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Twentieth Century Economics of Child-Rearing in Japan

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In order to explain the falling Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in Japan, it is necessary to look at the social factors affecting women and raising children in Japan. By examining historical factors surrounding women in Japan—their education, their presence in the workforce, and the cultural stigmas attached to their stereotypical representation—I will attempt to describe the deteriorating TFR in Japan as an economic problem with political and social repercussions. In conclusion I will also try to provide a prognosis and a recommendation for a solution.

An interesting factor surrounding the stereotyping of women post-World War II is the obvious creation of a creature which did not previously exist.

The idea of the nuclear family, with the breadwinner father out at work and the housekeeper and childminder mother at home, is neither as old nor as obvious as it seems. In predominantly agricultural societies, both father and mother worked on the land...With the industrial revolution, formal work largely moved away from home, but both parents commonly had jobs to make ends meet...It takes a fairly sophisticated society with a comfortable middle class...to devise the “traditional” family model that enjoyed such a vogue in developed countries in the late 1940s to early 1960s.¹

Prior to WWII, women were an integral part of the family’s workforce. Parents could not afford to have only one breadwinner in the family. Mothers worked in the agricultural fields right alongside their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons, as illustrated by the following quote by Kunio Wakai who experienced it first hand as the youngest child in a farming house in the Tohoku region:

> I remember well that she regularly told me stories at bedtime. Though she had to work till late at night, as soon as she was done, without even taking a break, she would come to

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http://www.economist.com/printerfriendly.cfm?story_id=143791
my side...Then, I could get full attention of my mother, who had been too busy to play
with me during the day.  

Mothers were required to work and take care of the kids “without even taking a break.”
Both of these activities had equal weight and equal importance and both needed to be
done. Then, in the aftermath of the war, women were classified as the “good wife, wise
mother” and their place in society devolved from that middle-class outgrowth. In
industrializing the country, women became stay at home mothers whose sole purpose was
to raise children. Their ability to produce many children can be likened to an assembly
line system raising “cannon fodder for the manufacturing sector.”—or as it was put in
the wartime injunctions, “umeyo fuyaseyo” or “give birth and multiply.” Of course, this
quickly fell apart once the country had industrialized and women were once again needed
as co-equal money-makers as costs of living continued to rise. The baby boom rise in
TFR immediately following WWII and then the subsequent drop can be seen in the
following graph.

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Japanese Frames of Mind: Cultural Perspectives on Human Development. Hidetada Shimisu and Robert
Japan II: A Young Family. 1990, pp. 18-24.
http://www.economist.com/printerfriendly.cfm?Story_id=2817
5 Rice, 260.
6 Rice, 262.
7 The Hinoeuma marker on the graph stands for a year whose Chinese astrological sign is the Fire Horse.
Women born in this year are considered “dangerous, headstrong, and seen as deadly to men.” The previous
Fire Horse year in 1906 produced women who were subjected to “poverty and starvation because they
could not marry.” Due to the superstitions surrounding females born in this year, many Japanese families
elected not to give birth rather than let their daughters face such persecution. (Cortese, Janis. “On what it
Following 1950, the TFR in Japan has steadily declined. It was relatively stable for the period between 1955 and 1975, but since then it has followed an ever increasing rate of decline.

The TFR in 2003 was 1.29, having fallen even further from the 1.39 of 1997. A 2.08 TFR is required in order to maintain the population.

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levels\(^9\), thus Japan can be seen to be far below that and therefore the ratio of the aged population to the children is also growing. The chart above further reinforces the discrepancies in Japan between 1960 and 1996. It also offers comparisons with other countries in the world. Japan can be seen as having a better TFR than Germany, Italy, and Spain in 1996, though it is far below the US, Sweden, France, and Britain. None of these countries—besides the United States—have the 2.08 necessary to maintain the falling levels of population by replenishing the dying population with live births. The problems inherent in a low TFR rate are as follows:

1. smaller supply of labor force population
2. smaller supply of labor force in terms of real working hours due to aging of labor force population
3. increased burden on labor force to support aging population
4. decreased opportunities for children to develop socially.\(^10\)

Even faced with these problems, it is obvious from forecasts that the TFR in Japan is going to continue to fall, and with it the population. This can likely be extrapolated to a global problem, and not just a Japanese one as based on the above comparisons between eight other countries.


\(^10\) Ibid.
As you can see from this graph, a steady decline in population is predicted for Japan. The graph gives the lowest, medium, and highest estimates for the population up to the year 2100. Even the highest estimate of 90.09 million is quite a drop from the 125.57 million in 1995. In addition to the information provided by this graph, one must take into account the fact that this is the total population of Japan, which is not the same thing as the total work force. The work force population in 2005 is 67 million.\(^\text{11}\) It is estimated to shrink to 63 million in 2025\(^\text{12}\) and to 57 million in 2050\(^\text{13}\). If the highest

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\(^{11}\) Ibid.  
\(^{12}\) Ibid.
estimate of the total population in 2050 is 110.96 million and the work force (ages 15-65) is 57 million than the supporting ration will be 51% of the population. The projection for the aged population (over 65) is 37.3% of the total population in 2050, making the under 14 population to be estimated at 11.7%. The aged population in Japan is rapidly becoming the highest percentage of the population. In 1970 it was a mere 7.12%, and it doubled to 19% by 2003. In Japan it took a mere 30 years to double the over-65 population—a feat which took 100 years in some developed European countries.\textsuperscript{14}

There are some positives to a declining population, such as: decreased environmental impact, less restricted living conditions due to the improvement in population density of urban areas, increased per capita capital, and education benefits such as less competition for instructor attention and in school entrance examinations.\textsuperscript{15} However, none of these will help with the failing labor force and lack of ability to maintain the current economic levels.

Now that I have described the problems facing Japan due to the falling TFR rates, I will go on to explain the reasons behind it. For women in Japan there are several reasons why they are longer bearing as many children or giving birth to none at all. The top two reasons are prohibitive costs and physiological restrictions. In the following chart you can see these two reasons, along with many others, and the percentage of women who fall under each one.

\textsuperscript{14} EIU, 2005. Note: France = 114 years, Sweden = 82 years, England = 46 years, and Germany = 42 years. (Japan’s MOFA, 1997.)
\textsuperscript{15} Japan’s MOFA, 1997.
Some additional reasons are the increased education of women, their desire for employment, the necessity of their employment, the escalating life expectancy rates, and later marriage trends.

Increased education is a significant reason behind women’s failure to have more children. As they spend more time in school it leads to their getting married later as well as gifting them with a personal drive to better themselves with their education in the work force. Thus, women who are better educated seem, invariably, to have fewer children. This is true in most industrialized countries.\(^\text{16}\) The following graph shows the education levels of women and men in Japan up to 2001.

As one can see, the number of girls in upper secondary schools has increased from 1975 to 2001 by 4%. More importantly, the number of females who attend universities rather than junior colleges has been up the upswing since 1995. You can see this where the solid blue and green lines cross. In 1975, for example, one in eight Japanese women went to a four-year university, but in 1996, it was one in four, and nowadays it’s even higher. Thus, more women are choosing to become better educated by attending full universities rather than junior colleges. This shows an increasing drive towards better education. Finally, the percentage in graduate schools has also increased from 1975 to 2001 from 1.7% to 6.3%, still a very small number, but continually growing. The growing number of skills that women are learning by being educated for longer and in better schools contributes to their incentive to remain employed.

Employment by necessity and desire is an increasing phenomenon in Japan. Women are no longer confined to the home and they are discovering just how much they

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http://www.economist.com/printerfriendly.cfm?story_id=145042
like being breadwinners along with their husbands. One woman cites that it gives her peace of mind to be earning her own paycheck.\textsuperscript{18} Another states the following:

I thought I’d be taking care of my children, but I’m glad I’m working. It gives me a sense of making a contribution, and it helps me to not think about the recession...[Before] on the surface it looked very happy, but it wasn’t very fulfilling. Now, to be sure, I don’t have much time, and it’s exhausting, but I think my mind is more stimulated. I meet more people here. I have challenges now, and I get into trouble, but somehow it’s not negative. You just pull through.\textsuperscript{19}

More men than women are still in the workforce and in upper management positions\textsuperscript{20}, but the women have the part-time employment sector covered.

The chart entitled “Potential Difference” shows the ratio of employment of men and women in the age group 15-64 in 2002. As can be seen, Japan has a smaller percentage of women working than men, though they do have a higher percentage of women working over Spain, Ireland, Belgium, France, and Italy. Even though more men are still employed in Japan over women, the female labor participation rate is on the rise; as can be seen in the next chart (below), “Jobs for the Girls”. From 1970 to 2000, Japan’s female labor participation rate has risen from below 50% to almost 65%.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} In 1984 one in 40 women held managerial positions in big companies, and in 1997, they hold one in 25, (“Free at last?”, March 6, 1997).
Unfortunately, women in Japan are still heavily under-represented in positions of power, as can be seen in this third chart (below), “Disproportionately represented”. In this chart, Japan has no women represented in the upper levels of government and a very small percentage of women in the lower or single house. This chart is obviously out of date since Junichiro Koizumi, the current Prime Minister of Japan appointed a female (Makiko Tanaka) as foreign minister in 2001; though she was fired in 2002 for making critical remarks of the PM twenty-one, so women are still theoretically underrepresented.

Though there might be fewer women in the workforce than men, and less women in government, women are still, as I said, a large portion of the part-time workers section.

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In the chart to the right, women’s share of part-time employment in 1997 was 68%. By 2002 women’s share was up to 90% of the part-time work force.\(^{22}\) This is in part due to the fact that part-timers are looked down upon as “less committed and less valuable” than full-time workers.\(^{23}\) Men are unwilling to take up part-time work, however, for women, it grants them the opportunity to have more flexible working condition if they are married with children so that they can combine a home life and a work life.\(^{24}\) It also is, in general, all they are offered if they ever drop out of full-time employment in order to start a family:

when a Japanese women possessing a high level of education and several years of employment experience attempts to return to work after raising her children, only relatively unskilled part-time jobs paying the minimum wage are available to her. This situation is deeply rooted in traditional Japanese employment practices—the lifetime employment system...\(^{25}\)

It is difficult for a woman with children to regain her former position in the work force—which is one reason why women are not having children at all. Rather than lose their job and income, they choose to not give birth. It is important in Japan for women to have an independent income as insurance against divorce also—a trend in Japan which is

\(^{22}\) Goodman, Peter S., A.01
\(^{24}\) “For better, for worse.” July 16, 1998.
significantly on the increase.\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, in 2001, the divorce rate in Japan was 2.27 per thousandth couple, up from 1.37 just ten years ago in 1991.\textsuperscript{27} As the divorce rate continues to rise, it will “further swell the already overflowing ranks of single-parent households.”\textsuperscript{28} The following chart gives an indication of how single-parent families with children are rising in Japan.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chart.png}
\caption{Percentage of lone-parent families in Japan (1980s and 1990s).}
\end{figure}

The percentage of lone-parent families increased from approximately 9\% to 13\% between 1980 and 1990. As divorce becomes more common in Japan and laws regulating alimony payments remain un-enforced, Japanese women are finding it increasingly necessary to maintain their employment status. The alimony situation in 1990 was “bleak”: “The divorce settlement usually includes one lump-sum payment,

\textsuperscript{26} “For better, for worse.” July 16, 1998.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
varying from approximately $5,000 to $20,000...and minimal child support, which remains unpaid by 78 percent of divorced men."\textsuperscript{29}

The New Japan Women’s Association (Shinfujin) claims that the average income of single-mother families amounts to about “one-thirds of that of general households”—a level which puts most of these families under the poverty line.\textsuperscript{30} In addition to this, the government allowances, which in 1999 were expanded for children in income-eligible families from age three to six to promote a higher birth rate\textsuperscript{31}, were decreased in 2002 in order, officially, “to encourage greater self-sufficiency among single mothers”, but in reality were “a bid to reduce rising social security outlays caused by increasing divorce rates.”\textsuperscript{32} Thus, single-mothers, the product of divorce are otherwise, find it imperative to work due to the cost of child care which rests solely on their own shoulders. With alimony payments going un-enforced and the government reducing subsidies to child support, single women with children have no choice but to work. And women with no children are more and more tempted not to have children at all due to the financial risks.

Furthermore, even in families where marriage is maintained, the percentage of single-income families is on the decrease—which proves that women are needed in the job force whether they are single or not. From 1955 to 1970, single-income families increased as Japan became an industrialized nation with a preponderance of middle class families where women did not need to work. The statistic for this period, 1955-1970 is that single income families went from 30% of the population to 36%. However, from

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Condon, pp. 18-24.
\end{itemize}
1987 to 2000, with rising costs of living and the Asian Financial Crisis, Japan’s single income families decreased from 37% to 27%.\textsuperscript{33}

In addition to married women becoming bread-winners alongside their husbands, the number of women who marry late or never marry at all is also increasing.

**CHANGES IN THE RATIO OF NEVER MARRIED BY**

There is a saying in Japan that, “Women are like a Christmas cake—no good after the 25\textsuperscript{th},” that implies women who are not married by the age of 25 are spinsters on the shelf for life who are not good enough to marry.\textsuperscript{34} This is a saying which is being roundly

\textsuperscript{33} Curtin, February 6, 2003.
\textsuperscript{34} Condon, 18-24.
abused by women who are becoming strong-willed enough to determine when it is best for them to marry. In the above chart, the women who are not married by the ages of 20-24 is 86.4% in 1995. Between the ages of 26-29, the percentage of women not married is still 48%. Almost 50% of women do not get married till after they’re 29. Whereas in 1920 only 9.2% of women hadn’t married by the time they turned 30. This is a significant difference in women’s marriage patterns. As they wait longer to wed, they are also waiting longer to have children. If a woman is 30 years old, established in her job, and gets married, the likelihood that she will then quit her job in order to have a child is much smaller than if she’d started earlier in life. In the chart from before on reasons why women don’t have their ideal number of children, one of the top reasons was because they were physiologically unable to. This could include infertility, but it also includes advanced age. Writes Jane Condon, “Japanese women have the longest life expectancy of any people in the world.”

Women’s life expectancy rates in Japan have risen astronomically since after World War II when “the average woman had five children and unending chores—cooking, cleaning, sewing, farming, hauling water, and chopping wood.” They’ve gone from a life expectancy of around 50 to 81. Due to the expanse of extra time they have gained, women, as I’ve said, can spend more time on themselves. This can include education as well as employment.

Even as women are creating a better life for themselves by becoming better educated, gaining high-paying, skilled jobs, and marrying later to their own desires, they continue to fight against sexist discrimination in Japan. One of the most important

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
reasons women are having less children is because it is impossible for them to keep their job and start a family due to the unfriendly practices in effect in the workplace.

On paper, Japan seems to have a very family-friendly policy for parents, however the discrimination against women (and men) who take advantage of these policies is very high. Men, who generally make more money than women, can’t take the time off because the reduction in pay would create financial difficulties for the family. In addition, men who take time off are even more discriminated against than women as it is seen as un-masculine to be the primary care-giver. If the woman takes the time off for maternity leave, it is generally not guaranteed that her job will be waiting for her when she returns. Whereas, in Nordic countries, as a contrasting example, “widely available and good-quality child-care, together with generous maternity and paternal-leave arrangements, has kept birth rates near replacement level even though most women go out to work.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How family-friendly?</th>
<th>Maternity and parental-leave entitlements</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maternity leave</td>
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<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>14-18 weeks</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>16-26 weeks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>14 weeks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>22 weeks</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
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<td>Netherlands</td>
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<td>Spain</td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
<td>14 weeks</td>
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<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>12 weeks†</td>
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</tbody>
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Sources: ILO; Demos; The Economist

*Previous job preserved; pay varies by country, mostly minimal. †Available to either parent

Japan, as a country and as a society, has to work forcefully on developing their culture to encourage and make acceptable policies which support working mothers and fathers who can take leave without discrimination. Some state departments, such as the Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI), are already trying to create such

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reforms. The chairman of Japan’s CCI, Nobuo Yamaguchi, stated in a press conference that, “Women who want to return to work should be allowed to do so,” and “Companies have to make it easier for working women to have children...To do that, they will have to take on a bigger share of the costs.” Of course, so far, as Yamaguchi admits, this type of reform is not being successfully implemented.

In addition to the non-family-friendly policies, women also have to put up with misogynistic stereotypes against their leaving the home for work at all. In a survey done in 1992, 1997, and 2002, with 3560 participants of both genders, the following statistics were found to the question of “Husbands should work outside the home and wives should take care of their families”:

- 1992: 34% disagreed, 60% agreed
- 1997: 37.8% disagreed, 57.8% agreed
- 2002: 47% disagreed, 47% agreed

This information shows the changing ratios from 1992 to 2002 and how women’s place in the home as required has been gradually shifting to agree that women should be accepted outside of the home in the work-force. The balance in 2002 having progressed from a much lower percentage indicates that the societal opinion of women’s ability to work outside the home will continue to rise. Though, on the other hand, the percentage of people who answered negatively to the question of whether women should quit their jobs when they become pregnant was only 37.6% in 2002, a slight increase from the 33.1% of 1997.

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41 Ibid.
The following chart makes apparent the disparity between women who work and women who don’t and the percentage of household chores that they still do in comparison with their husbands. As you can see, the pink section for men is under one half hour whether their wives work or not. The data states that this half hour includes such “onerous activities as fetching the newspaper.” In addition, fathers spend very little time with their children. Some statistics from 2002 are that, on a workday, 75% spend equal to or less than 60 minutes with their children, 25% 30 minutes or less, and 11.5% spend no time with the children at all. Women who work continue to do the major percentage of household chores and child-rearing—a statistic which demonstrates the inequality in Japanese society between men and women.

The final point I will describe as a factor in Japan’s declining TFR is based on the ineffective reforms they have instigated to reverse the decisions of women not to have children. These reform programs are thus predominantly aimed at making it more appealing to women to have children by assisting them with employment, day-care

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43 Rice, 89.
facilities, and increasing the paternal responsibility ratio. The names of the programs are: the Angel Plan of 1994, the New Angel Plan of 1999, and the Plus One Proposal of 2003.

The Angel Plan, also titled “The Basic Direction for Future Child-Reading Support Measures” was put into action in December of 1994. It was a five year plan whose purpose was to help mothers reconcile jobs and child-rearing by expanding the nursery care centers services within Japan. This failed as not enough child care centers were built, they did not offer enough hours or holiday care, and they did not include enough services for infants. Thus women were still unwilling to have more children because the costs for themselves had not changed significantly.44

The New Angel Plan in 1999, aimed to rectify some of the concerns which were not addressed by the original Angel Plan. The NAP was also a five year plan and included the following measures:

1. Expand child care centers
2. Have more hours and be open on holidays
3. Have temporary care for babies and infants
4. Build family support centers
5. Create after school clubs
6. Provide subsidies to companies that build their own day-care facilities
7. Instituted a pilot program to assist women who quit their jobs in order to give birth to be re-employed after their children were born.45

This plan also failed. Even though child care centers were increased along with their hours, more women did not start having children. This can in part be explained by the fact that all of these measures targeted women and the children themselves, it did not target the companies with their unfriendly family policies or the social stigmas attached

45 Boling, 7-8.
to leaving the workforce to have children.\textsuperscript{46} The final plan, the Plus One Proposal, was an attempt to solve at least one of those problems.

The Plus One Proposal, a five year plan begun in 2003, has the full title of the “Plus One Proposal to End the Low Birthrate.” It had three main measures as its goal:

1. Improve worker’s lifestyles
2. Shorten hours of employment
3. Promotion of men taking advantage of child-care leave\textsuperscript{47}

It is the third measure which is the most important. Even though men are legally allowed under the law to partake of paternal child-care leave policies, few do. This can be explained by social stigmas as I have said above. In 2001, only 0.3\% of eligible men took advantage of the paternal leave, which was actually a decrease from the 0.42\% of 1999.\textsuperscript{48} The goal of the Plus One Proposal and its subsequent Child Care Leave Law was to increase this number to 10\%.\textsuperscript{49} This is a goal which seems almost insurmountable and has so far not shown much progress.

As for my future prognosis of Japan—I would argue that Japan cannot control the failing TFR rate under their current modus operandi. Unless radical change is implemented in Japan, women will continue to not have children due to the difficulties that face them as mothers. Change in policies that favor women in the workforce, single parent families, and child care measures are all needed to stop the declining birth rate. The necessity of women in the workforce is a fact which must be recognized and included in any measures for reform. The halcyon days of Japan’s prosperity are past and

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} Curtain, November 18, 2002.
a single-income family is a thing of the past for most families in Japan. Women are a necessary part of the workforce both for individual financial reasons as well as the fact that the aged population is growing and thus the total labor force is shrinking. Women are needed to pick up the slack in the total labor population in order to keep the economy running.

Unfortunately reforms are impossible (as shown by the failure of the three plans outlines above) unless equality issues are resolved. As it currently stands, equality discrepancies are a detrimental force to reforms being enacted. For example, the term for infertility in Japan is *funin*, from which *fu* stands for “not able” and *nin* stands for “women’s work”.\(^{50}\) Infertility is thus described as the inability to do women’s work. Fertility is a woman’s only job and if she is not able to bear children than she is not able to do her job. The ironic thing is that infertility in Japan is primarily a male problem as late marriages, stressful careers, and low sperm counts account for the main causes of infertility in Japan’s men.\(^{51}\) It is saying something that 1 in 10 couples in Japan were determined infertile in 2002.\(^{52}\) Even though men should be blamed for the infertility rate in Japan, *funin* continues to claim otherwise. Yoshiro Mori, the former Prime Minister of Japan also blames women for the situation. In a panel discussion debating the declining birth rate in Japan and how it should be addressed by the government, Mori claimed that “Welfare is supposed to take care of and reward those women who have lots of children. It is truly strange to say we have to use the tax money to take care of women who don’t even give birth once, who grow old living their lives and singing the praises of


\(^{51}\) Ibid.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
freedom.” The obvious disparity against women who choose not to give birth and choose instead to remain part of the work force in this statement is stunning. It is attitudes like this that must be reversed in order to create equality. In order for the TFR to change, social discrimination against women needs to change. Women are needed in the workforce for personal and public economic reasons and their efforts there must be rewarded with equal rights in order for them to feel secure in their position. Until women feel secure in taking time off to give birth, or until men also feel secure enough in their masculinity to do the same, the TFR will continue to fall.

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List of Works Cited


