

Stewart D. Friedman. *Baby Bust. New Choices for Men and Women in Work and Family.*

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In 2013, children born to white families in the US constituted the minority, for the first time in the history of the country. From 2007, the average number of births per woman has been on a steady decline, dropping to 1.89 in 2011, significantly below the replacement rate of 2.1 (National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). At the background of the aging population in the developed countries worldwide, it is a very disturbing trend. Even more dramatic is the tendency of the *baby bust*, a staggering number of both men and women opting out of parenthood.

The reasons why this is happening are explored in the longitudinal study of the Wharton School of Business (University of Pennsylvania) classes of 1992 and 2012 by the Practice Professor of Management at the Wharton School Stewart D. Friedman. These two groups of subjects represent two distinct demographic generations in America, Generation X, or Gen Xers, and Millennial generation, or Millennials. A shocking finding of this study, which prompted Friedman to write the book under the review, is that the rate of college graduates who plan to have children has dropped by half over the past 20 years: 58 percent of Millennial men and women in equal proportions are opting out of parenthood!

As the baby bust is not happening in a vacuum, decisions about whether to have children are based on a number of social, cultural and economic factors, which are explored in detail in *Baby Bust. New Choices for Men and Women in Work and Family.* The most important thing that Friedman emphasizes is to understand what has happened during these 20 years that has “busted” parenthood and how the related issues could be mitigated to reverse this trend.

Therefore, the *Introduction* and the first chapter, *How We Got There*, address the issues related to the problem. The news, as the author points out, is both bad and good. On the one hand, young people value personal relationships and family, and they consider parenthood very important for them. On the other hand, career ambitions, new time requirements at work and job competition create an intense conflict between these two aspects of their lives. On the one hand, traditional, narrowly defined gender stereotypes have been revised, and women are increasingly seen as peers at work, and there is a growing cultural understanding that children rearing is not a women’s issue, but a human issue. On the other hand, higher mobility, lower stability, much greater debt for education financing, and the narrowing gender gap leave both men and women much more focused on their career than families and children. There were other significant differences found between Gen Xers and Millennials: the latter consider friendships much more important for the success of their lives, are more interested in social recognition in their careers, women in particular seek status and respect, both genders have lower ambitions about career achievement (they prefer job security)

and want more time for themselves.

Having thus set the framework of his investigation, Friedman further proceeds to exploring gender-specific variables influencing decision-making of his research population. Chapter Two is dedicated to the question why fewer men plan to have children now. While both of his 1992 and 2012 cohorts expected to have trouble managing the competing demands of work and family, the intensity of such anticipated conflicts has increased. While the former group of male graduates believed that they still could have families, the latter one doubted this proposition. Among the major reasons for the American men of modern generation (unlike their Japanese counterparts)<sup>1</sup> is the fact that most of them have grown up in families with working mothers, expect their wives to be working too and therefore no longer see themselves as the sole breadwinner. Surprisingly, it is those, who challenge the traditional gender role assumptions, are choosing to have children, while men with traditional views are less likely to become fathers.

The same question related to females is explored in Chapter Three “Why Fewer Women Plan to Have Children Now.” The study found that while 79 percent of Gen Xers said they planned to have children, only 41 percent of Millennials planned to do so. This radical shift is a reflection of social progress, when “Millennial women are no longer bound by outmoded expectations that they be the primary nurturers at home and are freer to make choices based on their own unique strengths, talents and desires” (p. 40). But, on the other hand, even those who value parenting are struggling with how to make motherhood a reality. 2012 women have developed a stronger interest in solving social problems through their careers, apparently at the expense of motherhood. The paradigm shift from 20 years ago is evident in the different values women pursue in their life: while Gen Xers aspired for flexibility in work hours, time for family, and job security, their younger counterparts seek challenging tasks, opportunities for expressing creativity, and power and influence. A new vocabulary mirrors this shift: talking about their life choices young women today refer to themselves not as “childless” but as “childfree.” Also, for women of 1992 the importance of maintaining health was associated with motherhood, while for 2012 women, the association was with fitness. A significant difference is also observed between Millennial men and women as the intention to make a positive social impact is connected, for women, with the devotion to their careers; for men, it goes hand in hand with fatherhood.

The transformation of gender roles and values, or a gender role revolution, as the author calls it, naturally redefines family, an issue explored in Chapter Four. Having a family and being a parent are no longer synonymous for the new generation; moreover the start of a family life is pushed further on, after building a career first. Even though Millennials hold more egalitarian beliefs, gender roles are slow to change and women still continue to bear the greater burden for childcare. An interesting finding is that while men are eschewing traditional gender roles, more Millennial women are reverting to them, with both genders' views meeting in the middle. Specifically, as women now care more about earning a great deal of money, and having material wealth and a high standard of living, they are more willing to make sacrifices in their careers if their

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<sup>1</sup> A reviewer's comment

partners are more capable to provide the desired standard of living. The conclusion of Friedman is that modern women have “thrown off the rose-colored glasses the previous generation wore” (p. 57). They obviously have a clearer view of the future in which they can’t “have it all” and opting out of parenthood is really not a matter of choice. Understanding the new demands on the family life makes very appropriate the striking advice of one female CEO, quoted in the book: for young women, the most important career choice is the husband they select.

A concluding chapter, *We Are All Part of the Revolution*, draws important practical implications of the study’s key findings for the society, organizations and individuals. While eschewing moral judgment of individual life choices, the author however is resolute about the following: we need to continue replacing the human population; children still need caretakers to lovingly attend to them; and we, as a society, need to provide opportunities and choices to ensure a brighter future for young men and women and subsequent generations.

A socially and economically significant conclusion, which the book draws, is that we need our organizations and social institutions to cultivate an increasingly adaptable and productive workforce that can both compete in the global economy and raise the next generation. For this, the author suggests several reasonable and feasible measures. On the one hand, the society has to provide world-class childcare, and on this issue the United States (just like Japan)<sup>2</sup> are notoriously behind not only some developed but even developing countries. Other socially instigated actions should be making family leaves available, revising the school calendar, requiring mandatory public service, and others. On the other hand, an organizational change is essential too, since the employers have to take into consideration new realities and support employees’ development as valued assets to business. To do this the author insists that companies need to realize that Millennials do want to work, but they need greater flexibility and greater control over how they spend their time. He suggests some practical steps for this effect: a) set clear goals pursued by flexible means; b) declare that this policy is not for women only, it concerns men too, since family issues are no longer “women’s issues”; c) provide support for childcare, encouraging and supporting government sponsorship of excellent childcare; d) making work more meaningful by showing how employees have a positive social impact through their work and popularizing successful role models; e) changing the culture of overwork, specifically by putting an end to “the glorification of the work warrior” (a dear concept for the Japanese work culture, too)<sup>3</sup>, and some others.

Concluding the review, it should be noticed that Friedman’s research has revealed a number of important changes that have occurred gradually in the mentality of the young generation of the United States. The study has exposed very profound metamorphoses in modern men’s and women’s expectations for work and family. Since the processes involved in this transformation are not just limited to one country and concern the future propagation of human race in general the conclusion of the research is worth noticing. Furthermore, as the evidence from the study is drawn from a cohort of promising young business professionals, understanding its implications

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<sup>2</sup> A reviewer’s comment

<sup>3</sup> A reviewer’s comment

is quite important for global social, cultural and economic development. As an educating and enjoyable reading, Friedman's book is definitely a must-read not only for the young people who are embarking on their adult life with its many difficult choices, but for employers, managers, politicians - anybody who is in power to make those choices easier and better for all.