

Gender Inequality and Fertility Intentions:  
A Four-Country Comparison

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Recent studies of postindustrial fertility have suggested that countries characterized by a high level of gender inequality are likely to have very low birth rates. Gender equity theory, proposed by the Australian demographer Peter McDonald, predicts that fertility is likely to be low in contexts where women have made gains in education and the labor market but where the household division of labor remains heavily skewed towards women. This situation is hypothesized to create a double work burden for women, making it difficult for them to fulfill their fertility goals.

This paper uses gender equity theory to predict country-level differences in individuals' fertility ideals, intentions, and reasoning in four societies. The data consist of over 200 interviews with highly-educated men and women age 24-35 in stable partnerships. Data were collected in two low-fertility societies (Japan and Spain) and two moderate-fertility societies (the U.S. and Sweden). We predict that desired fertility will be two or more children in each society but that fertility intentions (plans) will be lower in Japan and Spain, resulting in a greater "unfulfilled fertility demand" in those countries. Furthermore, we expect to find that women in particular will have a larger fertility ideals-intentions gap in these societies than in the U.S. and Sweden, based on their experience of greater work-family conflict.

We find that mean fertility ideals in each of the four countries are indeed slightly over two children, and that mean fertility intentions are close to two children in the moderate-fertility countries of the U.S. and Sweden. These findings are consistent with our expectations. However, Spanish interviewees also have mean fertility intentions of two children, contrary to what we predicted. Japanese interviewees have the lowest fertility ideals and intentions of all four countries.

Our analysis of individuals' reasoning for their fertility intentions also reveals some unexpected findings. Japanese women do not discuss housework or childcare as limiting their fertility intentions. This seems to be due to the fact that in two-thirds of the Japanese marriages represented in our sample, wives have quit working full-time and thus are not experiencing the double burden of housework and full-time employment. In the remaining one-third of cases where wives are working full-time, fertility intentions are especially low. In all three of the other countries, women bring up the conflict between work and motherhood when they describe how they form their fertility intentions, but the reasons differ across countries.

In Spain, women's focus on employment can be traced to couples' feelings of financial insecurity due to the country's very difficult labor market circumstances; in such an uncertain economic environment, couples assume that women as well as men need to become established in a career in order to ensure the family's economic stability. Ironically, we find that women's concern with work-family conflict in the U.S. and Sweden appears to reflect how far women in these two countries have progressed with regard to their career expectations. In other words, it is *because* American and Swedish women's career goals are so high that they express tension between employment and home when they describe their fertility intentions.

Our findings suggest that work-family conflict persists even in moderate-fertility countries such as the U.S. and Sweden, rather than being limited to low-fertility countries. This is due to highly-educated women's considerable progress in the labor market and the taken-for-grantedness of full-time work. In the U.S., the norm of full-time employment exists alongside a situation where neither high-quality affordable childcare nor paid parental leave are certainties, creating a persistent concern over meeting one's fertility ideals.