BALANCING ACT

MOTHERHOOD, MARRIAGE, AND EMPLOYMENT AMONG AMERICAN WOMEN

DAPHNE SPAIN AND SUZANNE M. BIANCHI

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Preface

ALTHOUGH THIS PROJECT BEGAN IN 1994 WHEN THE RUSSELL SAGE Foundation invited us to revise *American Women in Transition*, its current identity emerged only with the realization that a simple update would not suffice. Since 1986, when *American Women* was published as part of the 1980 census monograph series, cosponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation and the National Committee for Research on the 1980 Census, women have continued to experience significant changes in both their family and work lives. In particular, the movement away from marriage, a trend under way when we wrote *American Women* but much more pronounced by the 1990s, required rethinking and reorganizing the chapters on marriage and childbearing. The continued growth of nonmarital childbearing, coupled with high divorce rates, means that women continue to balance motherhood and employment, but many women now execute this balance outside marriage.

The narrowing of the gender earnings gap also necessitated a fairly dramatic revision of earlier analyses of labor force trends and the economic role of women in families. When we were writing *American Women*, the data for young college-educated women only hinted at how much women's work experience had changed and the implications that would have for earnings equality. Another part of the earnings equity story—just how austere the labor market would be in the 1980s for those with less than a college education (especially men)—was also unclear as we placed the finishing touches on *American Women* in 1984.

We would like to thank the Russell Sage Foundation for the visiting summer fellowships in New York that allowed us to complete this research. Colleagues at Russell Sage who were particularly helpful include Eric Wanner, Nancy Casey, David Haproff, Madge Spitaleri, Emma Sosa, and Vivian Kaufman. Kimberly Webb Giamportone deserves special recognition for her expertise and patience in manuscript preparation. Sara Beckman and Jamie Gray provided excellent computer support, and Reynolds Farley encouraged us professionally and personally (and with many good meals) throughout the project. If the current volume is as accessible to nondemographers as we would like, the credit is due to Larry Long, whose precise prose influenced us during our formative years at the Census Bureau, and to Rozlyn Coleman, our editor at the Russell Sage Foundation.

Thanks also are due Leslie Smith and Cindy Larison for their research assistance. Three outside reviewers contributed valuable advice to the final revisions; Joan Huber's thorough, thoughtful reading was especially appreciated. Daphne Spain acknowledges the benefit of a sesquicentennial research leave from the University of Virginia to complete the project, and Suzanne Bianchi acknowledges the support of the Center on Population, Gender, and Social Inequality at the University of Maryland. Finally, as women who have experienced many of the changes documented in these chapters, we are indebted to our families for their emotional and intellectual support.

Daphne Spain
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Introduction

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PROMISES TO BE AN INTERESTING ONE FOR American women. So many of the overt barriers to women's full participation in society have been eliminated that it can be hard to remember that women have been able to vote only since 1920, legally guaranteed the same wages as men in the same jobs since the 1960s, and able to choose abortion as a way to limit their fertility since the 1970s. Yet in the 1990s, women still are not fully represented in public office, employed women still earn less than men with comparable credentials, and reproductive rights are under attack. Whether the next hundred years will see further progress toward gender equality or a possible regression to more traditional roles depends, in part, on the changes described in this book.

The 1960s and 1970s were watershed decades for women. The birth control pill went on the market, abortion was legalized, equal-pay legislation was enacted, and divorce became easier to obtain. But with those gains came additional responsibilities. Young women now must decide whether to have a child (within or outside marriage), whether to cohabit, marry, or divorce, whether to pursue a job or career, and how to construct their lives if they wish to combine one or more of these options. If women at the end of the nineteenth century felt constrained by a lack of choice, women at the end of the twentieth century sometimes express dismay at the endless array of choices they must make.

Some of the most significant changes for women have occurred in the past decade. For example, the growing incidence of motherhood outside marriage is unprecedented. In addition, more women today delay childbearing until their thirties and return to work immediately after their child's birth. As a result, women now spend longer periods of time as mothers than as spouses, and their attachment to the labor force is increasing. In the portrait of contemporary women's lives, children are in the foreground, marriage is in the background, and employment occupies an ever-expanding middle landscape. This development is a primary theme of this book.

In regard to women's work outside the home, the most important news is that the wage gap between women and men narrowed more in the past decade than in any previous period. The ratio of women's to men's earnings finally has responded to women's increased work experience and educational achievement after decades of stagnation. Women's college enrollment rates now exceed those of men, and young women and men are equally likely to have college degrees for the first time in recent history. Counterbalancing these positive developments is evidence that affirmative action and the protection of reproductive rights—policies that helped to close gender gaps in education and earnings—now seem more politically vulnerable than a decade ago. Nevertheless, we believe that women are making slow, steady progress toward equality with men.

Women as a group are more diverse than a decade ago, because of increased immigration and different rates of fertility by race and ethnicity. Census categories indicate a broad range of ethnicities and allow us to examine life patterns for Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian women as well as for black and white women. Heterogeneity also exists *within* these groups depending on immigration status and length of residence in the United States.

We intend to convey just how much the balancing act for American women has changed in the past decade. On the one side are the obligations of family life and personal relationships; on the other are the demands of market work. How these often incompatible (and sometimes overwhelming) forces are resolved is the central challenge of women's lives. The growing proportion of mothers in the labor force is no longer remarkable. What *is*

remarkable is how little has been done to assist families with often conflicting responsibilities, how routinely the problems associated with juggling jobs and children are identified as a "women's issue," not a national one, and how persistent is the unequal division of labor within the home. The barriers that remain, therefore, are as important as the progress of the past decade.

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DEMOGRAPHIC DATA ARE UNIQUELY SUITED BOTH TO CELEBRATING women's achievements and to underscoring the urgency of many families' economic and emotional needs. Demographic data also inform public discourse and policymaking. For example, what are the reasons for, and the consequences of, increased nonmarital fertility? How prevalent is cohabitation as an alternative to marriage? Why do women still earn less than men when their educational profiles are the same? Knowing how many women and their dependent children live in poverty may influence welfare reform policies; realizing that the majority of mothers with infants are in the labor force should create support for child care legislation; and understanding that almost one-third of births now occur outside marriage could lead us to new definitions of what constitutes a family. Our hope is that scholars and policy analysts will use these data to improve women's lives and those of their families.

Much of this book is about the experiences of female birth cohorts. A *cohort* refers to a group of individuals who share a unique set of experiences throughout life. Although cohorts can be defined by events other than birth, the term most commonly refers to all individuals born in a specified time period—that is, a generation. Differences between older and younger women are incorporated into the chapters using cohort analysis. Table I provides a guide to our cohort approach, showing how birth cohorts moved into various age categories during the 1980s.

Women born between 1936 and 1945, *the World War II cohort*, typically reached labor force age between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s. They entered adulthood during the ten-year period leading

TABLE I Labor Force Entry of Birth Cohorts

Birth Cohort	Generation	Labor Force Entry	Age in 1980	Age in 1990
1966–75	Baby bust	Mid-1980s through 1990s	05–14	15–24
1956–65	Late baby boom	Mid-1970s through 1980s	15–24	25–34
1946–55	Early baby boom	Mid-1960s through 1970s	25–34	35–44
1936–45	World War II	Mid-1950s through 1960s	35–44	45–54
1926–35	Parents of baby boom	Mid-1940s through 1950s	45–54	55–64
1916–25	Parents of baby boom	Mid-1930s through 1940s	55–64	65–74
1906–15	Grandparents of baby boom	Mid-1920s through 1930s	65–74	75–84

up to passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which for the first time in American history barred discrimination on the basis of sex. Most of the World War II cohort of women therefore completed their education and began their families before the widespread questioning of gender and racial stereotypes that characterized the 1970s.

The next cohort of women (*the early baby boomers*, born between 1946 and 1955) reached adulthood between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. As a relatively large generation, it created serious dislocations as it moved through school and into the labor force. Elementary and high school classrooms bulged as administrators scrambled for space, and these early baby boomers then flooded college campuses, fueling the activism that became a defining marker of the 1960s. These women had access to the pill and to legalized abortions, a factor that radically changed sexual practices and attitudes toward marriage.

The late baby boom cohort, those born between 1956 and 1965, reached adulthood and began entering the labor force in the mid-1970s. They trailed their older brothers and sisters onto campuses and into the labor market. Following such a large cohort created disadvantages as late boomers settled into adult life: these women entered a labor market in which wage rates were stagnating rather than rising, as they had during the previous four decades. This created added financial pressure for many women, especially low-income ones whose husbands were most affected by the economic restructuring, to work outside the home.

At the same time, women continued to carry the brunt of housework and child care within their families.

Examination of the various cohorts ends with these late baby boomers—the youngest of them having reached prime working age (twenty-five and over) in 1990, the last census year. It will be several years before we can fully examine the education, employment, and earnings profile of the "baby bust" generation, born between 1966 and 1975.

This book uses data collected by the Census Bureau and other federal agencies to document postwar demographic trends. (Unpublished census data come from microdata tapes.) Two large surveys—the Current Population Survey (CPS) and Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP)—allow us to supplement the decennial analyses. The CPS is a monthly national survey of about sixty thousand households that has been conducted since the late 1940s. It was designed primarily to obtain information on employment and unemployment, but regular supplements to the survey address a variety of additional topics. For example, in June the survey asks questions about marital history and fertility; the October supplement asks questions about educational enrollment and attainment; and the March and April surveys ask about income and child support. The SIPP augments the CPS with questions about child care arrangements, child support payments, and income from government programs. The SIPP is a series of longitudinal panels—in which the same individuals are visited every four months over a two- to three-year period—that has been fielded by the Census Bureau since 1984, with sample sizes ranging from twelve thousand to twenty thousand households.

In addition, we use statistics collected by the National Center for Health Statistics on births, deaths, marriages, and divorces. Data on college degrees and undergraduate majors come from the National Center for Educational Statistics of the Department of Education. We also use public opinion data from the National Opinion Research Center affiliated with the University of Chicago.

The advantages of multiple sources of information must be weighed against their disadvantages. Some of the supplemental data, for example, may conflict with census data. Labor force statistics are collected in both the decennial census and the CPS, and, although the definitions are similar, their results sometimes

differ. We rely on the source that is most accurate for the topic under consideration. When data from noncensus sources are clearly superior, or when information is not collected in the census but is available elsewhere, we turn to these auxiliary data sets. Because they provide sample sizes large enough to examine trends for American Indians and Asians as well as for Hispanics, blacks, and whites, the decennial censuses are the primary source for racial and ethnic comparisons.

We also draw on international indicators compiled by the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Labour Office, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In addition, data for several countries are available through the Luxembourg Income Study data base. Because inconsistencies in collection and reporting make international comparisons difficult, even among industrialized nations, country findings are reported according to data availability.

Statistics seldom speak for themselves. We try, in this volume, to present data on women's status in a comprehensive way, informed by demographic, sociological, and economic theory. No doubt, our interpretations will be too conservative for some and too liberal for others, but our goal is to accurately represent the changes in women's lives and the ways in which women's new balancing act is transforming society.

* * *

IT IS PERHAPS WORTH MENTIONING AT THE OUTSET WHAT THIS BOOK IS *NOT* about. We do not discuss women's physical and mental health, despite their possible links to fertility, marriage, and employment. Nor do we consider sexual orientation, although it is relevant to patterns of cohabitation and marriage. Other important "gender issues" beyond the scope of this book include domestic violence, sexual harassment, adoption, and artificial insemination. Our lens is focused on basic demographic trends that can be measured with reliable and comprehensive national data.

In recognition of the change in women's lives, we begin this book with an overview of childbearing patterns among American women (chapter 1). Following that, we turn to marital status and living arrangements (chapter 2). The middle chapters (chapters

3–6) review women's socioeconomic gains of the past decade: in education (chapter 3), in labor force and occupational status (chapter 4), in earnings (chapter 5), and in economic well-being and poverty (chapter 6). Chapter 7 examines how women combine employment and family roles.

The book is organized around the central roles that women occupy throughout their lives. The dominant theme is that most women now perform a variety of paid and unpaid tasks each day, rather than specializing in motherhood at one stage of life and possibly employment at another. The strategies devised by individual women to address these simultaneous demands form the demographic patterns described in this book.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Childbearing

AS THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION CAUGHT FIRE DURING THE LATE 1960S AND early 1970s, premarital sex among young women became increasingly open. Freed from the societal constraints of the 1950s and in increasing control of their reproductive rights, women entered sexual relations with fewer inhibitions. Such sweeping changes in sexual behavior, together with other forces that will be discussed in this chapter, have contributed to a rise in out-of-wedlock births to American women. The result is that the link between motherhood and marriage has become increasingly tenuous in the late twentieth century. In recognition of the primacy of motherhood among women's varied roles, we place the chapter on childbearing first.

A woman ceases to be a wife when she divorces or is widowed, but she remains a parent as long as her child lives; or, as Alice Rossi (1968) puts it, "We can have ex-spouses and ex-jobs, but not ex-children." Although the overall fertility of American women has continued the decline characteristic of this century (with the exception of the baby boom years), three trends in childbearing over the past decade warrant special attention. The first and most significant is the increase in the proportion of births occurring to unmarried women during the 1980s. Almost one in three births took place outside marriage in 1993 compared with one in five in 1980 and one in ten in 1970. Racial differences are particularly pronounced: nearly one-quarter of births to white women and more than two-thirds of births to black women occurred outside marriage in 1993. A second trend is a rise in

teenage childbearing that began in about 1989, after more than a decade of decline. Because disagreement exists about just how detrimental teenage pregnancies are for women, their children, and society, considerable public debate has been devoted to this issue. A third trend is delayed childbearing. Compared with a decade ago, a larger proportion of women in their thirties are now having children.

Other trends worth noting are that birth rates rose slightly during the 1980s, then dropped again in 1991 and 1992. Even with the recent decline, however, the United States now has a fertility rate close to that necessary for natural replacement of the population (2.1 births per woman of childbearing age compared with 1.8 in 1980). Also, birth expectations among younger women have remained approximately stable despite delayed childbearing, and the proportion of women in their forties who are childless has increased slightly.

Fertility Trends and Their Explanations

Demographers look at three basic measures of fertility—the total fertility rate, the age-specific fertility rates, and the number of children ever born—all of which have registered declines over the past few decades. (The measures are described in detail in the appendix.) The total fertility rate (TFR), or the average number of children a woman has in her lifetime, reached a high of 3.6 births per woman during the baby boom and has since declined to an average of 2.1 births per woman. Age-specific fertility rates (ASFR), or the ages at which most childbearing occurs, reflect lower fertility and delayed childbearing trends. In 1960, women's birth rates peaked in their early twenties and at very high levels. Today, birth rates for women in their late twenties are as high or higher than those for women in their early twenties, and the rates decline less precipitously for women in their thirties. The third fertility measure, the number of children ever born to a woman, dropped for married women in their thirties from 3.1 in 1967 to 1.8 in 1992 (see appendix).

Two contending theories have been offered to explain U.S. fertility trends: one by Richard Easterlin (1987) and the other by William Butz and Michael Ward (1979). Easterlin proposes that

fertility moves in predictable cycles that are tied to the income and employment opportunities of men. According to this theory, lifestyle aspirations are formed at an early age based on the income of one's parents. As cohorts reach adulthood and enter the labor force, they compare their own incomes—and their commensurate standards of living—with those of their parents. If their income is greater than anticipated, they will have more children; if it is less, they will have fewer children.

Coupled with this theory is Easterlin's proposition of a negative relationship between a cohort's size and its success in the labor market: small cohorts do well financially, while large cohorts suffer from increased competition for jobs. For example, the small birth cohorts of the 1930s experienced favorable labor market conditions in the 1950s and responded by increasing their fertility (thus producing the baby boom). But the large baby boom cohort entering the labor force during the 1970s faced stiffly competitive labor market conditions and responded by reducing fertility (thus the "birth dearth").

Conflicting support exists for Easterlin's model. His research implies a cohort theory of fertility (that is, preferences are formed early and do not change over the life course), yet others have shown changes in fertility to be quite sensitive to period effects (that is, the fertility rates of all age groups tend to move in the same direction at the same time). It is also true that generational cycles smooth out over time and lose their importance as determinants of fertility (Bianchi and Spain 1986, p. 54).

Some studies have found little validity in the Easterlin hypothesis, while others verify its accuracy (Bianchi and Spain 1986, p. 54; Pampel 1993). Much of the disagreement comes from applying aggregate data to an individual-behavior model and from using different definitions of "relative income." Easterlin's biggest oversight from a contemporary perspective is his emphasis on the income and employment opportunities of *men*, which tends to ignore women's role in the childbearing decision, their participation in the labor force, and the perceived opportunity costs to them of childbearing.

The Butz and Ward model perhaps overcompensates for Easterlin's exclusion of women. They argue that three factors affect the timing of fertility decisions: the proportion of women in the

labor force, the earnings of women, and the earnings of men. According to this theory, while increases in a husband's income raise the demand for children, a wife's wages have the opposite effect. Increases in women's wages tend to depress fertility by amplifying the cost of the wife's forgone wages. By considering the earnings of both wives and husbands, Butz and Ward account for the postwar upswing in fertility—by linking it to the rising incomes of men—and for the decline in the 1970s—by suggesting that as more women began working outside the home their wages improved.

The Butz and Ward countercyclical theory has predicted fertility swings fairly well, but it may prove less useful in the future. Based on the assumption that the trade-offs between fertility and women's employment are made in the context of marriage, the model does not allow for the recent increases in delayed marriage, divorce, and nonmarital childbearing. Butz and Ward's hypothesized relationship between women's employment and fertility may not apply now that such a large proportion of women live outside married-couple households. Even within marriage, we may be reaching a point at which fertility is low enough and women's economic opportunities are high enough that the notion of a trade-off is outdated. Women increasingly are both parents and wage earners at the same time.

In the 1990s, it is perhaps women's and men's decisions about marriage, more so than about childbearing, that should be the subject of scrutiny. Higher earnings for women or diminished earnings for men may predict delays in marriage, just as they predicted lower fertility (Oppenheimer 1993). If so, large numbers of unmarried mothers could be taken as evidence that women are enjoying greater economic independence or that men are facing a decline in economic opportunity. If women continue to bear children, but less often within marriage, the question becomes: are marriages being delayed, or eschewed altogether, because women can afford to live independently, or are marriages being postponed, sometimes permanently, because men cannot afford to marry the mothers of their children? The answer to this question has far-reaching implications for women and men well into the next century.