

Frances McCall Rosenbluth, ed.**The Political Economy of Japan's Low Fertility.**

Stanford University Press, 2006, 240 pp.

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This edited collection offers much more than its title announces. Extremely rich, both conceptually and empirically, it provides readers with a detailed, sophisticated account of factors that explain Japan's record low fertility, with some chapters contributing rigorous and pertinent international comparisons. Taking a feminist stance, the editor and authors of this book suggest that having children in Japan means that women often lose their economic independence, along with the satisfaction and benefits of a career; hence, many women have no choice but to forego motherhood altogether. As its title indicates, the book examines this issue from a political economy perspective, (rather than an individual or micro perspective), and it includes a thorough account of social policies and the politics of low fertility in Japan.

The book's original contribution to the debate on Japan's low fertility is its focus on the country's inhospitable labour market, which forces women to choose between motherhood and career. The book convincingly shows that, while better maternity leaves and available, affordable childcare are essential, they are not sufficient to promote an acceptable level of work-family balance for Japanese women. The crux of the problem lies in Japan's firm-centered employment system that offers life-long employment in exchange for employees' investment in firm-specific skills and knowledge. In this type of labour market, employers cannot afford career interruptions (such as maternity leaves) or any diminution of their employees' total devotion to work. Thus, the imperative of raising young children is irreconcilable with firms' structure, ethics, and work culture. Not surprisingly, firms prefer to not hire women or to relegate them to subaltern positions, despite a legal framework that promotes gender equality in the workplace. The book also stresses how Japan's work culture ignores the imperatives of childrearing for men, who are expected to show complete loyalty to their employers, regardless of families or personal lives. The responsibilities of childrearing thus disproportionately fall upon women, who, in addition, must face intense social pressures to raise competitive, "smart" children in order to enhance their offspring's future value in the job market.

The nine chapters, written by remarkably accomplished scholars from Japan, the US and Europe, are organized into four sections. In the first, volume editor and author, Frances McCall Rosenbluth, opens the collection with the idea that fertility levels can be used as a measure of "female welfare". Based on previous research showing the positive relationship between "gender-friendly policies" and fertility levels, the author argues that low fertility is not only an outcome of women's choice, but an indication of the difficulty women have in juggling the demands of work and motherhood. In the second chapter, Japanese sociologist Sawako Shirahase provides a statistical analysis of women's work, income, and fertility in Japan. In the second part of the book, Margarita Estevez-Abe reviews theories of the welfare state to explore contexts that make motherhood and work more or less compatible. In the following chapter, Mary Brinton explores the clerical sector of the labour market. Using a US-Japan comparison, Brinton shows how American women's entry into clerical jobs served as an engine for changing social norms with respect to female employment; Japanese women, in contrast, have made only modest strides in entering clerical jobs. In an international comparison, Eiko Kenjoh argues that good quality part-time work has given Dutch women a unique opportunity to successfully combine work and motherhood. Part three includes three chapters that provide a thorough account of Japan's policies that are supposed to ease women's burden in combining work and family. Each author concludes that the obstacles faced by women in the labour market are not

overcome by these “family or gender-friendly” policies. Patricia Boling analyzes the history of maternity leave and childcare policies. Junichiro Wada focuses on childcare and criticizes the current system as still being inadequate for meeting working women’s needs, particularly in urban areas. Keiko Hirao offers a rich analysis of the pressure put on mothers to organize and oversee their children’s education. Examining the famous “cram schools” (schools for after-school hours) and the effect of children’s attendance in them on mothers’ lives and employment, the author shows how these schools do not substitute for after-school care but, in fact, represent another significant burden on mothers. Mothers must research schools, meet teachers regularly, and closely follow their children’s regular and “extra” studies. Consequently, the author’s data show that unemployed mothers are more likely than employed mothers are to educate their children in these schools. In part four, a concise conclusion by the editor summarizes the arguments of the book and discusses policy solutions in light of the analyses presented.

The relevance of this book goes beyond the specificities of the Japanese case. By including comparative analyses with North America and Europe, the volume literally provides a framework for a political economy of low fertility in all countries that are dealing with prolonged below-replacement fertility. In addition, theoretical insight into the interplay between work, family, and public policies will be relevant to scholars and policy makers interested in work-family balance, work and gender issues, public policies in the realm of families, and their outcomes. Demographers, sociologists, anthropologists, Asianists, and many others will find the material and ideas in this book very welcome for analyzing demographic trends from an institutional and policy perspective. Course instructors teaching public policies, sociology of the family, population studies, gender, and work will find useful insight, examples, and information in this superb volume.

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