



## I | *Women's Work and Family Decisions*

### *The "Subtle Revolution" in Historical Perspective*

We are in the midst of a "subtle revolution." Even seasoned observers, armed with statistics, are pointing to changes in women's behavior so vast as to warrant this label (Smith, 1979a). Current concerns about "the new working woman" and "the new choice of motherhood" reflect a growing awareness among experts and lay observers alike of the far-reaching changes taking place in the work and family patterns of American women.

The rising number of female workers is the most obvious indication of the changing position of women.<sup>1</sup> The 1970s witnessed a veritable explosion in the number of women working for pay outside the home. The percentage of women at work rose from 43.3 percent in 1970 to an unprecedented high of 51.2 percent in 1980 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1980:3). For the first time in American history, more women are in the labor force than out of it, and women are likely to continue to stream into the workplace in the coming years. Recent predictions suggest that by 1990 around 70 percent of all women of working age will be employed or looking for a job. For younger groups, this figure

1. I use the term "work" to refer specifically to work performed outside the home for pay. Whether or not they are paid for what they do, all women (except for a small group of "leisure class" members) work in some way. The significant question is not whether they work, but how they work.

is likely to rise even higher (Masnick and Bane, 1980; Smith, 1979b). The scale has thus tipped in favor of the employed woman.

A dramatic drop in women's fertility has accompanied this trend. Despite fears of a population explosion when the children of the baby boom reached childbearing age, the 1970s brought a "baby bust" instead. Although the fertility rate among baby boom mothers rose as high as 3.7 births per woman in the 1955–1959 period, it dropped to about 1.8 births per woman in the 1975–1980 period (Alonso, 1980; Sternlieb et al., 1982).<sup>2</sup> As women's workplace participation reached a historic high, the birthrate also dropped below the replacement rate to a historic low.<sup>3</sup> If current trends continue, the generation now in its prime childbearing years will not bear enough offspring to reproduce itself.

That the rise in the number of women workers occurred alongside a sharp decline in women's fertility is no coincidence. Women's work and family decisions have always been closely connected, and recent changes simply underscore the interactive, indeed inseparable, quality of this relationship.

This book explores the relationship between women's work and family decisions by taking a close look at the women most responsible for recent changes in female work and childbearing patterns. It examines the lives of a strategic group of women now in their prime childbearing years, all members of a generation in which large numbers have departed from the well-worn paths of their forebears. As the generation whose own life choices are most responsible for dramatic demographic shifts, this group is especially well positioned to illuminate the causes, consequences, and meaning of the subtle revolution now under way.

Examining the forces that have shaped these women's decisions clarifies the more general process by which women choose between work and family commitments as their work aspirations interact with their desires to bear and rear children. The experiences of these women also show how work and family decisions emerge from the broader social context in which they occur. Proceeding from the lives of this strategically placed group, this study thus presents a model for understanding general processes of human development and a method for analyzing the link between human action and social change.

2. The fertility rate refers to the number of births a woman would have in her lifetime if she kept pace with the age-specific birthrates for the given period (Sternlieb et al., 1982).

3. The birthrate refers to the number of births per 1,000 population.

## Changing Work and Family Patterns

In important respects, American women have often diverged from the model of the homebound, domestic mother. The child-centered housewife is actually a relatively recent historical development and is a social position that has generally been reserved for the more privileged members of the female population.

The rise of the factory system in the nineteenth century promoted the physical, social, and economic separation of the home and the workplace and thus ultimately relegated women to the private sphere. Yet throughout the early stages of industrialization, women contributed directly to the economic support of their families in a variety of ways. In the beginning years of industrial capitalism, many women and children worked alongside men in the factories, withdrawing from the industrial workplace only after male workers fought for and secured a "living" or "family wage" upon which the entire household could depend (Hartmann, 1976; Oakley, 1974b; Smelser, 1959). Many women were never able to withdraw completely from the paid labor force; sizeable segments of working-class and poor women have always worked outside the home for pay (Kessler-Harris, 1981; Tilly and Scott, 1978). Even though most nineteenth-century women did not participate in the paid work force, many took in boarders and lodgers to supplement the family income (Modell and Hareven, 1973).

Early nineteenth-century families were not especially child-centered. Instead, they generally operated as small businesses, looking to all household members, including women and children, to contribute to the "family economy." In order to sustain an acceptable standard of living for the family as a whole, children were often treated in ways that appear decidedly "adult" to modern eyes. Many left home to become apprentices long before the age we now consider appropriate for children to live on their own (Modell et al., 1976). Those who remained at home were expected to fend for themselves without the benefit of doting mothers such as those modern children are believed to need.

A lengthy, leisurely childhood and prolonged adolescence are thus modern inventions that came into existence only after the rise of the mass system of education (Demos, 1970; Kett, 1977). If the modern family is expected to gear itself toward the child's needs, then the preindustrial family expected the child to orient himself or herself to its needs (Hareven, 1977). As industrialization proceeded, motherhood only gradually came to assume the idealized, almost mystical, aura that captured the American imagination throughout most of the twentieth century.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed two paradoxical developments in the position of women. First, after the turn of the century, the size of the female labor force began to grow at a faster pace. In the hundred years between 1800 and 1900, the percentage of women in the paid labor force rose only from about 5 to 20 percent. Yet between 1900 and 1945, the female labor force grew to slightly over 38 percent, gaining 18 percentage points in only fifty years (Blau, 1979:271; Brownlee and Brownlee, 1976:3). During this period, women poured into the workplace both to occupy jobs vacated by men away at war and to fill the expanding job pool in the “pink-collar” service sector so central to postindustrial capitalism (Howe, 1977; Oppenheimer, 1970).

Along with the steady rise in the number of working women, this period saw the consolidation of the ideology of female domesticity. This ideology originated in the nineteenth-century notion of “true womanhood,” which argued that women are uniquely endowed with the emotional qualities necessary to oversee the private sphere and thus to safeguard society’s moral fabric from the corrupting influence of industrialism (Welter, 1966). This ideal of femininity and woman’s “proper place” was translated into the belief that mothering is every woman’s ultimate fulfillment and should be every woman’s highest priority. Ironically, women were encouraged to embrace motherhood just as the birthrate began to plunge and they began to move out of the home in substantial numbers.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Hareven (1977:69) concludes that

motherhood as a full-time vocation has emerged only since the middle of the 19th century. Ironically, its glorification as a lifelong pursuit for women began to emerge at a time when demographic and social factors were significantly reducing the total proportion of a woman’s life actually needed for it.

During the middle decades of the twentieth century, the domestic, nuclear household, whose cornerstone is the housewife-mother, captured the popular imagination as an ideal, if not always the reality. The economic prosperity of the immediate post–World War II era finally enabled large numbers of middle-class and working-class women to attain this domestic ideal. This period spawned the baby boom, promoted the child-centered household, and raised the full-time

4. For a full consideration of the history of the practice and ideology of “mother love” and its relation to social circumstances, see Badinter (1981). For an analysis of the emergence of the bourgeois, child-centered household in the nineteenth century, see Ryan (1981). Oakley (1974b) presents a historical overview of the rise of the housewife. Ryan (1979) presents a similar overview for American women from colonial times to the present.

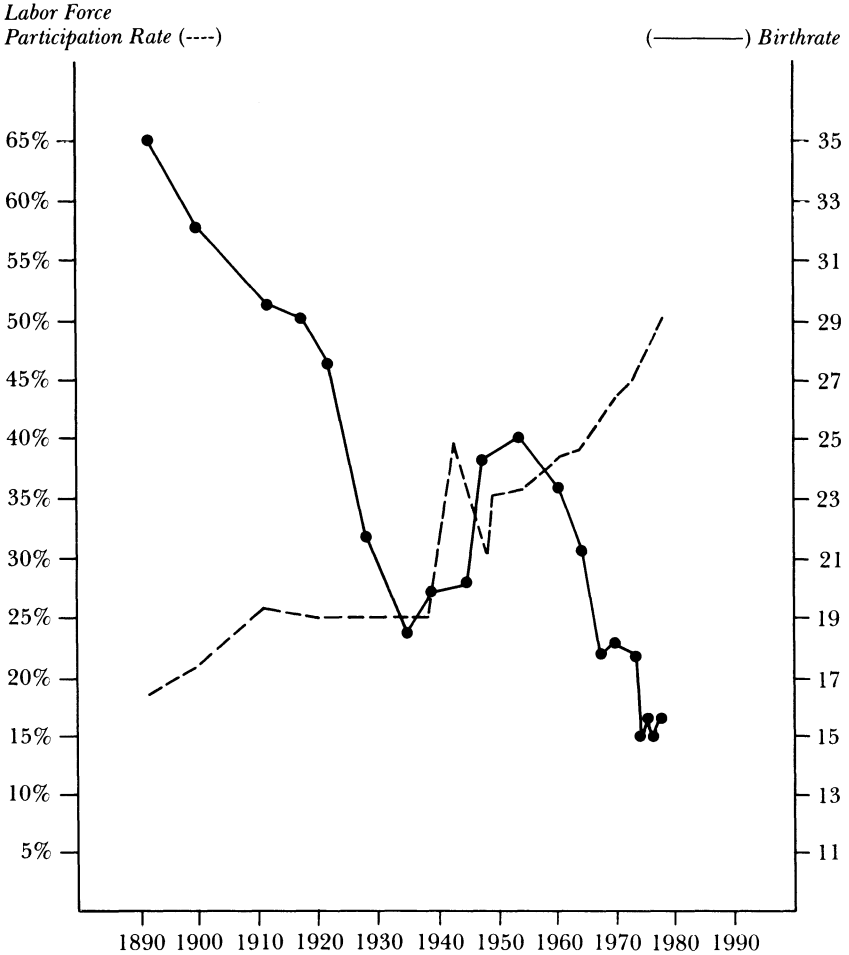
housewife-mother to a predominant place in American culture. After a long, steady decline dating back well before 1800, the birthrate turned upward in the mid-1930s and then rose even more sharply after World War II. Similarly, after rising sharply during the war, women's labor force participation dropped precipitously immediately thereafter, reaching wartime levels again only in the mid-1960s.

Figure 1 outlines the major contours of women's fertility and work patterns since the turn of the century. Except during the mid-1930s and mid-1950s, the birthrate has declined steadily since well before the turn of the century. In contrast, except for a brief period immediately following World War II, women's labor force participation has either risen or remained constant over this same time period. The two trends tend to be interactive and inversely related. Since the mid-1950s especially, the birthrate has tended to go down as women's labor force participation has gone up. The figure thus reveals a long-term trend toward women's movement out of the home in the twentieth century. The post-World War II period of resurgent domesticity, and not current patterns, appears to be "a conspicuous and unusual departure" from this overall direction of change (Alonso, 1980:37).

Women's declining fertility and growing ties to the workplace are thus not new developments, but rather extensions of trends that have long been in the making. The roots of recent changes in women's commitments to work and family are deeply embedded in the structure of American society, as well as in virtually all the other advanced industrial nations. Cross-national studies attest to the nearly universal movement of women out of the home under conditions of advanced industrialism. (See, for example, Land, 1979; Lapidus, 1978; Sullerot, 1971; Wilensky, 1968.) Only from the perspective of the immediate post-World War II period do these recent changes appear unexpected. From the perspective of long-term historical change, the 1950s appear more aberrant than typical.

Since the 1950s, the pace of change has quickened dramatically. In slightly more than thirty years, women's labor force participation has risen more than 20 percentage points, from a low of 30.8 percent in 1947 to an all-time high of 51.2 percent in 1980. Similarly, over the last twenty-five years, the birthrate has dropped from an average of 25 children per 1,000 population in 1955 to an average of only 15 in the late 1970s. Notably, this drop has occurred despite the fact that the exceptionally large cohorts of "baby boomers" entered adulthood during the 1970s, placing an especially large number of women in their prime childbearing years. Current patterns in women's work and fertility behavior stand in sharp contrast to the model of female domesticity that attracted so many adherents in the 1950s. Daughters have increasingly departed from their mothers' paths.

**Figure 1** *Comparisons Between the U.S. Birthrate and the Female Labor Force Participation Rate, 1890–1980*



SOURCES: Brownlee and Brownlee (1976:3); Moore and Hofferth (1979:127); U.S. Department of Labor (1980:3).

The 1950s thus provide the contrast that makes the reemergence of long-gathering trends in the last two decades so striking. Yet recent changes in women's behavior stand out in bold relief not simply because we tend to compare them to the somewhat atypical patterns of the 1950s. Women's current work and family patterns differ qualitatively, and not just quantitatively, from past developments.

First, alterations in the kinds of women who work have accompanied the recent explosion in the proportion of women workers. Historically, the typical woman worker was young, single, and childless. For most, paid employment represented a temporary commitment that ended or was substantially curtailed with marriage and the arrival of children. This is no longer the case. Rather, as Table A.1 demonstrates, the biggest increase in women workers since 1950 has occurred among married women, mothers with children (and especially preschool children) in the household, and women aged twenty-five to forty-four. (See Appendix A.) There has also been a notable rise in the percentage of women workers who work full-time, year-round. An increasing proportion of women workers are married, rearing young children, working throughout the middle adult years, and working full-time throughout the year.

Women today have not simply joined the work force in historically high numbers; they have also shown a growing commitment to steady, long-term, full-time workplace attachment. In these important respects, women workers have begun to resemble male workers.<sup>5</sup> Like men, women of all ages and family statuses, and not simply those with few family responsibilities, are building strong work ties. Few, including men and children, have failed to feel the impact of these changes.

Second, the recent sharp drop in the birthrate appears to reflect more fundamental changes in women's orientations toward childbearing and mothering. The decline in the birthrate in the early decades of the twentieth century did not signal a rise in the rate of childlessness or one-child families, as it appears to do today. Historically, the birthrate decline resulted from a drop in average family size, not a rise in childlessness (Bane, 1976; Hofferth and Moore, 1979; Masnick and Bane, 1980). To the contrary, the percentage of ever-married women remaining childless or bearing only one child has also declined until recently—probably because of improved health and increased fecundity among women of childbearing age. Thus, in this earlier period, average family size dropped, but the proportion of women remaining childless or bearing only one child also decreased (Masnick and Bane, 1980).

Recent trends suggest that this historical aversion to childlessness and only children is declining. The cohorts of women now in their

5. The reverse is also true. Men's labor force participation has dropped from 86.4 percent in 1950 to 77.2 percent in 1980 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1980:3). In addition, men tend to work shorter hours and switch careers more often than they did thirty years ago (Hirschhorn, 1977). Men's work patterns thus increasingly resemble the part-time, interrupted model once reserved primarily for women.

prime childbearing years have shown a marked lack of enthusiasm for childbearing, as shown by their increased propensity to remain childless or to have fewer children later in life. Although their ultimate decisions remain an open question, so far these women have exhibited notably higher rates of childlessness than most cohorts of the same age range born earlier in the twentieth century.

Among women born between 1935 and 1939, 80.7 percent had their first child by age twenty-nine, and only about 10 percent remained permanently childless. Only 63 percent of those born between 1950 and 1954 had had a child as they neared thirty. This trend appears to be more than just a preference among younger cohorts for postponed childbearing. When asked in 1979 to report their lifetime birth expectations, almost a quarter of the women between ages eighteen and thirty-four said they expected to have either no children or only one child (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980a). (Also see Table A.2, Appendix A.)

Although the link between predictions and actual future behavior is tenuous at best, these forecasts indicate that children are assuming a far less central position in many women's lives than they did thirty years ago. There is considerable controversy among informed analysts concerning the future. Some argue that the voluntary childless rate is declining and that an "echo baby boom" may soon occur as the biological clock runs out on this generation (Houseknecht, 1982). Others are convinced that low birthrates are here to stay and that a sizeable proportion (perhaps as large as 20 to 30 percent) of women currently in their prime childbearing years will remain permanently childless (Bloom and Pebley, 1982; Ryder, 1979; Westoff, 1978). Whatever these women finally do, their current behavior signals significant social change. So many women postponing motherhood and acknowledging the possibility of childlessness is in itself consequential. At the very least, as one analyst puts it, we can expect rates of childlessness "considerably higher than the 10 percent rates that prevailed throughout most of the century" (Bloom, 1981:16A).

Since the 1950s, the nondomestic woman has emerged to challenge the predominance of the homemaker-mother. The traditional household composed of a breadwinning husband and homemaking wife dropped from 59.4 percent of all American households in 1950 and 51.2 percent in 1960 to only 30.3 percent in 1980. (When the presence of children in the household is also taken into account, this figure dips even lower.) Increasing numbers of dual-earning couples (with and without children), single-parent households (overwhelmingly headed by women), and single adults living alone or with other unrelated persons (primary individuals) have steadily eroded the dominance of



the "traditional" household.<sup>6</sup> The greatest growth has occurred among married couples with a working wife and primary individuals, most of whom live alone (Gerson, 1983:140).

The domestic woman who builds her life around children and home-making persists, but she now coexists with a growing number of working mothers and permanently childless women. The nondomestic woman, whether she combines work and motherhood or eschews motherhood altogether, is no longer a statistical, social, or psychological anomaly. Instead, a variety of life patterns more accurately describes the current situation of American women.

## Cohorts and Social Change

Recent changes in work and mothering patterns are not distributed equally across the population of women. Rather, these changes have occurred primarily through the aging of successive cohorts, whose decisions have differed in important respects from those made by the generations that preceded them.

Table A.3 shows that younger cohorts of women are much more likely than older cohorts to work. The rise of the woman worker has thus resulted not so much from changes in the behavior of all women, but from the progressive entrance of younger cohorts into the labor force as they reached working age. Women born after 1940, most of whom are now in their twenties and thirties, are most responsible for the steep rise in the percentage of women workers.

Table A.4 shows a similar pattern for changes in women's childbearing patterns. Cohorts born after 1944 largely account for the recent sharp decline in the birthrate. Because these women are still moving through their prime childbearing years, their final rates are subject to change. When compared with older cohorts at a comparable age, however, they display notably lower propensities for childbearing.

Table A.5 offers an additional perspective on the fertility patterns of different generations by comparing the percent remaining childless

6. I use the term "traditional" to refer to women whose primary commitments and orientations are to the home and the domestic sphere. Female domesticity is not a consistently dominant historical pattern. As used here, the term "traditional" thus refers to the type of female homemaker and mother who gained ascendancy in the mid-twentieth century, and not to an idealized image that probably never predominated in the more distant past. (See Scott and Tilly, 1975; Tilly and Scott, 1978.)

among different cohorts at different ages. This table reveals an interesting difference between the baby boom mothers born between 1930 and 1940 and the baby boom offspring born between 1945 and 1959. Although only about 20 percent of the women in the older group were childless by the time they reached their late twenties, well over 30 percent of the younger group remained childless throughout their twenties. Among those born between 1945 and 1949, almost 20 percent were childless well into their thirties; for those born between 1950 and 1954, over 35 percent were still childless as they approached thirty. Thus, despite improved health standards that helped lower the rate of childlessness throughout the first half of the twentieth century, recent female cohorts have returned to the high childlessness rates that characterized the earlier part of the century.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, younger female cohorts are most responsible for the rise in the percentage of women workers, the decline in the birthrate, and the increasing proportion of childless women in the later stages of their reproductive lives. The personal decisions of young adult women, most of whom came of age in the 1970s, underlie these rapid social changes.

This generation reached adulthood during a period of accelerated social change. Born in the aftermath of World War II, most of its members grew up in so-called traditional households. Ironically, the mothers of this generation are the women who vacated the workplace in large numbers to devote themselves to home and family. Yet the world this generation has inherited, and helped as adults to create, differs greatly from the world it knew as children. As members of a generation on the cutting edge of social change, they have collided with social institutions in flux. They have become both the recipients and the agents of far-reaching changes in work and family life.

Recent demographic changes in women's position can thus be best understood by examining the forces that have shaped the work and family decisions of that generation of women currently in its prime childbearing years. These women's lives offer especially rich clues to understanding the sources, contours, and likely future implications of the subtle revolution in women's behavior.

7. It is difficult to disentangle voluntary and involuntary childlessness. Aside from those with infertility problems, most women who have postponed or rejected motherhood have found the option of childbearing difficult to implement *and* have found other options more attractive. Their choices thus reflect both constraints on their fertility behavior and opportunities to pursue other goals. There is, furthermore, an uneven distribution of fertility as economically disadvantaged women with fewer attractive alternatives to motherhood tend to have more children than educationally advantaged women.

## Alternative Paths in Adult Development

Despite the rising number of women who appear to be breaking from former patterns, those who constitute this strategic generation have not made uniform choices. This group displays a varied range of responses to the structural dilemmas facing all women. Indeed, the experiences encountered by women of all generations may be found to some degree within its ranks.

Many have embraced the patterns of their predecessors; they have married, borne children, and settled down to full-time mothering; they have worked outside the home only intermittently, if at all. Yet a sizeable number of women have departed from this "traditional" path. These women have postponed, and even foresworn, motherhood; they have developed ties to the workplace that resemble the committed, permanent pattern once reserved for men; and they have rejected the domestic path that places children, family, and home above all else. In short, they have moved through their young adult years in markedly different ways from earlier generations. There have always been some women who fit this emerging pattern, but today their numbers are growing on a scale never seen before.

Consider, for example, the diverse paths taken by the following women drawn from the larger group interviewed in this study:

Laura grew up in a "typical" middle-class family. Her father, a middle-level manager for a large utilities company, was happy in his work and able to support his wife and three children with ease. Her mother never worked for pay, devoting herself instead to caring for her family and managing their comfortable suburban home.

Laura never gave much thought to the future when she was young; she always "just assumed" that she would become a wife and mother much like her mother before her. Because there were ample financial resources, she also planned for college. She looked upon this period as a chance to train for a profession, such as teaching or nursing, that would mesh with homemaking. College would also provide the perfect setting, she reasoned, for meeting a man who would support her domestic aspirations.

For Laura, things turned out much as she expected. After two years of post-high school training, she went to work as a nurse. She met her husband, Steve, on the job, and two years later they were married. Because her work did not offer the pay or advancement opportunities that Steve enjoyed as a physician, she began to look forward to trading the long, late hours of nursing for what she

imagined would be the more rewarding work of parenting. Because Steve's income rose rapidly, she did not feel financially obligated to remain at a job that had grown tedious. She soon became pregnant and withdrew from the workplace.

Since the birth of her first child, Laura has stayed home with few, if any, regrets. Although she plans to return to work part-time when her two children are older, she states firmly that her family "will always come first." She also resents the undertones of disapproval she senses when she tells inquirers that being a mother is her "career."



Joanne's childhood was not filled with the same advantages as Laura's, but she did grow up with similar expectations. As a repairman, her father struggled to make ends meet. Her mother nevertheless did not work outside the home until Joanne was in the eighth grade. Both parents agreed that the children should have a full-time mother, even if this arrangement entailed forgoing material luxuries. Despite their limited finances, they hoped Joanne would attend college to prepare herself for a "better life" than either of them had achieved.

Joanne, however, did not share her parents' aspirations. She was more interested in dating than in schoolwork and was not inspired by her part-time job as a waitress in a fast-food chain. Thus, when she became pregnant at seventeen, she did not greet this news with disappointment or panic. Instead, much to her parents' chagrin, she married her high school boyfriend and settled down to full-time mothering.

Two children, several sales jobs, and ten years later, Joanne still prefers domesticity to her other options. She occasionally feels social and financial pressure to forsake her domestic commitments for paid work. However, her husband earns enough money as a mechanic to "make ends meet." And every time she searches the want ads, she remembers how much she disliked the few temporary jobs she has held over the years. She then promptly turns her attention back to her children and her home. She is even considering having another child.

These two life histories illustrate the *traditional model* of female development in which an adult woman chooses the domestic life for which she prepared emotionally and practically as a child. Although they have disparate social backgrounds, Laura and Joanne share a similar life course trajectory. For each, adult life went according to plan. Neither experienced a substantial change in life goals or emo-

tional priorities as she moved into and through adulthood. Both were also insulated from events that might have caused them to veer off their expected life paths: They were neither pushed out of the home by economic necessity or marital instability nor pulled into the workplace by expanding opportunities. They thus remained committed to the domestic path they assumed was a woman's proper place. In its essentials, these life histories fit well the traditional model of female domesticity that gained momentum during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and reached a peak during the post-World War II period.

In contrast, consider the life paths of Elizabeth and Jane:

Elizabeth, like Laura, grew up in a traditional, comfortable, middle-class home. As a lawyer, her father took great pride in supporting his family in style. Indeed, he vetoed the few attempts his wife made to find work outside the home, arguing that children need their mother at home and her working would reflect badly upon both parents. Similarly, he expected his daughter to go to college not to prepare for an occupation, but rather to find a suitable mate. Adopting the messages she received, Elizabeth grew up believing a woman's place is in the home.

Elizabeth, the dutiful daughter, thus married a young engineer soon after college graduation. Within a few years, however, the marriage began to sour. Before she could fully assimilate the implications of her situation, she was divorced and out on her own for the first time in her life. Desperate for a paycheck, she wandered into an employment agency looking for a job, any job. They placed her in a small company, where she started as a receptionist and office manager. She quickly made herself indispensable and over a period of about five years worked her way up the organization to her present position of executive vice-president.

Elizabeth is now in her mid-thirties, and there appear to be few limits on how high she can rise. Rearing a child could, of course, conflict with her career goals. There is little chance that motherhood will interfere with her work, however, for she has foresworn marriage forever and probably childbearing as well. Despite her childhood expectations, home and family just do not fit with the commitments she has developed as an adult. As she looks back over this chain of events, she wonders how she could have come so far from where she began.



Like Laura, Joanne, and Elizabeth, Jane also assumed when she was growing up that she would marry, have many children, and live

“happily ever after,” just as her parents before her. Her father, a Southern European immigrant, worked day and night to support his large family. Her mother clung tightly to the “old country” ways, which included loyalty to her husband and an almost total devotion to her children. Jane harbored a hidden desire to go to college, but her father opposed such pursuits for women and could not have underwritten the expense in any case.

Jane worked for a short time after high school as a filing clerk. She married two years later and was pregnant within six months of the ceremony.

Shortly after the birth of her daughter, however, she became bored and dissatisfied. Taking care of a baby was not the ultimate fulfillment she had anticipated. Instead, she found motherhood to be a decidedly mixed experience—alternately rewarding and frustrating, joyful and depressing. Although she was reluctant to admit these feelings to herself or others, a growing sense of emptiness plus the need for additional household income spurred her to look for a paid job.

Thus, to keep herself busy and help with the family finances, she took a job as a bank teller. She expected this situation to be temporary, but the appropriate time to leave work never arrived. Her husband, Frank, could not seem to “make it” as a salesman working on commission, and his income consistently fell short of their needs. As time passed, the marriage began to falter. Frank’s work difficulties, coupled with his growing desire to have another child, left Jane feeling that she might be happier without Frank than with him.

Just when it seemed that the marriage had become unbearable, Jane’s boss offered her a promotion into management, including higher pay, increased responsibility, and more respect from peers and co-workers. The bank was facing affirmative action pressures and had responded by initiating a program designed to advance women who lacked college degrees. Jane was initially worried about the increased pressures the new job would entail, but she was also eager to move ahead. Not coincidentally, she also divorced Frank.

Today, Jane is dedicated to her job, aspires to upper-level management, and has no plans to expand her family beyond her only child. She is convinced, moreover, that her daughter is better off because she left the bulk of child care to someone else who enjoyed the work more than did she.

These lives illustrate an emerging and increasingly common pattern among both middle-class and working-class women that involves *rising work aspirations and ambivalence toward motherhood*. Elizabeth and

Jane grew up wanting much the same things in life as Laura and Joanne, but adult experiences intervened to push them off their expected life courses. Despite their contrasting class backgrounds, both Elizabeth and Jane experienced similar constraints and opportunities as adults. Not only did their early marriages deteriorate over time, but unanticipated work advancement opportunities also opened to both. Growing work ambitions and a diminishing interest in mothering thus eventually replaced their early domestic aspirations. These examples illustrate the developmental path taken by an increasing proportion of women from both the middle and working classes who grew up believing in the "feminine mystique," only to find that adult life offered a very different set of alternatives.

The next four lives begin from notably different starting points than the first four stories. First, there are the cases of Gail and Mary:

Gail was not attracted to motherhood as a child, but rather hoped to avoid it. Her mother had relinquished a promising career as an artist to raise three children and never seemed to recover from this sacrifice. As her children grew, Gail's mother slipped deeper into depression and frustration.

Gail's father, in contrast, seemed to thrive on both his work and his children. As a successful businessman who had pulled himself out of poverty after the Depression, he encouraged his children, all girls, to aim for whatever they wanted in life. It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that for as long as she could remember Gail wanted to be a lawyer. She knew this was an unusual desire for a girl, but the prohibition against it only fueled her determination.

In major respects, Gail has not waived from her early plans. She went to college, graduated in the top third of her class, and entered law school, where she was surprised to find that over 30 percent of her classmates were women. After receiving her law degree, she joined a small law firm and was eventually made a partner. Throughout this period, she never found the time or felt the inclination to marry or have a child.

Now secure in her career, Gail has begun to view children as an option she can afford to consider. Time is running out, however, and no partner is in sight. There have been a few serious relationships with men, but they have all ended badly. She is fast losing confidence that she will find a suitable partner for the joint enterprise of child rearing and has reluctantly concluded that an exclusive commitment to one person for life may not be possible anymore. Because having a child outside of marriage seems unfair to herself and the child, the chances are high that she will never have children. She acknowledges this probability with mild regret.



Mary, like Gail, yearned from an early age for a life beyond the boundaries of home, children, and family. As the oldest of six children in a strict Catholic family, she had few illusions about the constant, often thankless task of rearing children. Her father worked hard as an electrician to keep his children clothed and fed. Her mother also worked hard cooking, washing, cleaning, and generally making sure her numerous children stayed out of trouble. Although Mary remembers her mother as devoted to her duties, she also remembers never wanting to follow her example. Her mother's life seemed stifling, and children seemed more a burden than a fulfillment.

Although she harbored vague ambitions for the independence work could offer, she married within a year of high school graduation. She now admits her primary motivation was to escape her parents' home and the confining atmosphere of her family. Unlike many of her friends, however, she did not rush into motherhood, but instead went to work for a mid-sized corporation.

The work was frustrating at first, but every time she quit, she found staying home was worse. From time to time, she considered starting a family; but both she and her husband had become dependent on her income, and she still viewed children as something she was supposed to but did not want. Rather than getting pregnant, she took a series of clerical jobs. Eventually her persistence paid off, and in her late twenties, she was promoted into the lower level of management at a major corporation.

Today Mary is just past thirty. She is more committed to work than ever and still has strong misgivings about becoming a mother, but she also feels the biological clock ticking away. Her husband, who loves young children, is growing impatient to have a child of his own. Mary is beginning to fear that never having a child might condemn her to loneliness later in life. She has recently decided that having one child might be the perfect compromise. With one child, she reasons, she can pursue her growing work ambitions without sacrificing completely the pleasures of building a family.

Despite their divergent class and family backgrounds, neither Gail nor Mary found domesticity an appealing option. Even as children, they viewed motherhood apprehensively and hoped for something different out of life. Although Gail formed clear career goals early in childhood and Mary's goals remained vague well into her twenties, both saw children as a potentially dangerous obstacle to achieving other desired life endeavors. For these women, mothering did not