

“Catching up with ‘compressed modernity’” - How the values of Millennials and Gen-Z’ers could reframe gender equity and demographic systems

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The brief in this series is to consider this question: “What is the most important factor likely to influence future fertility trends and why?” When we look around the world, there are issues that are more dominant in one place than in another. Moreover, given the broad diversity in the policy mechanisms, labour market contexts, geographies, and cultures of our global(ised) society, it is impossible to identify any kind of catch-all “thing” that will affect fertility rates (if we implement it), as the brief asks us to do.

However, there is one thread that runs through the context of childbearing in all parts of the world: gender equality and equity (or the lack thereof).

Japan and Uganda have, on the surface, little in common. But in each setting, there is a notable gap between the number of children women say they want to have and the number of children they end up having; and gender roles are arguably central to understanding the gaps in each of these contexts. It has been pointed out that Japan represents an extreme example of the “incomplete gender revolution” observed in many lower fertility settings around the world, which implies that changes in women’s roles in the private sphere have not caught up to the revolution in women’s roles in the public sphere. Moreover, the current #KuToo movement in Japan, in which women are rebelling against the strict dress codes imposed upon them, is just one piece of evidence that the public sphere revolution is hugely incomplete as well. Meanwhile, in Uganda – as in other places around the world – the reproductive aspirations of younger women are all too often frustrated by those with conflicting aspirations and expectations about families or contraception. Sometimes, the individuals who stand in the way are the women’s (prospective) husbands.

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Other times, older members of the community or of other organisations, such as the church, attempt to frustrate the reproductive aspirations of (younger) women and men (Kabagenyi et al. 2014; Nalwadda et al. 2010). Consider this quote from an unmarried Ugandan male in his early twenties:

Parents and elders are against contraceptives. If they find you with a condom, they lose confidence in you . . . parents should be made to accept that things are changing to allow these methods . . . nature is nature, young people need sex, it is better to tell them about contraceptives

(Kabagenyi et al. 2014).

To a certain degree, the gendered inequalities discussed in the Japanese context are also the product of intergenerational transmission. Whether from bosses to workers, or from parents/in-laws to their offspring and their families, there is a multiplier of age and time that accompanies the nurturing and development of gendered norms and expectations concerning work, the family, and all other aspects of life. To return to the #KuToo movement in Japan, the issue isn't just that men are imposing sexist norms on women; but that *older men* (with more power) are imposing sexist norms on *younger women*.

The above quote from Uganda gives us a clue as to the possible resolution of these inequities. Chang Kyung-Sup refers to "compressed modernity" as the "civilizational condition in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space" (Chang 2010, 444). Under these circumstances, "the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system" (Chang 2010, 444). Perhaps no other society better encapsulates the notion of compressed modernity than South Korea, the home nation of Chang Kyung-Sup. Within two generations, that country has seen a dramatic transformation in almost every aspect of social and economic life. However, certain aspects of Korean society persist, especially around gender; and they operate through the cultural and institutional grip that older generations have on the young. When we look at Uganda, the idea of "compressed modernity" might appear harder to discern. Economic transformation and urbanisation has certainly altered the relationship between the people and the land. However, if we define compressed modernity in the manner above, we can easily imagine modern family planning technology as a "change" that occurred in an "extremely condensed manner"; which has led to the emergence of the kind of "mutually disparate" systems described in the quote above. By extension, the intergenerationally transmitted "dominant yet detached" role of the man in reproductive decision-making (Paz Soldan 2004; Greene 2000) has been shown to be malleable in many parts of the world.

Surveys tend to suggest that younger people are adopting a more gender-egalitarian approach to both work and family than their parents and grandparents, even in parts of the world characterised by very traditional gender roles (Gietel-Basten 2019). Younger people (generally) have more progressive views regarding

family forms, sexuality, family planning technology, birth planning, and female autonomy in reproductive decision-making. A recent study of 12th-graders in the US over the past 40 years found that “contemporary young people exhibited greater openness to a variety of division of labor scenarios for their future selves as parents” (Dernberger and Pepin 2020, 36).

The question, I believe, is whether younger people today will reflect on their (gendered) frustrations under conditions of compressed modernity, and “free” the next generation from these obligations when they go on to become bosses, parents, and, in some cases, religious and secular leaders.

Will they even go further, and draw up a new reproductive contract based on *equity*? If they do, the biggest hurdle to the actualisation of reproductive preferences will be removed, and this shift could, in turn, have a dramatic impact on fertility rates in the future.

In theory, as older generations (and perspectives) are replaced, we might assume that the views of the younger generation automatically become ascendant. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. As contexts change, so do values. The transition from being a person who wants to buy a home to a person who owns a home may, for example, be accompanied by a profound shift in the person’s view of affordable housing. To be sure, the forces of hundreds of years of cultural norms will be exerting substantial pressure to hold such gender roles constant. It may well be the case that the progressive views of the young become so bent and misshapen by the choices they will have to make in order to “conform” to society that these views become unrecognisable by the time they reach middle age. Flexibility around roles is not the same thing as equality or equity in their distribution. Even though the study by Derberger and Pepin cited above found that younger people have greater “openness” to more progressive scenarios of the division of domestic labour, they also observed that “the husband-as-earner/wife-as-homemaker arrangement remained most desired” (p. 36). It appears that there is still a very long way to go.

Thus, it is clear that such a radical change will require a profound shift in attitudes; i.e., a paradigm shift. It will require the sharing of power, rather than the hoarding of it. It will demand a generosity of spirit that is not always easy to muster. “I was bullied, so I will bully you” can translate into “I didn’t have kids to further my career, so if you have kids, what do you expect?” In the household, partnerships will have to take on a much more holistic and comprehensive meaning; a fairer, more balanced, more equitable distribution of household responsibilities is urgently needed (Freeman et al. 2018).

So my succinct answer to the question of what factor will have the biggest impact on fertility rates in the future is that it is whether Millennials and Generation Z’ers turn out differently than we and our own parents did, and shape the economic and social system in better, fairer ways. These younger people could start off by updating the reproductive contract for the 21st century by putting gender equity at the heart of it. I really, really hope that they do – and I think they might.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Cameron Campbell, Joy Cruz, Rachel Ganly, Zilin Li and the editors/reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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