

EDITORIAL

POPULATION, GENDER AND REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE: THE MOTHERHOOD QUESTIONS

The spectre of declining fertility and ageing populations stalks many developed countries in the early twenty-first century, raising issues which have not attracted such attention for several decades. Most discussion focuses on the declining size of projected populations, levels of immigration required to make up for deficits of newborn nationals, and ratios of persons of working age to those aged and potentially needing care (see for instance Teitelbaum and Winter 1998).

Rarely do these discussions focus on women, although as late nineteenth-century commentators recognized all too well, women were, and are, deferring marriage and childbearing, pursuing their own (self) interests. While early twentieth-century commentators in industrializing countries blamed 'selfish' women for curtailing births, today's sociologists declare women to be pursuing the same path of liberal self-actualization that men have long been urged to follow (see, for instance, Beck 1992). Liberal individualism is not noted for its attention to dependants and those wishing to make their way in the world are best to do so unencumbered.

Even rarer in population discourse is any discussion of women's sexuality and its changing expression, or of the shifting power relations between men and women, a major aspect of twentieth-century social history. Yet the empowerment of women, their career choices, their sexual needs and desires and their ability to control their fertility are key elements in the story of declining fertility.

In February this year a group of researchers came together in a two-day workshop to deliberate on the topic 'Population, gender and reproductive choice: the motherhood questions', placing the focus squarely on women and on changing gender relations.¹ They were an interdisciplinary group — sociologists, historians, demographers, policymakers and economists — and together they canvassed some of the key questions surrounding current debates on fertility 'decline'. Several of those papers are presented here, while others of a more policy-oriented nature will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Just Policy*; see also Bryson and Mackinnon (2000). Together the papers raise issues which place women's needs at the centre of debate, and question the power relations between men and women in negotiating both work and relationships. The

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papers focus on Australian, English and European data, and raise issues that are central to wider international debate. Population size and movements of people are already emerging as key issues for the twenty-first century.

Alison Mackinnon brings an historical perspective to the question of population policies. Why have governments in developed countries recently avoided explicit population policies when there was no reluctance on this count in the past? Mackinnon traces several key moments throughout the twentieth century when Australian government inquiries into reproduction and reproductive health revealed that women wanted policies which enabled them to gain control over their childbearing; and also to enjoy a reasonable standard of living for their families. She argues that governments found it convenient to deal with declining population by improving obstetrical health in the first part of the century and by encouraging immigration in the latter part. Meeting women's needs for reproductive and economic independence was much harder to do in policy terms and arguably remains a problem.

The historical perspective is continued by Hera Cook, in a comparison of contraceptive and abortion practices in England and Australia over the century. She argues that analysis of such practices reveals differing patterns of gender relations, of heterosexual activity and differing levels of power and ability to negotiate sexual life between Australian and British women. Did Australian women have more control over their sexual activity than British women? Can conclusions be reached through an analysis of their differing take-up of types of birth control used or access to abortion? Cook's article reveals the difficulties of going beyond speculation in entering the subjectivities of women and men in the past. To what extent can we measure relative power of either men or women through their sexual behaviour, faintly glimpsed through a maze of survey and archival material? Cook reminds us that the advent of the contraceptive pill decisively enabled large numbers of women to separate their sexual lives from their reproductive lives, a turning point in sexual and marital behaviour and one which 'has been the central force in the reshaping of societal sexual mores'.

Looked at from a long-term perspective women have gained much over a century in terms of reproductive and sexual autonomy, and of policies which acknowledge their multiple roles. When the lens shifts to a shorter perspective, however, much remains problematic. Not all women, even in relatively affluent countries, have access to contraception and to control over their sexual and reproductive lives. Ann Evans in a contemporary analysis casts doubt on any over-optimistic account of young women's ability to negotiate sexual relationships. Drawing on two surveys, one Australia-wide, the other of New South Wales, she demonstrates the pitfalls involved for many young women in making the decision to engage in sex and to use contraception. There is a substantial group, she argues, whose path to sexual activity is marked by unwanted sex, and an inability to negotiate the use of contraception and the timing of pregnancy. Similar reservations about the degree to which sexual and reproductive health have been achieved are expressed by Penny Kane. In a focus on issues of reproductive health as defined by the Cairo conference of 1994 she points out that although much has been achieved, there is still a long way to go. The right to reproductive health can be acknowledged as a major breakthrough but the right to a safe and satisfying sex life is far from won even in the affluent West. It may scarcely register on the agendas of

those forging a subsistence living.

For many women in the developed world control over reproduction leads to a deferral of childbearing until the right conditions prevail. For increasing numbers those conditions include paid work or career, a partner who will share the tasks of homemaking and childrearing, and access to a workplace which accommodates interruptions or flexible hours at some stage. How available are these conditions and what circumstances shape their provision? Graeme Hugo examines the anxieties in Europe over declining fertility and consequent policy responses, responses which may result in providing the appropriate environment for combining work and child care. He discusses both direct and indirect pronatalist policies in several European countries, claiming that direct policies such as cash incentives are rarely successful in the long term. The best hope for maintaining births is through indirect pronatalist policies which alter the environment in which children are reared, ensuring a combination of work and family where desired. Thus 'family-friendly policies' are more likely to encourage fertility (see also McDonald 2000).

Hugo argues, however, as do the editors of this issue, that gender equity in the workplace should prevail for its own sake, not for its pronatalist effect. And there perhaps is the rub. Successive governments in several developed countries have been reluctant to implement the policies women have demanded to accommodate their needs on the basis of social justice, or equity. Will governments be prepared to do so as a matter of expediency — to halt declining birth rates? In the early twentieth century some well-educated feminists referred to the refusal to marry as 'the silent strike', a strike which would continue until the conditions of marriage better met their needs. Perhaps we are seeing in our declining fertility rates another silent strike. It is increasingly apparent that the situation is scarcely likely to change without some intervention. It is also clear that direct pronatalist measures do not work except in cases of extreme coercion. Perhaps in this pattern we are seeing another power shift in gender relations: one which may not always be apparent in specific relationships but is writ large in our statistics.

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Guest Editors

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