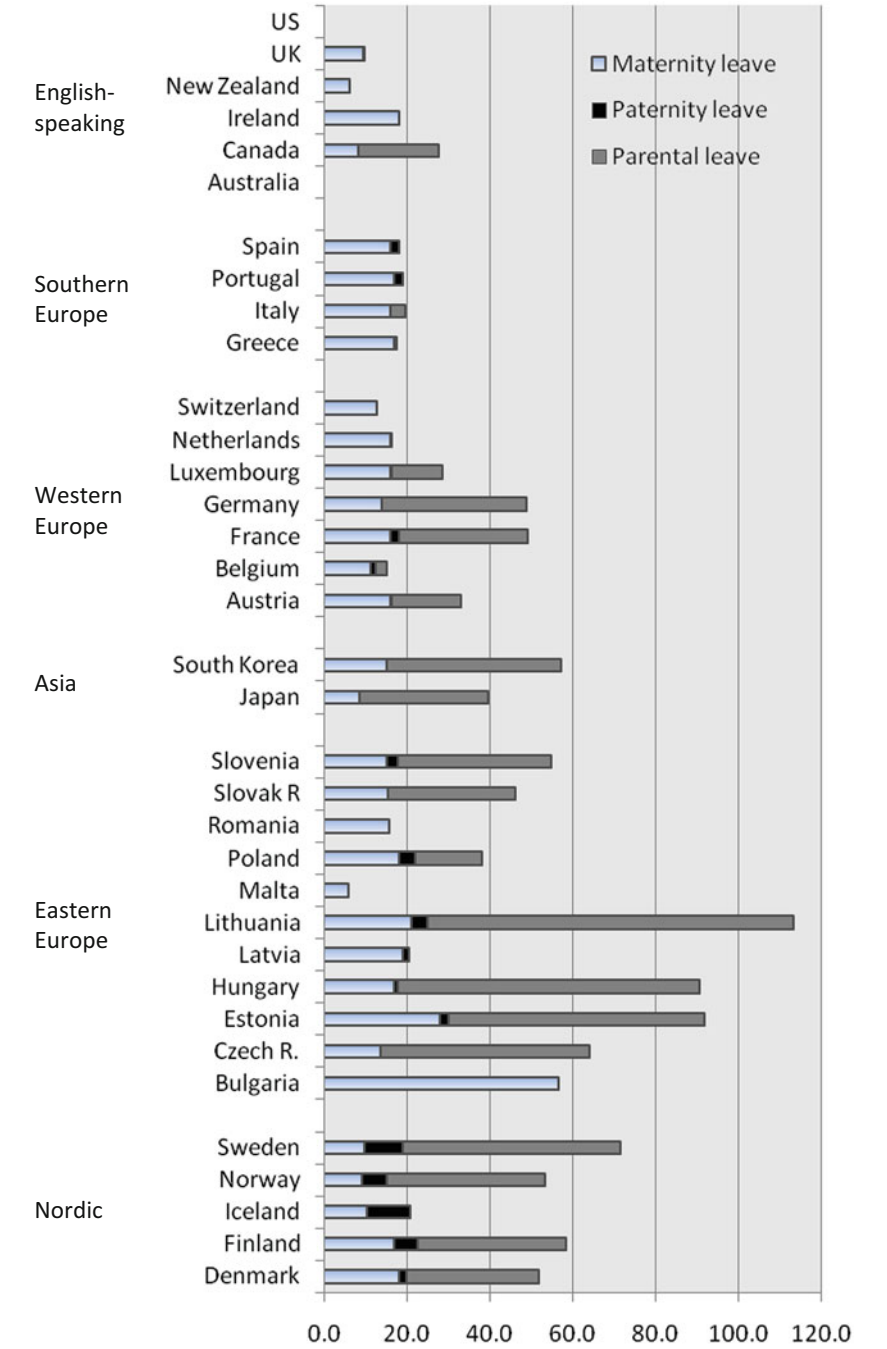
The indirect cost of children, also known as the opportunity cost, is perhaps an even bigger barrier to fertility in view of its larger magnitude than the direct cost of children. The estimates for a first child vary, but figures from Australia put it at USD \$250,000, or 31 % of lifetime potential earnings (Breusch and Gray 2004). Of course, theoretically the opportunity cost of children could be zero if a woman is eligible for maternity leave, if the benefits paid during this leave totally compensate her for the loss of earnings, if she can resume the same job after her maternity leave ends, if she does return to work after the end of her leave, if she does not experience any loss of promotion during her maternity leave or shortly after, and if she experiences continuous employment thereafter. The reality, however, is far from this “no cost” scenario for a large proportion of women. As shown by Sigle-Rushton and Waldfogel (2007a, b) the penalty associated with motherhood is non-negligible and varies widely among countries, being smallest in the Nordic countries and largest in Continental and Southern Europe.<sup>7</sup> It is true that not all women want to resume work after their maternity leave, some of them preferring instead to stay at home to take care of their young children. It remains that in today’s economy a second earner is a must in many families. It is also encouraged by several governments.

Not surprisingly then, governments in most industrialized countries have put in place measures to make it easier for parents to combine work and family responsibilities and to reduce the opportunity cost of children. Those measures include maternity and parental-leave schemes, the provision of childcare facilities, and subsidies for childcare. Figure 2.2 presents data on the combined maternity and parental-leave schemes in various countries. The data are expressed as full-time week equivalents in that they take into account both the duration of the leave and the cash benefits received during the leave. The cross-national differences are very large, with high support provided in the Nordic countries and some Eastern European countries and low support in the English-speaking countries and Southern Europe. In this graph, Japan and South Korea appear in the middle of the distribution. This is a new situation and reflects the recent adoption or extension of parental and childcare leave in those two countries.

The data tell us only one part of the story, however. Issues of eligibility for maternity and parental leave, job security after the period of leave, and possible job discrimination against young women need also to be taken into account in order to get the full picture. We do not have cross-nationally comparable data on all these dimensions. What we do know, however, is that a very high percentage of women

---

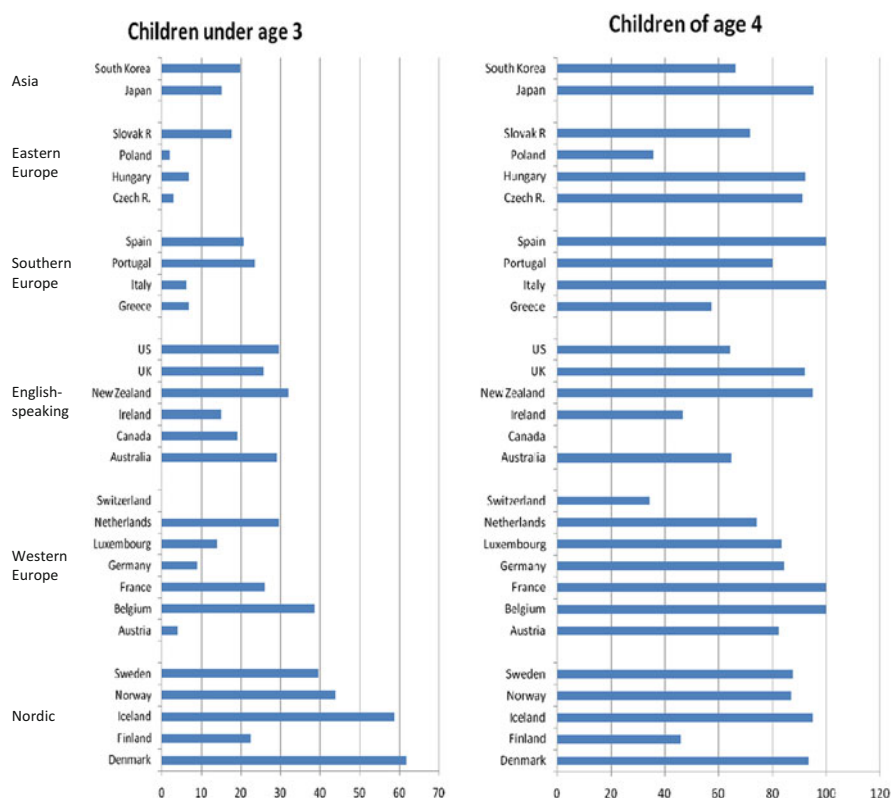
<sup>7</sup>The analyses by Sigle-Rushton and Waldfogel (2007a, b) do not include estimates for Japan or other Asian countries. Considering the strong tendency for women in countries such as Japan to withdraw from the labor market after childbirth, however, we can expect the wage penalty for motherhood to be high in those countries.



**Fig. 2.2** Maternity and parental leave benefits: selected OECD countries, 2006–2007 (Note: All forms of leave are expressed as equivalent full-paid weeks (number of weeks of leave multiplied by the percentage of wage or earnings received during the leave). Source: OECD (n.d. b, table PF7.1))

in some Asian countries quit work after childbirth. In Japan the estimate is about 70 % (Atoh 2008), while it is around 20 % in Europe (Del Boca 2003). And while such a high exit rate from the labor market in Japan may reflect a combination of obstacles, including normative and structural ones, it considerably increases the opportunity cost of children.

The other major policy instrument for reducing the cost of children is the availability of affordable and high-quality childcare arrangements. During the past 20 years, many governments have put in place measures to support the creation of childcare facilities and to partly subsidize them through direct subsidies or through tax relief for parents. Figure 2.3 reports the enrollment of children in formal childcare facilities and preschool services for children under the age of 3 (left-hand side) and those of age 4 (right-hand side). Regional and cross-national differences are very large, especially when it comes to children under age 3, with higher-than-average childcare provision in the Nordic countries and lower ones in Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, and Japan and South Korea.



**Fig. 2.3** Enrolment of children in formal childcare and preschool: selected OECD countries, 2000–2005 (Source: OECD (n.d. b, table PF11.1). Notes: Enrolment in daycare and preschool. The actual year of the data varies across countries, but all fall in the period 2000–2005)



Affordable childcare on its own is not sufficient, as parents may experience difficulties when their child is ill or when the care-giver himself or herself is ill.<sup>8</sup> While some employers will accommodate parents in such situations by allowing them to take time off, others will not. The struggle of working parents to look after a sick child is one of the key themes that emerged from interviews conducted by Jody Heymann (2006) and her team with mothers in several countries, including Russia, Vietnam, and the US. Their situation contrasts sharply with that of parents in countries like Sweden, where parents are eligible for numerous days off each year to take care of a sick child.

## 2.5 Gender Inequality in Paid and Unpaid Work

The provision of measures to help parents combine work and family responsibilities is important. But even when these are provided, parents may still face one additional barrier resulting from the combination of their paid job with their unpaid work at home. The term “second shift” was coined by Hochschild and Machung (1989) in their influential book, thus drawing attention to the very unequal gender division of household work.<sup>9</sup> It is not unusual for women to combine their 7 or 8 h of daily paid work with 4 or 5 h of unpaid work at home. The situation has been changing in recent years in some countries where men have increased their contribution to housework and childcare (Gershuny and Robinson 1988; Fisher et al. 2007). However, the division remains very unequal in most countries.

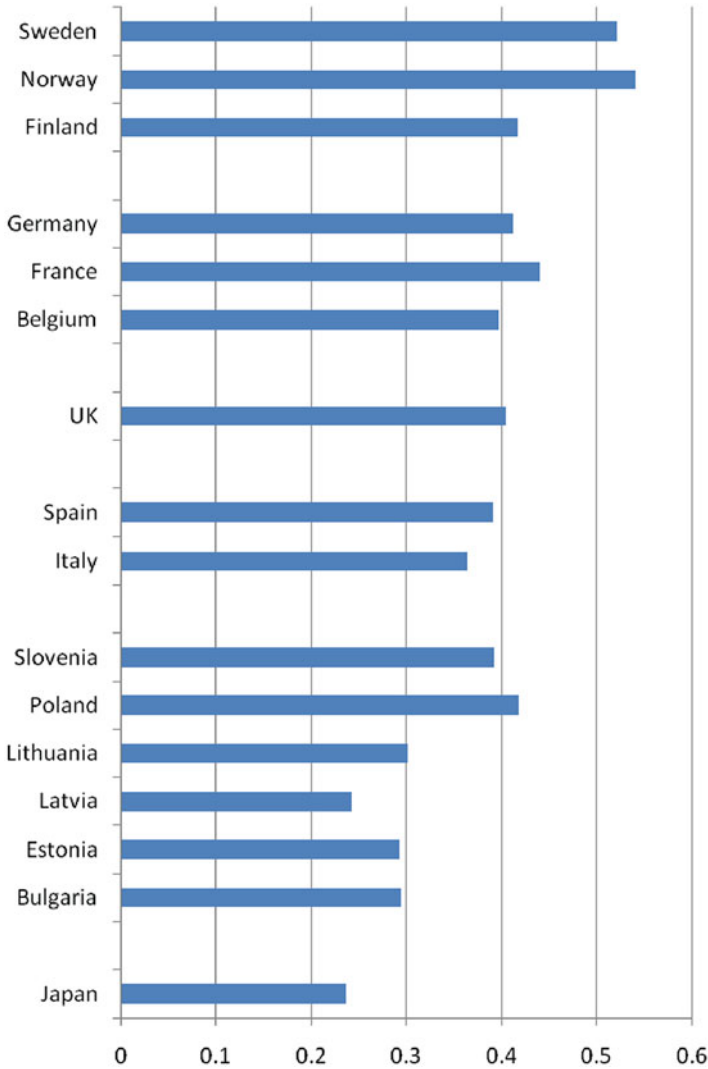
Figure 2.4 reports data on the ratio of father’s to mother’s time spent in childcare activities as calculated from time-use surveys. More equal gender contributions to childcare are observed in this graph in the Nordic countries, whereas less equal contributions are observed in Eastern Europe and especially in Japan. An unequal division of household labor between men and women can result from several factors, including time availability (itself linked to the number of hours of paid employment) and cultural norms regarding the roles of men and women. What is important to note again is the geographical ranking of countries and its plausible correlation with fertility.

Gender inequality, as a determinant of low fertility, has been discussed widely in the literature, the theoretical argument being that inconsistencies between norms and practices of gender equity in different institutional settings have a negative effect

---

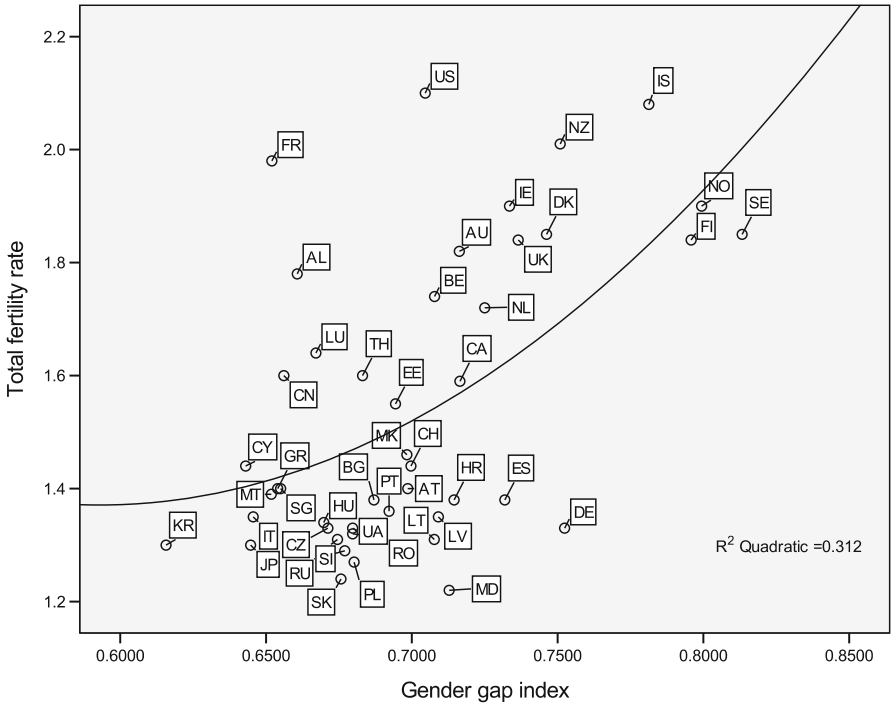
<sup>8</sup>Many childcare centers will not keep a sick child and will instead require the parents to pick up the child.

<sup>9</sup>I treat gender inequality here in a separate subsection, but it is also a normative obstacle.



**Fig. 2.4** Ratio of fathers' to mothers' time spent daily in childcare activities: selected OECD countries, around 2000 (Sources: Europe: Data computed by the author using the HETUS (n.d.). <https://www.h2.scb.se/tus/tus/>. Accessed 22 Mar 2010). Dataset, Japan: calculated from Japan, Statistics Bureau (2006). Notes: The data for European countries refer to married or cohabiting parents whose youngest child was under the age of 7. Childcare activities, as defined here, refer to time directly engaged with the child—for example, playing with or reading to the child as well as transporting the child. The data for Japan refer to married couples (regardless of the child's birth order))

on fertility (McDonald 2000). The persistence of very unequal gender norms in the private and public spheres in countries like Japan and South Korea is therefore undoubtedly part of the explanation for the observed very low levels of fertility in those countries. Again, a graphical illustration may be useful. Figure 2.5 shows the correlation between the gender equality index (as computed by the World Economic Forum) and fertility. The correlation is less than perfect, but what is very noticeable is the position of Japan, South Korea, and Singapore at the low end of the continuum, with low levels of both gender equality and fertility.



**Fig. 2.5** Correlation between fertility and gender inequality: selected countries, 2006 (Sources: Total fertility rates: (Table 2.2 in the Appendix); Gender-gap index: World Economic Forum (2006). Note: Only countries with a total fertility rate equal to or less than 2.1 are included here. Country codes: Albania (AL); Andorra (AD), Armenia (AM), Australia (AU), Austria (AT), Belarus (BY), Belgium (BE), Bosnia-Herzegovina (BA), Bulgaria (BG), Canada (CA), China (CN), Croatia (HR), Cyprus (CY), Czech Republic (CZ), Denmark (DK), Estonia (EE), Finland (FI), France (FR), Germany (DE), Greece (GR), Hong Kong, Hungary (HU), Iceland (IS), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Japan (JP), Latvia (LV), Liechtenstein (LI), Lithuania (LT), Luxembourg (LU), Macedonia (MK), Malta (MT), Moldova (MD), Montenegro (ME), Netherlands (NL), New Zealand (NZ), Norway (NO), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Romania (RO), Russian Federation (RU), South Korea (KR), Serbia (RS), Singapore (SG), Slovakia (SK), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES), Sweden (SE), Switzerland (CH), Taiwan (TW), Thailand (TH), United Kingdom (UK), Ukraine (UA), United States (US), Vietnam (VN), Brunei (BN))

## 2.6 Normative Obstacles

In the economic model of fertility, the preference for children is a key element. This element is rarely the subject of investigation by economists, however, their attention being focused instead on more tangible obstacles to fertility, such as financial and work-related ones. Nevertheless, elements of the normative systems of societies influence not only the desired or expected number of children, but also their “quality”—that is, the amount of money, time, and energy that parents are expected to devote to their children. These norms, it may be argued, have changed and have contributed to the current below-replacement fertility levels. And while some—if not most—of these elements are out of reach for governments, they are nonetheless important to understand as they can seriously curtail the effectiveness of policies aimed at increasing or supporting fertility.<sup>10</sup> I call these barriers the normative obstacles to fertility and have identified five of them.

First, there is the fact that parents are nowadays under increasing pressure to spend more money on their children, a pressure spurred not only by our consumerism, but also by a desire to give children what is best for them. Parents especially want to give them a good head start in life, for example by enrolling them in the best schools, paying for private tutorials if needed, enrolling them in extra-curricular activities, etc. As mentioned already, this pressure, especially when it comes to education, seems to be particularly acute in some East and Southeast Asian countries and contributes to substantially increasing the cost of children.<sup>11</sup>

Second, parents are under normative pressure to spend more time with their children and to do more with them and for them. For centuries, societies have been defining what is good parenting (see, e.g., Johansson 1987). Especially in economically advanced countries, the expectations have risen in recent decades. Good parenting is no longer defined only as feeding and caring for children, but is also about spending a significant amount of time with children: conversing with them, involving them in family decisions, exposing them to culture and politics at a young age, etc.<sup>12</sup> Not all parents have the luxury of conforming to these pressures, and it is unclear whether the pressures are felt equally in different countries. But

---

<sup>10</sup>To consider the possibility that governments can change norms would require a much lengthier discussion. It is certainly true that numerous examples exist in the developing world of governments that have fully endorsed family planning programs, and their endorsement may have indirectly contributed to changing norms toward smaller family size. Examples from the developed world of governments that may have succeeded in changing norms toward larger ideal family size would be much more difficult to find.

<sup>11</sup>Some authors (e.g., Ogawa et al. 2009) have used the term “success-oriented” societies in referring to this phenomenon.

<sup>12</sup>Evidence of such parenting pressures comes mainly from popular studies (e.g., Rosenfeld and Wise 2000).

where they are felt they may be raising the cost of children to parents and causing couples to revise downward their fertility intentions.<sup>13</sup>

Third, there are social pressures and expectations regarding the importance of achieving certain milestones prior to starting a family. For example, many young people, mainly from middle-class families, expect to have not only a good job prior to having children, but also to have traveled, to have found out “who they are” and what they are passionate about, and to have accumulated enough savings to buy a house or at least to rent a house or apartment in a comfortable and family-friendly neighborhood. And once they have children, they aspire (and are expected) to pursue their own development through such activities as fitness exercise, lifelong learning, and social activities. Obviously, these social pressures are difficult to reconcile with an early entry into parenthood and with having a large family. Of course, not all individuals are sensitive to these normative pressures, and different norms and expectations exist in different countries and even among different subgroups within the same society. Granting these differences, we should nevertheless not be surprised by a median age at first birth close to 30 years in some countries, nor by a low level of fertility.

Fourth, in some countries the social norm or expectation is still for couples to have children within marriage, following a traditional pattern of entry into parenthood. As young people increasingly favor cohabitation as a precursor, or even as an alternative, to marriage, such a social norm may act as an obstacle to fertility. Suzuki (2008, p. 37) even argues that it is the “weak familism in north-west Europe and English-speaking advanced countries that [has] prevented lowest-low fertility.” In contrast, in Japan and South Korea the marriage norm, along with normative expectations about caring for elderly parents (Atoh 2008), may act as a deterrent to fertility.

Finally, there are social norms regarding ideal family size. Until recently social scientists considered such norms to be mechanisms for keeping fertility around the replacement level. But recent studies indicate that the “ideal” family size appears to have dropped below replacement, for example in such countries as Austria and Germany (Goldstein et al. 2003). The explanation given is part of the so-called fertility-trap hypothesis, which states that the persistence of low levels of fertility has affected societal perceptions of what is acceptable and desirable, thus lowering “ideal” fertility, and in turn contributing to keeping fertility at low levels (Lutz et al. 2006). Similarly, it has been argued that when entire societies adjust to very low levels of fertility—for example, in terms of their standard of living, the stock of small houses, etc.—falling fertility may in itself be self-enforcing (see, e.g., Retherford and Ogawa 2006).

---

<sup>13</sup>This argument is consistent with the quantity–quality trade-off hypothesized by Becker and Lewis (1973).

## 2.7 Other Obstacles

Other obstacles to fertility exist beyond those reviewed above. Among them are health-related problems, including the physiological difficulty of conceiving a child. It is difficult to quantify this obstacle. In the 2006 Eurobarometer survey, 13 % of men and 20 % of women in Europe identified health problems as one of the reasons why they were unable to fulfill their fertility desires (Testa 2006). Results of a similar magnitude were reported from the 2003 German Population Acceptance Survey among childless women and men (Hara 2008). Empirical evidence suggests an increase in the use of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) in recent years. The use of such technologies varies widely across countries, partly as a result of national differences in the rules regarding their use and their coverage by public health insurance (Billari et al. 2007). Other obstacles are the lack of a stable partnership or marriage that some individuals may face when considering whether to have children, and disagreement between spouses about family size. It is difficult to quantify these obstacles or to even say whether they have increased over time. In Germany, around 60 % of childless men and women identified not having a steady partner as one of the reasons for not having children (Hara 2008). In Japan, around 40 % of never-married men and women identified not having a suitable partner as one reason for not being married (Hara 2008). And since marriage and childbearing continue to be closely linked in countries like Japan, obstacles to marriage are in turn also obstacles to fertility. Some scholars have interpreted these statistics as a reflection of an imperfect marriage market. Countries like Singapore have even taken steps to correct the situation by providing governmental matchmaking services (Singapore Government 2008). Others have interpreted these statistics as a reflection of other obstacles, including the gap between men's and women's norms and expectations regarding gender roles (Jones 2007).

Finally, the labor market should be singled out as a potential obstacle to fertility in some countries. The limited availability of part-time work (and the benefits associated with them) and the rigidity of labor markets in not accommodating exit and re-entry—especially after an absence of some years to look after a young child—are examples of factors that may adversely affect the career trajectories of women and their fertility decisions.<sup>14</sup> Labor market rigidities such as those observed in Japan, South Korea, and some European countries may therefore contribute to low fertility. In contrast, the more flexible labor markets of the US and other English-speaking countries may help explain their higher levels of fertility.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup>In addition, Japan is a salient example of how very long working hours and peer pressure in the workplace negatively affect the work-fertility nexus. See Chap. 9 of this volume.

<sup>15</sup>To this factor one could also add the opening hours of stores, which may act as an obstacle to working parents. The differences between the US (with very liberal opening hours) and parts of Europe (with very traditional opening hours) are wide and may help explain differences in fertility.

## 2.8 Conclusion

Why do people still want and still have children today despite all the obstacles identified here? A similar question was posed by Schoen and colleagues (1997). Although this is an important question, it is one for which we have only a partial answer. It has been argued that some people still have children for the emotional satisfaction they provide, including the pleasure of nurturing, loving, and caring for a fragile human being. Others have children for more utilitarian reasons: to help consolidate a union or marriage, to build and create social capital, or to ensure companionship and support in old age. Pronatal and antinatal factors play out differently in various cultural settings and among various groups within those settings. The obstacles to childbearing appear to be particularly strong in some East and Southeast Asian countries and have resulted in unprecedentedly low levels of fertility.

One of the questions I posed at the beginning of this chapter was whether East and Southeast Asia is unique or whether a combination of factors (common to other countries) can explain its observed very low levels of fertility. On the basis of the evidence reviewed here, I would argue that the answer is both: The region is unique in that it has a unique combination of five factors that together contribute to very low levels of fertility.<sup>16</sup> First, there is the very high direct cost of children (which is in part the result of a competitive education system), combined with very low governmental financial support for families. Second, there is the very high opportunity cost of children that results from normative obstacles that prevent women from staying in the labor market after childbearing, together with a labor market that requires long hours of work, and low governmental support in the form of maternity and parental-leave schemes. Third, there is the persistence of very unequal gender norms regarding the division of paid and unpaid work, including the care of children and elderly parents, which makes marriage an unattractive option for many young women. This factor is not negligible, as an estimated 24 % of Japanese women from the 1990 birth cohort are expected to remain single (Atoh 2008). Fourth, there have been increasing uncertainties about the future, especially about financial security. The economic slump of the 1990s and early 2000s in Asia has substantially changed the labor market, increasing the number of nonregular employees and jeopardizing job insecurity (Atoh 2008; Suzuki 2008). Although we do not yet have data on the 2008–2009 economic crisis, we can expect it to add to the prevailing uncertainty, especially among young adults. Finally, other norms discourage family formation and fertility, including consumerism, individualism, and the acceptability of childlessness. And while these factors have been observed in other regions, what is unique in East and Southeast Asia is the coexistence of all of them.

---

<sup>16</sup>Throughout this chapter, I have referred to East and Southeast Asia as a single region. The social, economic, political, and demographic differences within the region are large, however.

Is fertility consequently bound to remain at very low levels in countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore? The total period fertility rate may increase slightly in the years ahead as people catch up on postponed births. Nevertheless, reducing the obstacles to fertility would require formidable changes to the labor market, the schooling system, governmental support for families, etc. Furthermore, while some of these obstacles are within the control of governments, others, including normative obstacles, are not.

Implementing pronatalist policies may not be a solution and may even provoke a backlash, as it implies governmental interference in what is perceived to be a fundamentally private decision.<sup>17</sup> A better solution may be the implementation of family-friendly and family-supportive policies, ones that make it easier for parents to combine work and family responsibilities, that reduce the cost of children to parents, and that are sensitive to gender equity.<sup>18</sup> We do not know the exact combination of policies that would most efficiently reduce the obstacles to fertility (Gauthier 2007). What we do know is that governmental interventions, even modest ones, can increase the well-being of parents and children. Such policies, I would argue, may even have a positive effect on fertility, but only if they are designed to truly address the needs and preferences of parents and parents-to-be.

In recent years, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore have bolstered their support for families by providing longer parental and childcare leave, increasing financial support for families, and planning to increase the provision of childcare facilities. It is too early to assess the impact of these policies on the ability of parents to combine work and family responsibilities, and perhaps even their effect on fertility. Some authors have already expressed doubt about their possible benefits in view of the relatively small amounts budgeted and the continued economic uncertainties (e.g., Suzuki 2008). Governments are not the only actor, however. Without normative and policy changes in the labor market, the schooling system, and gender roles, obstacles to fertility will remain, further dampening the desire of young people to form a family.

**Acknowledgments** An earlier draft of this chapter was presented at a seminar organized by NUPRI in Tokyo in November 2008. I am grateful to the participants of that seminar for their comments. I am also grateful for the comments of the anonymous reviewer and to Professor Ogawa for his careful reading of the current version.

---

<sup>17</sup>Some people may point out that although deciding to have a child is a private decision, children are also a public good in view of their consequences for a country's demographic future. That issue is beyond the scope of this chapter.

<sup>18</sup>Pronatalist policies and family-friendly policies may overlap. For example, a parental-leave scheme may have a pronatalist objective or may be part of a family-friendly policy. What is the chief difference is the stated intention. But there can be other differences, especially if the policies are applied according to the birth order or other criteria.



## Appendix

**Table 2.2** Total fertility rates arranged by decreasing order within each region: 23 countries, around 2006

Region <sup>a</sup>	Country	TFR, <sup>b</sup> 2006	Adj. TFR <sup>c</sup>	Region <sup>a</sup>	Country	TFR, <sup>b</sup> 2006	Adj. TFR <sup>c</sup>
English-speaking	US	2.10	2.24	Eastern	Albania	1.78	u
	New Zealand	2.01	u	Europe	Montenegro	1.62	1.97
	Ireland	1.90	2.14		Estonia	1.55	1.85
	UK	1.84	1.98		Macedonia	1.46	1.88
	Australia	1.82	u		Cyprus	1.44	1.79
	Canada <sup>d</sup>	1.59	u		Serbia	1.42	1.68
Nordic					Malta	1.39	1.58
	Iceland	2.08	2.22		Bulgaria	1.38	1.70
	Norway	1.90	2.01		Croatia	1.38	1.61
	Sweden	1.85	1.96		Latvia	1.35	1.59
	Denmark	1.85	2.00		Hungary	1.34	1.75
	Finland	1.84	1.91		Armenia	1.34	1.62
Western					Czech Republic	1.33	1.76
	France	1.98	2.07		Ukraine	1.33	1.43
	Belgium	1.74	1.86		Romania	1.32	1.75
	Netherlands	1.72	1.82		Lithuania	1.31	1.68
	Luxembourg	1.64	1.82		Slovenia	1.31	1.55
	Switzerland	1.44	1.65		Belarus	1.29	1.47
Europe	Liechtenstein	1.43	u		Russian Federation	1.29	1.52
	Austria	1.40	1.64		Poland	1.27	1.58
	Germany	1.33	1.59		Slovakia	1.24	1.66
					Andorra	1.24	u
	Greece	1.40	1.52		Moldova	1.22	1.36
	Spain	1.38	1.39		Bosnia-Herzegovina	1.19	u
Southern	Portugal	1.36	1.65				
	Italy	1.35	1.48				

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007); Statistics Canada (2008); Statistics New Zealand (n.d.); Vienna Institute of Demography (2008)

u—data unavailable

<sup>a</sup>The geographic classification used here partly reflects the conventional typology of countries by welfare regime. The “Eastern European” region, however, is a very broad one and encompasses not only countries traditionally classified (e.g., by the United Nations) as Eastern European but also countries usually classified as Central European or Asian. Excluded from the analysis are Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey

<sup>b</sup>Total period fertility rate (average number of births per woman)

<sup>c</sup>Tempo-adjusted total fertility rate. The data come from the Vienna Institute of Demography (2008). The method used to adjust the total fertility rates is the one suggested by Bongaarts and Feeney (1998)

<sup>d</sup>Canada is here classified among the English-speaking countries despite a nonnegligible French-speaking minority concentrated mainly in the province of Quebec, which displays a significantly different pattern of family formation. Within-country differences are beyond the scope of this analysis

## References

- Atoh, M. (2008). Family changes in the context of lowest-low fertility: The case of Japan. *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 17(1), 14–29.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2007). *Births 2007*. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3301.02007>. Accessed 22 Mar 2010.
- Becker, G. S. (1991). *A treatise on the family: Enlarged edition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Becker, G. S., & Lewis, H. G. (1973). On the interaction between the quantity and quality of children. *Journal of Political Economy*, 81(S2), S279–S288.
- Billari, F. C., Kohler, H.-P., Andersson, G., & Lundstrom, H. (2007). Approaching the limit: Long-term trends in late and very late fertility. *Population and Development Review*, 33(1), 149–170.
- Bongaarts, J., & Feeney, G. (1998). On the quantum and tempo of fertility. *Population and Development Review*, 24(2), 271–291.
- Bradshaw, J., & Finch, N. (2006). Can policy influence fertility? In H. Emanuel (Ed.), *Ageing and the labour market: Issues and solutions* (pp. 151–167). Antwerp: Intersentia.
- Breusch, T., & Gray, E. (2004). New estimates of mothers' foregone earnings using HILDA data. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 7(2), 125–150 (Special issue).
- Chamie, J. (2004, April 2). *Low fertility: Can governments make a difference?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, Boston, MA, USA.
- Del Boca, D. (2003). *Why are fertility and participation rates so low in Italy (and Southern Europe)?* The Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America, Columbia University. [http://www.italianacademy.columbia.edu/publications/working\\_papers/2003\\_2004/paper\\_fa03\\_DelBoca.pdf](http://www.italianacademy.columbia.edu/publications/working_papers/2003_2004/paper_fa03_DelBoca.pdf). Accessed 16 Apr 2009.
- Diprete, T. A., Morgan, S. P., Engelhardt, H., & Pacalova, H. (2003). Do cross-national differences in the costs of children generate cross-national differences in fertility rates? *Population Research and Policy Review*, 22(5–6), 439–477.
- Family Planning Perspectives. (1987). Japan's fertility trends linked to late marriage, unique social factors, heavy reliance on abortion. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 19(4), 166–167.
- Fisher, K., Egerton, M., Gershuny, J. I., & Robinson, J. P. (2007). Gender convergence in the American heritage time use study (AHTUS). *Social Indicators Research*, 82(1), 1–33.
- Gauthier, A. H. (2007). The impact of family policies on fertility in industrialized countries: A review of the literature. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 26(3), 323–346.
- Gauthier, A. H., & Philipov, D. (2008). Can policies enhance fertility in Europe? *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research*, 2008, 1–16.
- Gershuny, J., & Robinson, J. P. (1988). Historical changes in the household division of labor. *Demography*, 25, 537–551.
- Goldstein, J., Lutz, W., & Testa, M. R. (2003). The emergence of sub-replacement family size ideals in Europe. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 22(5–6), 479–496.
- Hara, T. (2008). Increasing childlessness in Germany and Japan: Toward a childless society? *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 17(1), 42–62.
- HETUS [Harmonized European Time-Use Surveys]. (n.d.). <https://www.h2.scb.se/tus/tus/>. Accessed 22 Mar 2010.
- Heymann, J. (2006). *Forgotten families: Ending the growing crisis confronting children and working parents in the global economy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hochschild, A., & Machung, A. (1989). *The second shift*. New York: Viking Penguin.
- Japan, Statistics Bureau. (2006). *2006 Survey on time use and leisure activities—Statistical tables*. <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/shakai/2006/h18kekka.htm#1>. Accessed 22 Mar 2010.
- Johansson, S. R. (1987). Centuries of childhood/centuries of parenting: Philippe Ariès and the modernization of privileged infancy. *Journal of Family History*, 12(1), 343–365.
- Jones, G. W. (2007). Delayed marriage and very low fertility in Pacific Asia. *Population and Development Review*, 33(3), 453–478.

- Lutz, W., Skirbekk, V., & Testa, M. R. (2006). The low fertility trap hypothesis: Forces that may lead to further postponement and fewer births in Europe. *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research*, 2006, 167–192.
- McDonald, P. (2000). Gender equity, social institutions and the future of fertility. *Journal of Population Research*, 17(1), 1–16.
- McDonald, P. (2008). Very low fertility: Consequences, causes and policy approaches. *The Japanese Journal of Population*, 6(1), 19–23.
- OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development]. (1997). *Employment outlook 1997*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development]. (2008). *Education at a glance 2008: OECD indicators*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development]. (n.d. a). *Online tax-benefit calculator*. [http://www.oecd.org/document/30/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_34637\\_39717906\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/30/0,3343,en_2649_34637_39717906_1_1_1,00.html). Accessed 14 Jan 2010.
- OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development]. (n.d. b). *Family policy database*. <http://www.oecd.org/els/social/family/database>. Accessed 22 Mar 2010.
- Ogawa, N., Mason, A., Chawla, A., Matsukura, R., & Tung, A.-C. (2009). Declining fertility and the rising cost of children: What can NTA say about low fertility in Japan and other Asian countries? *Asian Population Studies*, 5(3), 289–307.
- Population Reference Bureau. (2008). *The 2008 world population data sheet*. <http://www.prb.org/publications/datasheets/2008/2008wpds.aspx>. Accessed 14 Jan 2010.
- Retherford, R. D., & Ogawa, N. (2006). Japan's baby bust: Causes, implications and policy responses. In F. Harris (Ed.), *The baby bust: Who will do the work? Who will pay the taxes?* Portland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Rosenfeld, A., & Wise, N. (2000). *The over-scheduled child: Avoiding the hyper-parenting trap*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Rostgaard, T. (2004). *Family support policy in Central and Eastern Europe: A decade and a half of transition* (Early childhood and family policy series, No 8 – 2004), UNESCO education sector. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001337/133733e.pdf>. Accessed 16 Apr 2009.
- Saxonberg, S., & Szelewa, D. (2007). The continuing legacy of the Communist legacy? The development of family policies in Poland and the Czech Republic. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 14(3), 351–379.
- Schoen, R., Kim, Y. J., Nathanson, C. A., Fields, J., & Astone, N. M. (1997). Why do Americans want children? *Population and Development Review*, 23(2), 333–358.
- Sigle-Rushton, W., & Waldfogel, J. (2007a). The incomes of families with children: A cross-national comparison. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 17(4), 299–318.
- Sigle-Rushton, W., & Waldfogel, J. (2007b). Motherhood and women's earnings in Anglo-American, Continental European, and Nordic countries. *Feminist Economics*, 13(2), 55–91.
- Singapore Government. (2008). *2008 marriage & parenthood package*. <http://fcd.ecitizen.gov.sg/MarriageNParenthoodPackage>. Accessed 16 Apr 2009.
- Statistics Canada. (2008, September 26). *The Daily*. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/080926/dq080926a-eng.htm>. Accessed 22 Mar 2010.
- Statistics New Zealand. (n.d.). *Birth tables*. [http://www.stats.govt.nz/methods\\_and\\_services/access-data/tables/births.aspx](http://www.stats.govt.nz/methods_and_services/access-data/tables/births.aspx). Accessed 22 Mar 2010.
- Stewart, K., & Huerta, C. (2006). *Reinvesting in children? Policies for the very young in South Eastern Europe and the CIS* (Innocenti Working Paper, 2006–01), UNICEF, Innocenti Research Centre. <http://www.unicef-irc.org/cgi-bin/unicef/Lunga.sql?ProductID=422>. Accessed 16 Apr 2009.
- Suzuki, T. (2005). Why is fertility in Korea lower than in Japan? *Journal of Population Problems*, 61(2), 23–39.
- Suzuki, T. (2008). Korea's strong familism and lowest-low fertility. *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 17(1), 30–41.

- Testa, M. R. (2006). *Childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe* (Special Eurobarometer 253/Wave 65.1). European Commission. [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_253\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_253_en.pdf). Accessed 16 Apr 2009.
- Tsuya, N. O., & Bumpass, L. L. (Eds.). (2004). *Marriage, work, and family life in comparative perspective: Japan, South Korea, and the United States*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Vienna Institute of Demography. (2008). *European demographic data sheet 2008*. <http://www.oeaw.ac.at/vid/datasheet/>. Accessed 22 Mar 2010.
- World Economic Forum. (2006). *The global gender gap report 2006*. <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2006.pdf>. Accessed 22 Mar 2010.



<http://www.springer.com/978-94-017-9225-7>

Low Fertility and Reproductive Health in East Asia

Ogawa, N.; Shah, I.H. (Eds.)

2015, X, 220 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-94-017-9225-7