

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.



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.