

The Future of Motherhood in Western Societies

Gijs Beets · Joop Schippers · Egbert R. te Velde
Editors

The Future of Motherhood in Western Societies

Late Fertility and its Consequences

 Springer

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Preface

The growing availability of reliable, acceptable and affordable forms of contraception since the 1960s contributed greatly to women's emancipation in all layers of population. This process was of inestimable value for women's liberation and independence.

However, some unforeseen problems have cropped up. Emancipation policies, developed by national governments and the European Union, are primarily directed towards women's economic independence. In these policies it is (implicitly) assumed that biological differences between women and men do not matter any more in today's society and in economic life. What a man can do, a woman should be able to do as well, is the well-intentioned thought underlying this view and indeed in many respects this is true. However, it is also the reason that little attention has been paid to motherhood. It has been assumed so far that a woman who wants to have children in addition to all her many other activities should just carry on and do so, preferably in a harmoniously decision making process with her partner. In practice, for many women, this proves to be too much to manage. Women are therefore apprehensive about having children, they put off the decision until later and have fewer children than they would really like, or even decide not to have children at all. Later on in life some of these women regret their earlier decisions. The question is whether this is the freedom of choice emancipation was supposed to offer.

From a demographic perspective we observe that the *age at first birth* has increased significantly and that the average number of children per woman has dropped rapidly since the beginning of the 1970s in most European countries to (well) below the replacement level. This will lead to an increasing proportion of elderly people who have, when becoming in need, to be cared for by a decreasing proportion of young people.

The view that differences between men and women have become irrelevant in social and economic respects is questioned over and over again. Modern biology and psychology have taught us that men and women differ in how they think, feel and act. These differences are partly due to our long evolutionary history and cannot be removed by a few well-intentioned measures within a couple of years, as many emancipation ideologists and politicians seem to think. "True" emancipation

maintains an interpretation of equality that not only accepts the differences between men and women but also values them.

In his 1991 Utrecht University inaugural speech on the increasingly later age at first birth Egbert te Velde touched the dilemma of ongoing adverse health issues versus understandable socio-economic drives. Te Velde's address led to several public and scientific discussions and meetings; two readers resulted in Dutch (Beets & Verloove-Vanhorick (eds.), 1992; Beets, Bouwens, & Schippers (eds.), 1997). Being better informed about the declining success rates of having children with advancing age could facilitate the decision making process.

The book in hand is the reflection of several international meetings and consultations on these issues, driven by the observation that practically all Western countries are characterised by a rising age at first birth although levels and timing may vary significantly. In these interdisciplinary meetings the participants – medical and biological scientists, next to demographers, sociologists and economists – discussed their concerns on the ongoing further rise of the age at first birth. They aimed at a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of having children late, on gender relationships, (the timing of) having children and other life time preferences and commitments, as well as at discussing acceptable strategies for preventing the age at first birth to rise further.

The meetings and discussions were organised at and coordinated by the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) in The Hague, a research institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) engaged in the scientific study of population (Demography). Next to the authors of the various chapters in this book, listed in a separate annex, several other researchers contributed in the scientific discussions: *Christien Brinkgreve* (Professor of Sociology, Utrecht University), *Pearl Dykstra* (Professor of Empirical Sociology, Erasmus University, Rotterdam), *Carina Hilders* (Gynaecologist, Reinier de Graaf hospital Delft), *Marli Huijjer* (Professor of Philosophy, Erasmus University, Rotterdam; and Haagse Hogeschool, The Hague), *Renske Keizer* (Post-doc Researcher in Sociology, Erasmus University, Rotterdam), *Hans Merkus* (Emeritus Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Nijmegen University), *Melinda Mills* (Professor of Sociology, Groningen University), *Nico van Nimwegen* (Deputy Director NIDI), *Joyce Outshoorn* (Emeritus Professor of Women's Studies, Leiden University), *Anne van Putten* (Sociologist, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, The Hague), *Judith Soons* (Psychologist, Education Council, The Hague), *Anmarie Widener* (Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, DC), *Frans Willekens* (Former Director NIDI), and *Boukje Zaadstra* (Epidemiologist, Researcher at the Netherlands School of Public and Occupational Health, Amsterdam).

This book is the reflection of these meetings and discussions. Some contributions were completed already in 2008, others became available more recently. We thank all persons who contributed to this book, in whatever way. Also a "thank you" to

NIDI for its efforts in organising the meetings, discussions and its final outcome. We hope the book will widen the understanding and discussion on the future of motherhood.

The Hague, The Netherlands
Utrecht, The Netherlands
Utrecht/Rotterdam, The Netherlands

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