

Having and Raising Children in English-Speaking Countries*

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* Funding for the interviews conducted in New Zealand and Australia was provided by a grant from the Imperial Gift Foundation Boshi-Aiikukai (Aiiiku Association of Maternal Health and Welfare).

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Beginning with a simple idea of the “best conditions” for having and raising children, this paper looks at women’s experiences and the environment for having and raising children in four English-speaking countries—New Zealand, Australia, Britain, and the United States. Interviews with women allow us to get at the ambivalence and complexities in how they think and feel about having children underneath the number of births or the aggregate fertility rate of a country. Our analysis shows that while differences in work and family environment probably lie behind the difference in birth rate in these countries, women’s attitudes towards children as well as society’s attitude towards children might be equally important in influencing individuals’ decisions to have children.

Description of research

Sample

This paper is based primarily on 87 parallel interviews conducted in New Zealand, Australia, and Britain in early 2002, supplemented, whenever appropriate, by 26 interviews conducted earlier in late 1999 in the United States.¹

Thirty-three women were interviewed in Hamilton, New Zealand. Hamilton is the fourth largest city in New Zealand and is fairly representative of New Zealand in terms of its population composition. Another thirty-four women were interviewed in the culturally diverse city of Melbourne, Australia, which is also the second largest metropolitan city in Australia. The twenty interviews in Britain were conducted in London, Surrey, and Essex. The interviewees in these three countries comprised married women and women in de facto relationships² who varied in employment status (employed full time, employed part time, not employed) and the number of children they had (no children, 1 child, 2 children, 3 or more). A total of 87 women were interviewed in these three countries. The sample is skewed towards a more highly educated, professional group, but there is diversity in economic circumstances and in ethnicity.³

¹ Interviews in New Zealand, Australia, and Britain were conducted respectively by Janet Sceats of Portal Consulting, Kim Johnstone of Women’s Health Victoria, and Helen Cairnes, Susan Harris, and Lynda Clarke of the Centre for Population Studies at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Interviews in the United States were conducted by Saori Kamano.

² One exception is a British respondent who is a single mother.

³ For details of sampling procedures and characteristics of interviewees in New Zealand, Australia, and Britain, see Appendix A.

Interviews in the United States were conducted in the two cities of West Lafayette and Lafayette of Indiana. The city of West Lafayette is centered around Purdue University and is neighbor to the bigger city of Lafayette in which quite a number of manufacturing plants are found. Lafayette is ranked the second best city to live in by the Money Magazine in 1998. The twenty-six women interviewed in the United States included 20 married women with children aged 6 and under, and 4 married women who do not have children. The American sample includes primarily part-time workers (11) and full-time workers (7); the rest are housewives, students, and self-employed.

Framework

Very simply put, if there is a good environment to have and raise children, we can expect higher birthrate on the average. A good environment to have and raise children could be comprise the following:

1. Women being given options: women being able to handle both family and work responsibilities should they choose to
2. Participation of significant others in childcare and housework
3. The presence of a good support system for child-rearing, including adequate childcare facilities, a strong support network, and so on.
4. Women's subjective evaluation of the environment: a supportive and positive larger environment for children to grow up in, a recognition of the circumstances as favorable, and/or a strong preference for children regardless of the objective circumstances

We will evaluate these components of the environment related to having and raising children in New Zealand, Australia, Britain and the United States, drawing on the interviews and our understanding of social policies and pertinent facilities in these countries.

1. Women being given options: women being able to handle both family and work responsibilities should they choose to

(a) Relevant Policies

With respect to women's options, we can consider maternity leave provisions and other structural support for reconciling full-time work and family obligations.

There is no explicit national, comprehensive policy with regard to children and family in any of these four English-speaking countries. Over the past century, measures directed at children or families with children were developed and constituted the implicit child and family policies of these countries. Similarities and differences among these countries are also found with respect to gender roles and women's roles. It has been noted, for example, that while Britain had a pioneering role as a welfare state, it has not been responding well to gender role and other family changes in the latter part of the 20th century. Despite the emphasis on mother's employment, after school child care in Britain remains a fragmented and under-developed program. Similarly, while the issue of the reconciliation of work and family life has been and still is an important issue in public discussion, it is not recognized as an important concern in public policy.

The emphasis is on employer responsiveness to a changing workforce, and provision of flexible benefits, and childcare related benefits and services, but none a matter of statutory provision. On the other hand, New Zealand has had a policy of family wage which assumes that mothers will stay home. The lack of paid maternity, paternity, and parental leaves also seem to suggest a lack of encouragement of women's employment (The Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth, and Family Policies at Columbia University, 2002).⁴

Even though in none of these four countries is there a national policy of paid maternity, paternity, or parental leave for employees, the exact provisions differ. For example, the United States does have an unpaid family leave policy that could cover pregnancy and maternity as well. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) enacted in 1993 requires businesses with 50 or more employees to provide 12 weeks a year of unpaid leave, with job protection, to qualified employees for birth, adoption, foster care, or personal or family illness (The Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth, and Family Policies at Columbia University, 2002).

Similarly, while New Zealand also does not provide paid maternity, paternity, parental, or family leave for parents, it does provide an unpaid parental leave if the parent has worked at least 10 hours a week for the same employer for one year before the expected date of birth or adoption. The provisions include a 14-week maternity leave, paternity leave up to 2 weeks for fathers at time of birth or adoption, and extended leave up to 52 weeks (including 14 weeks of maternity leave) for either or both parents to care for an infant or adopted child.

In Australia, since 1994, all employees with 12 months of continuous service have been entitled to 52 weeks of unpaid leave to care for a new born or adopted child. Parents may share this leave. However, Commonwealth employees are given 12 weeks of paid maternity leave and state-government employees 6-12 weeks (The Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth, and Family Policies at Columbia University, 2002).

In Britain, all pregnant employees are entitled to 18 weeks of job-protected, unpaid maternity level. Employees who have worked continuously for at least 1 year are entitled to up to 29 weeks after birth, during which they receive 90% of earnings for the first 6 weeks, then a low flat rate for the next 12 weeks paid by payroll taxes. Those who do not qualify are given Maternity Allowance at a lower benefit level. Parental leaves have also been established recently, allowing either parent who has been employed for at least one year to have up to 13 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave during the first 5 years of the child's life (The Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth, and Family Policies at Columbia University, 2002).

In sum, the provisions for maternity leave on the national level are generally extremely limited. While some companies would provide for paid leaves for

⁴ A recent change in the law provides for 12-week paid leave for women who have been employed for the previous 12 months. Self-employed women are excluded from this provision. And, further, the women interviewed in this study did not benefit from this change.

new parents, the general environment cannot be said to be supportive of the reconciliation of family and work for women or men. And, interestingly, the provisions were fuller in Britain, where the birth rate is the lowest among the four countries. The lack of sufficient maternity and parental provisions also does not seem to deter women from having children in USA, New Zealand and Australia. Perhaps other factors are more important in the decision to have children.

(b) Arrangements for Childbirth and Childcare

As a result of the lack of a supportive legal environment, women do make a range of arrangements for childbirth in all four countries. Most women interviewed were working full-time when they became pregnant with their first child (23 out of 27 in New Zealand, 26 out of 27 in Australia, and 19 out of 20 in Britain). In New Zealand, 13 women took a leave from their jobs (5 unpaid leave, 1 paid leave, 7 a combination of paid and unpaid leave) while 9 women quit their jobs and others make alternative arrangements. Within a year or so, 16 returned to work, but only 3 among them returned to full-time employment. The pattern is replicated somewhat in Australia where 4 women quit job, 14 took unpaid leave and 4 a combination of paid and unpaid leave, and the rest making alternative arrangements. Compared to New Zealand, more women in Australia returned to work (19 out of 27) and to full-time employment (9 among the 19). However, the pattern is still one of reduced employment and reduced full-time employment by the first child's first birthday. In Britain, 5 women quit jobs, 2 took unpaid leave, and 2 took paid and unpaid leave. The pattern repeated itself with the birth of the second child and the third child—each time with fewer women returning to full-time work or to work at all. Similarly, in the United States, only a minority of women interviewed kept their full-time jobs with the same employers through childbirth and the early months of childrearing.

The number of women taking paid leave alone was rather small, in comparison to those combining paid with unpaid leave and those who quit altogether. These figures show that women are not given the full range of options that support childbirth without compromising their work situation. Looking at it from another angle, one may also say that the larger number of women taking leaves first instead of quitting altogether from the beginning suggests that better maternity leave provisions will be utilized by these women.

(c) Part-time Employment: A viable alternative?

Most women noted the flexibility afforded by part-time employment once they have children. For example, one woman in the United States said about her part-time employment:

“I am pretty satisfied...I like this schedule. Working part-time is just about right. I have enough time to feel like, you know, I'm doing some adult thing where my brain isn't just Teletubbies and Pokemon all the time. But sometimes to feel I'm available and it's not in daycare everyday from 9 to 5. You know, we have days that we're home together; and I have some days when I come and do something. I feel kind of like if this is in control that's scary, but I

mean, where I can use my talents and abilities instead of just feeling like mom all the time. Not that that's not important, but I need some of that other side of things too." (US4).

This respondent seemed to be experiencing a pull from work—something attractive to pull her back to work—and perhaps a bit of a push from home duties as well. On the other hand, others experience a push from work to stay home, as this Australian respondent said:

"The work I was doing was pretty ordinary and I wasn't enjoying it and wasn't looking forward to it. Also the cost of childcare against the wages that you get means it's not worth it – if family had been nearby maybe it would have been different but the thought of using crèche just didn't sit well. It was also too difficult to leave her [the daughter]" [A16].

The flexibility of part-time work notwithstanding, many women also noted the shortcomings of working part-time, probably because the current sample is biased towards educated professionals. For example, a respondent in Britain noted that she was taken less seriously by the professional market when she returned to work on a part-time basis after her first child. She also felt that some jobs might lend themselves better to part-time arrangements than other jobs, noting that she herself found it increasingly difficult to catch up with the work in the days she was not in her office.

The division of work into "part-time" and "full time" might have indeed already limited these women's imagination about alternative arrangements that would allow them to juggle their various obligations. For example, consider what this woman in the United States said:

"I do like working. I do wish it were part-time. Because [...], I would feel like I had time for me to exercise; still be able to pick up the kids; and then you still have that time at work where you can chat with your friends and you feel like you're being productive and you feel like you know helping someone." (US 6).

She used the term "part-time," but one could also say "a less demanding job," or "changes in the current job." In other words, is the choice really between full-time or part-time or is the issue one of changing the definition of "work"? The division of work into "part-time" and "full time" work might be hiding a lot of differences within part-time work and full-time work respectively. For example, in the United States, a woman noted that while returning to work part-time slowed the progress in her career, it didn't stop it. Indeed, after working part-time for a number of years, she was promoted to director. Similarly, other women interviewed in the United States have opted out of the labor market during the early years of childrearing and instead went back to school to build up their credentials.

In most situations, however, part-time work was not fulfilling, and it was little

wonder that when feminists made demand for the right of work, many working class women were cold to the idea, having worked all their lives in jobs they would be happy to get out of. As such, instead of creating more part-time jobs for women to manage their family and work obligations, it might be more important and effective to design policies informed by a deeper sense of flexibility beyond the workplace—e.g. in the larger social structure—and a reconceptualization of full-time work as something that individuals—both men and women—could find fulfillment without crowding out their other obligations and interests (hooks, 1984).

(d) Job security and family friendliness of workplace

Other work-related supports that allow women to combine work and family obligations, should they want to, include the degree of job security and family-friendliness of the workplace. Women in all three countries are mixed in their responses about job security, with some thinking that there is job security in the current labor market, and others thinking that one's job can change drastically upon return from maternity leave. For example, some Australian women found the labour market quite safe, noting the experiences of friends:

“I think it's quite safe. Most women I know have been able to return to work on a part-time basis to the same employer.”

Others have different experiences. A British respondent, for example, found that her rather large portfolio of clients was not returned to her after she came back from her maternity leave, and was eventually made redundant because of her small portfolio. An Australian woman without children noted how women are disadvantaged in the labour market:

“[I]t's not even safe for single women with no children...I'm not sure how I'd go back into the workforce. I was out of the workforce for nine months [while travelling] and was able to get back into it. But I think after a couple of years of having children I'd have to start from scratch.”
(A02).

For the women who managed to have things their way—for example, negotiating decent part-time arrangements with employers of former full-time jobs—there seemed to be a tendency, especially in the United States, to emphasize how lucky they were, hence suggesting a general awareness of the rigidity and lack of support for working mothers of the average workplace..

Most women in all four countries consider the workplace family friendly, with “flexibility” being cited most often as the indicator. A supportive environment, paid maternity leave and related policies, childcare facilities at work, and being able to leave on time were also cited as aspects of a family-friendly workplace. However, some also noted that family friendliness depended on individual employer or workplace and was not institutionalized as a general characteristic of a typical workplace the women found themselves in. For example, one

American respondent said:

“...maybe it’s the difference that I have a woman boss. I mean Melissa is so very understanding because she has a little boy herself also. And that she’s divorced, and so she doesn’t even really have a spouse, you know another spouse that can help assist her arrangements. She, you know, she really understands. We work very well together.” (US 6).

In referring to family unfriendly aspects, the women interviewed cited factors like the inadequacy of policies, unsupportive attitude, lack of on-site childcare facilities, and preference for full-time employees.

While many of these women thought that their workplace was family friendly, quite many of them also reported elements that were not family-friendly. On the other hand, long work hours, lack of childcare and related facilities nearby or at work, pressure to return to work early after maternity leave, unavailability of flexible hours to those without children, inflexibility in general, job structures that are based on men’s lives, and so on were considered aspects that were not family friendly. With respect to the labor market as a whole, most working women with children did not perceive high job security, citing the preference for employees without children especially in small companies, in response to the legal requirements to provide leaves, especially the pending introduction of paid parental leave.

The overall picture that emerges shows that there is still a problem of job security even in places where there are maternity leave provisions, making having and raising children still a risk to employment. Accommodating working mothers’ needs does not seem to be a consistent policy, as a British respondent noted:

“The majority of businesses are fairly unsupportive, I mean you go into London and nine out of ten companies just don’t really care about if you’re having children or whatever, they don’t care about giving you maternity leave and that sort of thing, they’d rather get rid of you and have somebody else in.” (UK 11).

Another respondent noted the social impact of this lack:

“I think actually lots of women don’t go to their full potential as far as careers and work because of children and childcare. They’ll always opt for something that suits their family rather than something they’re really good at. The labour market loses out drastically. There’d be a lot more high powered women out there doing jobs that they are well bale to do if they had the flexibility of have a family.” (UK 18)

(e) Juggling Family and Work: Summary

Generally, the environment is as such that we cannot say that women have the full range of choice whether to continue working or not upon having children on the one hand, and whether to have children or not or how many children to have on the other. However, considering that the majority of women in New Zealand

and half of the women interviewed in Britain did express concerns over career development, and given that the sample contains women who are highly qualified, we cannot say conclusively whether they indeed *prefer* part-time work. Opting for part-time work might be related to how women feel about mother's employment, particularly when young children are involved. This seems to be a controversial area where women had strong opinions on either side of the issue whether mothers should stay home to care for young children. However, the weight of the opinion seemed to tilt in New Zealand and Australia towards endorsing the view that staying home is better for the child, at least when the children were young. This might explain the preference for part-time work. And yet, at the same time, women did feel positively about employment beyond the money. For example, while financial pressure was the most frequently cited reason for returning to work after childbirth, women also cited personal fulfillment, career development, intellectual stimulation, need for adult company as reasons, as shown in the quotations below.

“My brain was rotting...for intellectual stimulation. Partly that you've invested so much in your career. Certainly wasn't for financial reason. I think I really missed being in the workforce” (NZ 26).

“I know I didn't want to go back, but when I went back I quite enjoyed it...well [it was] a little bit financial but it was also important to me as a person to have interaction and a job that was making me think...[when] my mother decided to move up with us it made it easier for me because she would look after [the baby].” (NZ 15)

“I was on a high that whole month at being back at work, being surrounded by people, having ideas bouncing around and listening to them and just getting all this stimuli coming at me. It was a fulfilment. It was complementing me. I was also feeling the pressure to continue working and not letting my work experience or degree linger for any longer in the cupboard in cobwebs.” (NZ 7)

“I was missing social contact with other adults—I didn't have a social network in the suburbs. And it was about being more than just a Mum. My only social group was the mothers' group and all my friends worked. I felt very isolated” (A30).

Besides the positive benefits of working for women, some also noted the positive benefits for the children to be in day care—to get out, to learn to interact with other children, instead of just staying with their caretakers. For example, one American woman said:

“I don't see any problems with them going to daycare. I mean she gets to play with other kids. She gets to learn how to share. She is not alone. I mean, I think it's good for them going to daycare. But I also think that it's good for them being with their parents too.”

(US 8).

Indeed, more than one woman in the United States suggested or mentioned putting children in day care for a couple of times a week even for women who are not employed.

Considering everything together, even though women apparently will continue to have children despite the less than ideal work situation, perhaps they will be willing to have more children should there be more extensive leave provisions (longer, paid). More importantly, better maternity leave provision and better job security may help women maintain a healthy balance in their lives, approximating the relative emphasis on work and family they prefer, and give them the full range of choices. For example, given the stress involved in childrearing, if the goal is to improve women's quality of life, then childcare facilities should be less bound to work but more widely available to mothers. In addition, the very fact that some women complained about a lack of recognition of the value of stay-at-home mothers and the pressure to return to work while others saw the importance of flexible shopping hours for working women with children showed that mothers have different needs. As one Australian woman put it:

“I'd like to see an end to the debate we have now where it's one thing or another in terms of having children and working or staying at home—there's not one right way to do things and there are advantages and disadvantages to mums staying home with their kids.” (A105).

Another said,

“[P]ersonally, I'd like a stop in the pressure to go back to work.”

All this suggested that diverse women's needs could best be satisfied by creating an environment that gives them choices, rather than second-guessing their orientations and devising policies directing them to one path or the other only. Perhaps it is time we dislodged the juxtaposition of family and work and recognized that each sphere deserves a set of initiatives that could satisfy individuals' needs and maximize their choices. We can actually see from the interviews some awareness or suggestions along this line of thinking. Following this logic, childcare, for example, should not be made to be connected to work as a “support” for working women for the purpose of approximating women to men in work hours and commitment. Similarly, work should be reconceptualized and made more flexible not only for mothers or fathers to take care of their children, but for everyone, because we need to recognize that family obligations cannot be narrowly conceptualized as just childcare, hourswork, or even elderly care. Whether an employee is married or not, has children or not, she or he has the right to have a life—obligations, needs, interests—outside of work.

2. Participation of significant others in childcare and housework

Half of the fathers in New Zealand and most of the fathers in Australia and Britain took time off, utilizing a combination of paid leave, annual leave, and unpaid leave for the first child. A minority of women would have liked their

partners to take more time off in New Zealand, while close to half of the women interviewed in Australia would have liked their partners to have had more time off for the first baby, and most women in Britain felt that their partners did not have enough time off after the baby was born.⁵

The general picture of the division of housework and childcare between the couple in this sample of women is no different from most industrialized countries in that women did most of the housework and childcare. Further, while some women reported that their husbands/partners did more housework when the children were born, others reported an increase in their load. Women in New Zealand also noted that returning to work did not always mean a more equal division of labor than when they were childless. If fathers were involved, they were more involved in childcare than in other areas of housework. Typically, fathers played with their children rather than participated in the routine care work. However, still, one can see that most fathers did participate in the work of feeding, bathing, and so on at least a few times every week, with very few not getting involved at all.

From the interviews, we gather that fathers did have a presence and a certain level of involvement in the women's pregnancy and childbirth, and in raising children. It also seems that women did value their husbands'/partners' presence right before and after childbirth. The relative ratio of women wanting their husbands/partners to be around more across the three countries corresponds to the birth rate in the three countries. In New Zealand, where the birth rate is highest, most women seemed satisfied with the time their husbands/partners managed to take to be with them, while most women in Britain would want their husbands/partners to take more time off. Given the unequal division of labor, the actual help might not have been substantial, but perhaps the presence of partners/husbands made the whole experience less lonely for women, providing them the psychological support they needed. Indeed, loneliness/isolation was mentioned by the majority of women in characterizing their child rearing experience in Australia and New Zealand and by half of the women in Britain, and most reported seeking support from family members, including husbands/partners. Perhaps the issue is less how much time off men should take, but whether a real choice is available.

3. The presence of a good support system for child-rearing

Formal childcare facilities available in the three countries are similar, including the use of childminders or professional carers (nannies) who would take care of children at the children's own homes, home-based care where the child is taken to the carers' homes, and day care centers. In addition, family members and relatives were depended on to help out. Indeed grandparents, particularly grandmothers, were most commonly relied upon for children of all ages in New Zealand and Australia, where day care centers were the next most popular. In Britain, using childminding was most popular, and also the cheapest, while close

⁵ Husbands/partners of the interviewees took about 1-2 weeks off on the average in Australia. In Britain, the range was between 3 days off to 2 weeks off in Britain.

to half of the respondents had a relative, mostly the child's grandmother, who helped by providing care during the day.

Fewer women used childcare services—formal or informal—in the first year after a child was born, but more after the child was 1 to 4 years old, declining again after the child turned 4 when kindergarten became an option. This pattern seemed largely true of all children—whether first or second or third born—and across countries. The duration of time used varied and no particular pattern can be detected according to age or birth order of the children.

In New Zealand, many women felt that they did not have enough information on childcare to make informed decisions, and about half of the women using day care said that they had difficulties finding appropriate care for their child(ren) that met their particular needs. While most thought that there was a range of choices available, they also mentioned that the demand for good quality facilities meant that there were waiting lists. For example, one employee in the United States noted that the waiting list was a year and a half at a childcare center in Purdue University, but another one she found in the area had a waiting list shorter than 6 months (US 2). In addition to information about childcare facilities, the cost of childcare was also mentioned as a concern for many women.

Similarly, while most women in Britain did not experience any unforeseen difficulties finding the appropriate childcare and most reported having enough information to make informed decisions, many did complain about the long waiting lists, the amount of time it took to research one's options, and the cost. In the words of one respondent, "It makes it difficult for the woman to go back to work because it is so costly." (UK14).

Given the cost of childcare services and concern about the quality of care, family members seem to play a particularly important role in supporting the interviewees in child rearing in all three countries. Therefore, besides increasing subsidies for childcare and the increase in childcare facilities, it seems logical that any family policy should recognize the role played by family members. However, that this is not the case yet is seen from a respondent's story that her mother was not able to take a leave from her work to take care of her and her child and ended up having to quit her job. Similarly, respondents cited the importance of policies to encourage more fathers to be more involved in caring for their children.

As noted earlier, the positive benefits of childcare should be recognized, and that would take more changes in the ideas people have towards childcare and parental responsibilities. Thinking along this line would indeed make it necessary to expand existing childcare facilities. In addition, the overall picture is that in thinking about child-care facilities, the government needs to recognize that mothers are not the only players, and that while it is important to create a more supportive environment for women to have and raise children, the roles of other family members should also be formally recognized in designing family policies.

4. Women's subjective evaluation of the environment: a supportive and positive larger environment for children to grow up in, a recognition of

the circumstances as favorable, and/or a strong preference for children regardless of the objective circumstances

In thinking about starting a family, most women in New Zealand considered the effect on career and work, but only a minority of women did so in Australia and Britain. On the other hand, while the financial costs of raising children are a concern for many women in Britain and the majority of women in Australia, only a few women said that they had thought about the financial costs of raising children. Only a minority of women in all countries reported considering the longer term cost of education or the immediate cost of child rearing in thinking about starting a family. The following is a typical response:

“I don’t think I thought so much about work or costs much more, so just about; I mean since I was the only child. I don’t have a lot of experience around babies or small children. And again, I think that the friends that made me realize, “Oh I could do this, and actually having a baby...” Their older child is always around them a lot just socially. And it helped me to just be ready with babies and children and realize, “Oh yeah, I could do this. I understand it.” I don’t think I thought a lot about, you know, money or how it would affect work. And just don’t think it entered my mind. But I was too young to, you know, just too naive even to consider that.” (US 4).

Here’s another woman’s comment:

“Yeah, I don’t know, because having, having the family I think is so important that we felt like, you know, we could face those challenges.... I know there are expenses involved, and yet, I never felt like it was that major, but drain, yeah. On what we were spending.” (US 5).

Even though the cost of raising children did not seem a factor in considering starting a family, most women noted that it did have a part in determining how many children they had in Britain and New Zealand, but the response was mixed in Australia. Less than half of the women in all countries considered these factors in thinking about starting a family: availability of childcare, effect on relationship with husband/partner, and availability of support and network.

While child care might be important in determining the lives of women after childbirth, it seems that it didn’t feature prominently in the decision making process. Similarly, the majority didn’t seem to place too much emphasis on the costs of raising children in thinking about starting a family.

The majority of women in Australia and New Zealand, and close to half of the women interviewed in Britain, did feel that the costs of having children today were a financial burden, but most did not see it as an unacceptable burden. These Australian respondents’ comments are representative:

“It’s a financial challenge—less money for me and for around the house but the positives outweigh that” (A19)

“It’s not a burden but of course they cost money, but so does

everything” (A28)

“It’s a cost but not a burden.” (A18)

For New Zealand women, there was also a reluctance to characterize the extent of this burden as acceptable or too great. Apparently, while there was a concern about financial burden—which is a reality—the women also hesitated in placing too much weight on finances in thinking about having or raising children.

The general norm seems to be towards having children—with a good number of the women experiencing pressure or at least comments about their plan to have children in different countries. In New Zealand, for example, all but one of the childless women reported experiencing pressure to have children from parents and workmates. One woman mentioned the “obsession” about children she felt in New Zealand, and another noted that people did not seem to recognize that not having children was a legitimate choice. Among women with children, half had experienced pressure.

Regarding the trend towards smaller families, most women in Britain felt that having fewer children was a good thing, considering the quality time with children and giving children greater care and attention and opportunities, which in turn would have a positive impact on society. Examples are given as follows.

“If there are more families with smaller numbers of children then I think you’ve got more to give to them so they should be more rounded people I would hope.” (UK 15)

“I think it’s a good thing. Well, the fewer the better actually, you can raise them better, you can give them more attention I think and you can certainly provide more with less children.” (UK 19)

On the other hand, in both New Zealand and Australia, while women saw both good and bad aspects, the overall impression seemed negative.

Women in New Zealand and Australia all considered their countries as a great place to raise children, citing factors like clean and safe environment, good education system, opportunities for children, and so on. Those who also noted negative aspects in Australia cited financial reasons, growth of cities, lack of family values, detainment of refugees, racism. Just under half of the women in Britain thought that it was a good place to raise children, citing factors like opportunities available to children such as education, travel, economic and employment opportunities, but negative factors like gangs, materialism and education.

Conclusion:

There are similarities as well as differences among the four countries in a few aspects related to the environment for having and raising children.

A certain level of incompatibility between work and family obligations can be seen in all countries, even though there are differences among countries. The general pattern in all four countries was still one of reduced employment and

reduced full-time employment for women by the first child's first birthday. Women in all four countries were mixed in their responses about job security, with some thinking that there was job security in the current labor market, and others thinking that one's job could change drastically upon return from maternity leave. On the other hand, most women considered the workplace family friendly, with "flexibility" being cited most often as the indicator. However, there was also a general awareness that family friendliness in most cases was specific to individual workplaces. The general picture of the division of housework and childcare between the couple in this sample of women is no different from most countries in that women did most of the housework and childcare. In terms of the decision to have children, the majority of women in Australia and New Zealand, and close to half of the women interviewed in Britain, did feel that the costs of having children today were a financial burden. However, most did not see it as an unacceptable burden, and for New Zealand women, there was a reluctance to characterize the extent of this burden as acceptable or too great. The same pattern can be seen in the United States.

In other respects, however, women in Britain seemed different from their counterparts in New Zealand and Australia. For example, while proportionally more partners/husbands took time off from work in Australia and Britain than in New Zealand, it is in Britain, more than in New Zealand, where women would like their partners to take more time off. This is probably related to the fact that more women in Britain returned to work and to full-time employment than in the other two countries. While childcare arrangements were made for children in all three countries, family members, particularly grandmothers, were most commonly relied upon in New Zealand and Australia, while childminding was the most popular choice in Britain. In Britain, most felt that having fewer children was a good thing, considering quality time with children and giving children greater care and attention and opportunities, which in turn would have a positive impact on society. On the other hand, in both New Zealand and Australia, while women saw both good and bad aspects, the overall impression seemed negative. Similarly, while women in New Zealand and Australia all considered their countries as a great place to raise children, citing factors like clean and safe environment, good education system, opportunities for children, and so on, just under half of the women in Britain thought that Britain was a good place to raise children.

In some respects, New Zealand seems to be different from the rest. In thinking about starting a family, most women in New Zealand considered the effect on career and work, but only a minority of women did so in Australia and Britain. And this is interesting, given that fewer women returned to work or to full-time employment in New Zealand than in, for example, Britain. Perhaps women in New Zealand had made the decision to have children no matter what the effect it might have on their career development or employment. Further, while the financial costs of raising children were a concern for many women in Britain and the majority of women in Australia, only a few women in New Zealand said that they had thought about the financial costs of raising children. On the other hand, while most women said that the cost of raising children is a

factor in determining how many children they have in Britain and New Zealand, the response was mixed in Australia.

Generally, the interviews gave the impression that women with children in Britain felt more pressured in their lives than their counterparts in New Zealand and Australia. The support in New Zealand did not seem particularly outstanding, given that fewer women returned to the workforce and fewer husbands/partners took time off than in the other two countries. However, women in New Zealand seemed more positive in their attitude about having and raising children. It seems safe to conclude that one's decision to have children seems more closely tied to one's preference for children: women in New Zealand, and to some extent Australia, seem more positive about having children and the whole experience of childbirth and childrearing than their counterparts in Britain. Relevant here might be the larger number of people in New Zealand and Australia than in Britain who saw the trend towards smaller families as a negative thing. This is not to say that maternity provisions and comparable policies are not important. These are important in giving women choices, in improving their quality of lives, in minimizing the compromises they need to make for themselves or for their families. However, these policies might not have an impact on their decision to have children. Much consideration about the cost of having children and related financial matters seemed to be thought of after the fact, and when these were thought of beforehand, they did not seem to affect their behavior in the expected manner (eg. decision about employment and consideration of the impact of family on employment).

Another factor to consider, and which is not directly considered here, is the general attitude towards children—the sense of responsibility and the attitude towards children. The stronger the sense of responsibility—the feeling that one is responsible for one's children—their well-being, their achievements, their happiness—the more hesitant one might be in having children since it seems such a daunting task. If one sees one's responsibility as providing opportunities and a good environment, then perhaps having children is less daunting a task.

In sum, therefore, policies related to family and children, flexibility of workplace, support for childrearing, and so on are all important in their own right, in guaranteeing a certain level of quality of life for women who choose to have children, in giving them a free choice in the balance they want to have in their lives with regard to family and work, and in supporting the decisions they make whether to have children or not. However, these policies and provisions themselves, from what we can tell from the interviews, might be related at most to the number of children women have, but are not directly related to these women's decisions to have children. Instead, the attitudes towards children in the larger society might be more significant in this respect.

If we were to draw any implications for Japan from these interviews, it is that first, the varying birth rates in these countries and the relatively high rates of birth in these countries compared to Japan might show that while frequently mentioned issues such as the incompatibility of work and family obligations, job insecurity, inadequate maternity and childcare provisions, and financial costs of having children are present and recognized, they do not explain the decision to have nor

not to have children. . . Second, Japan could still do a lot more in terms of providing support for working parents, not so much in the sense that it will then encourage them to have children or more children, but more in terms of improving the quality of life of its people and providing an environment that maximizes their freedom in choosing the lifestyles they prefer. Third, it is that the oft-repeated reason for not having children in Japan (Prime Minister Office, 2001)—the costs of raising children—by both married couples and in the mass media might not be the main cause behind the low birth rate. Instead, referring to the costs of children might be a proxy indicating the sense of responsibility one feels towards one's child and/or a deep-seated aversion towards having children. It can be seen in Japan that there is a lot of pressure towards having children—by people around, by grandparents—and at the same time, there is a strong sense of parental responsibility towards children, as instantiated in the expectations that mothers stay home with young children. In this context, the “cost of children” becomes a legitimate and concrete indicator of perhaps something more abstract and more anxiety-provoking. So, a more complete understanding of individuals' decision to have children may be obtained from analyzing society's ideas about parental responsibility towards children and broader evaluations of the larger environment of Japan for children to grow up in. Indeed, feminists and women activists raised the question decades ago when they organized a conference entitled “Toward A Society Worthy of Giving Birth” in protest of the proposed changes to restrict the legal right to abortion in the 1972 and 1982 (Mastui, 1990; Tanaka, 1995). Even though the impetus behind this protest was narrowly focused on the right to legal abortion, it had broader implications by situating the issues of childbirth and childrearing in all aspects of the larger environment of the society as a whole (Khor, 1999). Analyses of family policies are important, and better policies are necessary, but one cannot do so thoroughly without exploring the value system of the larger environment.

Appendix A Summary of respondents' education and occupation

Education of interviewees

	Secondary	Tertiary non-degree	Tertiary degree	total
New Zealand	3	12	18	33
Australia	10	3	20	33
Britain	5	0	15	20

Occupation of interviewees

	Professional I	Professional II	Clerical	Trades and sales	Other
New Zealand	10	9	3	0	0
Australia	4	14	9	2	3
Britain	12		0	0	1 (student)
USA	11		1	2	2 (self-employed) 2 (student) 1(voluntary worker)

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Acknowledgements

Paper presented at the "International Workshop/Seminar on Low Fertility and Social Policies" Tokyo, 20-22 November, 2002

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