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[Emily Freeman](#), Xiaohong Ma, Ping Yan, Wenshan Yang
and Stuart Gietel-Basten

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**‘I couldn't hold the whole thing’: The role of gender, individualisation and risk in
shaping fertility preferences in Taiwan**

Emily Freeman, Ma Xiaohong, Yan Ping, Yang Wenshan & Stuart Gietel-Basten

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Abstract

Taiwan has one of the lowest fertility rates in Asia. High direct and indirect costs of childbearing have been identified as key drivers behind this at the macro-level, but little is known about the mechanism of these influences at the individual-level. In 32 qualitative interviews with parents in Taipei, we sought to explore the salient factors for couples in their decisions about having further children. We identified a tension between gendered expectations of childcare responsibilities and women's desire to 'build a life of one's own' - a life with options and the freedom to pursue career and social aspirations. Based on our grounded analysis, we reflect on the high relevance of individualisation, risk society and incomplete gender revolution theories for understanding why many couples - and women in particular - choose to cease childbearing at parity one.

KEYWORDS: Taiwan, fertility, gender inequity, gender inequality, risk society, individualisation

Introduction

Pacific Asia is currently home to some of the lowest fertility rates on earth. At 1.07, Taiwan has one of the lowest fertility rates in the region (United Nations, 2015). In the capital Taipei City, the 2010 total fertility rate (TFR) was just 0.89, falling from 1.51 in 2000 (CEPD, 2010). These patterns in TFR are unlikely to be due to delaying childbearing to later ages: a genuine decline in fertility is confirmed in cohort measurements and forecasts. Myrskylä et al. (2013) estimate persistent declines in lifetime fertility in Taiwan. They predict the 1979 cohort fertility to be as low as 1.35, the lowest of all 37 developed countries they consider. Fertility decline in the context of increasing longevity is widely expected to pose social, economic and welfare challenges, at least in the short term (see Frejka, Jones, & Sardon, 2010 for East Asia generally; Poston & Zhang, 2014 for Taiwan). Understanding the key drivers of current low fertility is therefore of paramount importance. Within the study of low fertility in Asia, the role of gender has been presented as critical.

The mechanisms by which gender roles affect childbearing are complex and multifaceted, and must be examined both on an individual level and in terms of the institutional frameworks in which they operate. In the Asian context, existing analyses have focused on quantitatively establishing that there *is* a relationship between gender roles and fertility intentions and outcomes. Little is known about the *way* in which these factors – or indeed other costs of childbearing – interact with decisions about having children. Qualitative studies that could provide insights into the nature of interactions (*how* mechanisms such as the labour market or gender equity might impact on fertility preferences and outcomes) are rare still (for a notable exception, see Sun, 2012).

This paper seeks to make both an empirical contribution and theoretical reflection to understanding the reasons for low fertility. First, we present a unique qualitative exploration of the childbearing experiences of mothers and fathers in Taipei, Republic of China, Taiwan. Our focus is on the factors – both micro- and macro-level – that they themselves felt were important in shaping their future fertility decisions. Secondly, based on our grounded analysis of these qualitative data, we appraise the relevance of Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim’s individualisation thesis and risk society framework for understanding fertility decline, outlined below. In doing so, the paper contributes to understanding how women’s and men’s experiences of childbearing might influence fertility not just in Taipei, but also the wider Pacific Asian region.

Theoretical context

The costs of childbearing

A large body of theoretical and empirical research has explored the reasons for low fertility in Pacific Asia (see, for example, Frejka et al, 2010; McDonald, 2009). It discusses a series of direct and indirect costs of childbearing. Direct costs are typically presented as being economic, and revolve around relatively high costs of living related to housing and children’s formal and ancillary education (Anderson & Kohler, 2013; Lee, 2005). These are arguably exacerbated by institutional characteristics. For example, labour market conditions – with high rates of youth unemployment and non-traditional, fragile contracts – as well as overarching economic malaise can be translated into lower fertility and fertility preferences in Pacific Asia as elsewhere (Adsera, 2010; Basten & Verropoulou, 2015). The family policy packages to support childbearing implemented by some Pacific Asian governments have

generally been deemed to be inadequate in meeting the high financial costs of childbearing (McDonald, 2006).

However, these direct costs of childbearing are by no means unique to Pacific Asia. Numerous scholars have argued that what especially marks out the region are the indirect costs of childbearing, or perhaps more particularly, the ‘opportunity costs’ of childbearing. In this context, gender roles and relations have emerged as having critical importance. The most recent investigations into reasons for current fertility trends in the East Asian region, including Taiwan, all place gender inequity in housework and childcare centre stage (Kan & Hertog, 2017; Nagase & Brinton, 2017; Yoon, 2017).

Incomplete Gender Revolution

Recent empirical studies of the role of gender on fertility build on established theoretical explanations of the link. In an attempt to move beyond the classic New Home Economics theory (NHET) of opportunity costs to childbearing (Becker, 1960) which could not account for reversal of fertility declines in European countries, scholars such as Peter McDonald and Gosta Esping-Andersen have posited the notion of the ‘Incomplete Gender Revolution’ (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015; McDonald, 2000). While the NHET argued that increasing women’s participation in the labour force and earning power lowered fertility by increasing the opportunity costs of childbearing and decreasing the gains to be made from marriage and childrearing based on traditional gendered divisions of labour within the family, the Incomplete Gender Revolution focuses attention on what is happening to gender equity during this shift. To characterise this framework in a nutshell, they argue that in many settings with persistent low fertility, the dramatic changes in women’s *public* sphere roles have not been matched with changes in women’s *private* sphere

roles as the primary carers of children or in societal expectations of their caregiving role. Subsequently, the demands on women's labour have increased dramatically, intensifying the opportunity and emotional costs of childbearing and the motivation to limit fertility. In contrast, in settings in which gender equity is improved in *both* public and private life, such as in some European countries, women's wider set of horizons outside of the household are balanced with shared responsibilities inside the household. The costs of childbearing for women are subsequently lessened, couples' relationships are happier, and fertility increases from previous low levels.

The influence of heavily gendered roles in the home on contemporary fertility trends have been identified across Pacific Asia, in both what Song et al. (2013) term conservative developmental regimes, such as Japan and Singapore, and in more liberal developmental regimes such as South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Kan and Hertog (2017) find that wives' desire for more children is associated with their husbands' greater involvement in housework in China, Japan, South Korean and Taiwan, while Nagase and Brinton (2017) find husbands' share of household work is a significant predictor of second births for dual earning couples in Japan. In familial systems in which women are also expected to care for older relatives – usually parents and parents-in-law – as well as providing the majority of childcare and other domestic duties, the costs of childbearing are compounded (Ikels, 2004). Conversely, data from South Korea indicate that when co-resident parents or in-laws are able to provide assistance with childcare alongside husbands, second births are more likely (Yoon, 2017).

Individualisation and 'Risk'

While the ‘Incomplete Gender Revolution’ thesis has been highly influential in shaping views surrounding low fertility in Pacific Asia, other writings emanating from late-modern social theory may also provide valuable insights. We highlight Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim’s (2001) work on ‘individualisation’ and ‘risk’ and their interaction with aspects of the incomplete gender revolution.

‘Individualisation’ charts the changing function of the family from a primarily economic orientation geared towards production, to a primarily social orientation geared towards individual choices and activities. Within this process, men and women have been active agents in shaping and reshaping their own identities within both the home and the wider world, gaining freedoms and options. Rather than living out the lives that past institutions had designed for them, men and women have set out to ‘organise their own biography’ with the goal of creating a ‘life of ones’ own’. Women, for example, are *theoretically* cut free from their ‘status fate’ as housewives. Along with this are many elements which we would normally associate with the Second Demographic Transition: self-empowerment and self-expression leading to a multiplicity of family formation typologies which better reflect the desires, wishes and needs of individuals rather than solely longer-standing societal norms.

On the other side of the individualisation dynamic is the ‘risk society’. This second core concept asserts that as the family exerts less influence in defining people’s lives, social and economic bonds and responsibilities within the family weaken. Risk is disproportionately transferred from the collective – the extended family – to the individual. What this means in practice is that the ‘penalty’ for an adverse outcome is predominantly shouldered by the individual with less support from elsewhere. In the context of these changing support systems, actors develop behaviour which, while asserting their desire to ‘build a life of one’s

own’, is simultaneously ‘risk averse’. With regards to fertility choices, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue:

The greater people’s options and demands for a bit of ‘a life of one’s own’ and the greater the attendant risks, uncertainties and demands, the more does having children cease to be a natural part of life, and become the object of conscious planning and calculation, hopes and fears – in short, the more it becomes the ‘question of children’ (p. 126).

Building upon the notion of the Incomplete Gender Revolution, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim note that while women have been encouraged – indeed expected – to build a life of their own, as have men, the expectations upon women as mothers and partners have not kept pace with that. The burden of childcare and domestic labour has rested disproportionately on women – and various institutions have served either deliberately or accidentally to maintain that status quo. These institutions predominantly revolve around the labour market and welfare systems, but also concern residual familial obligations. Under these circumstances of primary responsibility for childcare and inadequate facilities to combine employment and parenting, women increasingly have to weigh-up a desire for children with considerable individual-level costs to their careers, daily workloads, leisure and financial security in older age and in the event of divorce. In sum, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim conclude:

So long as it is an individual task for women (through trial and error, balancing acts and ever precarious makeshift efforts) to resolve the tension between their wish to have children and to have a life of their own; so long as political measures to make these different spheres compatible remain skimpy or even non-existent; so long as men do not become noticeably more willing to take an active share in child care – so long as these things do not happen it is hardly to be expected that the birth rates will increase significantly (p.126).

Approach and context

Our purpose is to explore qualitatively the context of childbearing preferences for men and women in an Asian low fertility setting, in an attempt to uncover the nuanced function gender

roles (or any other factor) might play in fertility decisions. To do so we applied a ‘case-study’ approach, which allows for an ‘in-depth, multi-faceted exploration of complex issues in their real-life setting’ (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 1). We set out to uncover information about the (direct and indirect) costs of childbearing and how they might shape childbearing preferences. However, we also sought to uncover the complex ways by which broader dynamics might mediate such preferences. As such, similar to hypothesis testing research, the case-study allows for ‘problem definition and construct validation’ (Eisenhardt, 1989) – in this case with regards to gender, individualisation and risk, and the link back to the construction of fertility preferences.

We explore these themes in the context of the urban agglomeration of Taipei City and New Taipei City (hereafter Taipei), Taiwan. While there is a large literature relating to fertility preferences in Taiwan (e.g. Chen, 2012; Mei-Lin Lee, 2009; Lin & Yang, 2009), as elsewhere in the region, empirical studies have focussed on quantitative approaches (Basten & Verropoulou, 2015), especially through time-use surveys (e.g. Kan & Hertog, 2017).

In common with many other cities in the region, Taipei has a high rate of human capital accumulation and a very high cost of living – indicators of both the direct and indirect economic costs of childbearing previously associated with low fertility in Pacific Asia in the literature. Since 2006 specific pro-natalist measures have been implemented in the form of the ‘Mega Warmth Programme’ (Jones, Straughan, & Chan, 2009). These have focused primarily on public family policy interventions. Efforts to develop childcare facilities, financial assistance for families, creation of family-friendly workplaces, revision of parental protections, improvement of the reproductive care system, creation of child-safe environments and opportunities to meet prospective reproductive partners, have been

combined with various financial incentives, including childcare subsidies, ‘baby bonuses’, income tax rebates and housing subsidies (Chen, 2012; Mei-Lin Lee & Lin, 2016). The local government has sought to play an additional role with ‘top-up’ policies to support families (Government, 2014). The rationale of these policies have been criticised by feminists and environmentalists (Mei-Lin Lee, 2009) and have failed to tackle household gender imbalances.

Methods

This study explored the childbearing and parenting experiences and desires of men and women with at least one child in Taipei. It focused on fertility intentions rather than fertility ideals since intentions have a more powerfully predictive power for demographic outcomes than ideals, which typically reflect broader social norms and attitudes (Philipov, Thévenon, Klobas, Bernardi, & Liefbroer, 2009). In doing so, the study aimed to investigate the complex factors that shape individuals’ fertility in this setting where contraceptive availability and use-willingness is high (Cernada, Sun, Chang, & Tsai, 2007).

The results presented in this paper are a product of competing, but not incompatible, qualitative research paradigms adopted by the authors. Data collection was designed to critically investigate the relevance of existing theories of fertility decline (the direct and indirect costs discussed), informed by a post-positivist social demographic approach; inductive analysis that prioritised data generated over any existing theories or empirical studies was informed by a constructivist social science paradigm.

Data were generated using broadly-structured in-depth interviews (N=32) with men (n=16) and women (n=16) between March 2014 and September 2015. Participants were purposively

sampled to maximise variation in characteristics likely to influence their fertility intentions (see Table 1). A local research consultancy recruited participants from their database of people who had previously agreed to be contacted about participating in social research. Participation was voluntary and the purpose of the research was explained to each potential participant prior to interviews. Participants were offered a gift of US\$10 in return for their time.

Each conversation lasted around an hour and followed a similar pattern, interviewers asking about both mothers' and fathers' careers and working hours, childcare arrangements, childbearing and parenting within their social networks, their expectations of parenting, constraints on further childbearing and fertility plans, as well as participants' understanding of the reasons for low fertility in their country. Although interviews were structured, the qualitative approach adopted allowed participants to voice the experiences, practices and concerns that they felt were most relevant to the topic under investigation. Interviews subsequently explored participants' day-to-day parenting practices and experiences, their plans for the future and the structural (e.g. professional, religious and familial) influences shaping their fertility intentions.

Interviews were carried out in Mandarin by local research assistants. Participants chose the site of the interview. The vast majority of interviews were carried out at participants' homes, occasionally with other family members (spouses or parents) present. A small number of interviews were carried out at participants' place of work and three interviews were eventually carried out over the telephone. Location and medium of interview and the presence of other people was taken into account during analysis.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and translated verbatim. Inductive thematic analysis of these transcripts was carried out using NVivo data analysis software (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2012). Using a strategy informed by the constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), interview transcripts were read, re-read and grouped line-by-line (coded) into fluid concepts and themes according to the perspectives, experiences and concepts identified within and across them. Questions and thoughts were documented in a series of successive memos that were continually revised based on comparisons across participants and within the narratives of a single participant. Comparisons were made using a series of subtle and nuanced questions such as:

- What do participants say about a certain topic? What is the range of discourses about a certain topic?
- Why is there a range of discourses about a certain topic? How else do these participants differ?
- What social or linguistic references does a participant draw upon? Why might they draw upon these particular references? What variation is there in these references?
- What is the influence of the researchers and research process on a participants' narrative?
- How do the narratives recorded in the transcripts not only reflect, but also shape, participants' experiences?

By considering links between codes and memos a more abstracted analysis was built up and documented in further memos. Analysis was reflexive and took account of the way data were generated and the questions participants had been asked, as well as the influence of the lead authors' own feminist outlook.

The final stage of the analysis was to integrate memos in the way that best presented the relationship between the various analytical ideas. The emergent central story was then refined by reviewing its internal consistency (its 'logic'), 'trimming it' by checking that all the analytical ideas included really fit with the analytical 'story' and most importantly, returning to the raw, uncoded data to check that it could explain most cases (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The broader literature and theoretical perspectives we present in the paper represents our extended reflections on this data-centred analysis. Quotations from the interviews we highlight (with accompanying pseudonyms) were selected for their illustrative power of the themes and perspectives that emerged in the analysis. Care was taken to ensure quotations were selected from a full range of participants.

Ethical review was conducted and granted by the University of Oxford and consequently approved by *Academica Sinica*.

Results

Men and women's intentions about having further children were informed by their experiences of pregnancy, childbirth and parenting so far. Rather than ideals held at the beginning of participants' childbearing lives, the dominant factor shaping whether they reported wanting more children or having completed their families was how pleasurable or difficult having a child had been for them. Beyond pregnancy and childbirth, individuals' parenting experiences reflected whether childcare for them primarily involved provision of

‘hands-on’ day-to-day care (looking after children) or provision of financial support through employment. These parenting roles were gendered. In this sample, while some mothers and fathers provided both ‘hands-on’ care and financial support, only mothers provided exclusively ‘hands-on’ care and only fathers provided exclusively or near-exclusively financial support.

Participants who provided ‘hands-on’ day-to-day care typically reported more significant changes to their lives after becoming parents than those primarily providing financial support.

Interviewer: OK, well, do you think there is any difference between your life now you have children and before?

Pai-han: At most, it’s economic situation. In terms of economics! [That’s what] I think about! Giving birth to babies costs so much money. You would have to pay for their caring expenses, such as food, drink, diapers, and insurance after they were born... Right! This part is hardest to accept.

[Pai-han, Male, two children, primarily financial care]

[Life with children] is still OK! It is acceptable. Before having a kid, I thought that a child would tie up my life. For example, I must take care of her or something. It would invite a lot of negative effects. Later on, however, because it is my mother-in-law or the elders in the family take care of the kid for most of the time, the kid doesn't really affect that much of my time.

[Cheng-han, Male, one child, primarily financial care]

Interviewer: After you have a child, what kind of change did you have in your life?

Shu-hui: It did really change. In fact, it was just you had your own leisure time in the past. But, the time you get alone with yourself becomes less now. Every day, you are with your kid!... I have no freedom to use my time as before.

[Shu-hui, female, one child, ‘hands-on’ and financial care]

The negative experiences, or ‘costs’, associated with providing care were similarly linked to the primary type of care participants’ provided. Those who provided primarily ‘hands on’ care discussed the energy required to raise children as well as feeling isolated as their social world had retracted around caring for their children; those who primarily provided financial support more frequently discussed economic implications of parenting, such as the price of

housing and education – the direct costs of childbearing outlined in previous research (McDonald, 2009). Further – and perhaps consequently – the costs associated with providing primarily ‘hands-on’ care were much more strongly associated with fertility intentions to limit childbearing than the costs experienced by those primarily providing financial support. That is to say, looking across participants’ narratives, caregiving experiences such as tiredness and social isolation were far more salient motivations for smaller families for than those such as financial concerns about the cost of children.

While the high financial cost of children’s education, housing and clothing etcetera was readily acknowledged by participants, and indeed by all the fathers in the sample, it was rarely discussed as a principal reason for limiting family size. Of the few fathers providing primarily financial support and little ‘hands-on’ care who reported wanting no further children, only one suggested that money was their sole motivation. The vast majority of fathers who provided primarily financial support reported wanting more children, or being indifferent about having more children (no mothers were indifferent about having further children), and did so *despite* their concerns about money. Indeed, participants commented that those who wanted more children would adjust their finances to find a way to pay for them:

It depends on what kind of life you want...The income is enough for you to get married and have children. The only thing is their life is tougher. Tougher for a while! [But that’s] no concern!

[Kuan-lin, Male, one child, primarily financial care]

The influence of providing ‘hands-on’ care alone

Having negative experiences of parenting and the association between those experiences and personal intentions to stop childbearing was much more prevalent among participants who

felt that they were providing all, or almost all, of the ‘hands-on’ care for their children. Participants providing this care more-or-less alone were all women. Whether or not participants were providing hands-on care as part of a parenting team was the clearest and most consistent predictor of reporting an intention to stop childbearing in this study.

Consider for example the cases of Hui-chun and Chia-ling. Both women found caring for their first children difficult:

I remember he would still cry in the night at the age of 2 or 3. That was-! I did not know why he wanted to cry. Was the cry due to a nightmare? Or, the cry was because he was hungry? ... So I thought it was very tough to take care of him. I sat and was crying in the bathroom... [asking] ‘Why did I have a baby? Why torture myself?’ It was because you couldn’t sleep at night or during the daytime. Because I was breastfeeding, then, he got up every hour at night to drink breast milk. There was no way to have a rest... I felt a lot of pressure at that time.

[Hui-chun]

It was still OK when I got pregnant but not after giving birth. Right! Then, I had to do everything for him when I had no idea of anything in the first beginning. Right! His food, clothing, housing, and travelling... in the beginning I just felt I was staying in a hell every day because the child’s day and night were running in reverse! [...] I hardly had my own time! Breastfeeding, doing household chores, and cooking, everyday tied up together, always stuck to [my baby].

[Chia-ling]

However unlike Hui-chun, Chia-ling’s frustrations with providing ‘hands-on’ care had not dissuaded her from having more children in future. At the time of the interview she was pregnant with her second child and reported wanting more. In her narrative, the ‘hell’ of caring for a baby is quickly replaced with what she later refers to as the ‘joy’ of having children in her life:

But slowly [that changed], I feel caring for a child is quite a happy thing... So, I feel I will have courage to have a second child. Right! Right! I see him growing up, it is very fun [...] I come to quite enjoy the experience of childrearing! Therefore, I think having the second kid won’t make me feel terrible.

The major difference between the women's narratives is the extent to which 'hands-on' care is shared between parents. Neither woman considered their husband's provision of financial support to be a sufficient contribution to parenting. Indeed, Chia-ling acknowledges that her husband is tired at the end of the working day – but not as tired as she is from providing 'hands-on' care:

I wish when he comes back [from work], I like him to be happy and playing with the kids! Then, he plays a kind father role. But, usually when he comes back, he has been worn out and just wants to watch TV! Something like that. And then I look at him. Then, I feel kind of, of course, I feel: 'Wow! I have been caring for my child for a whole day. It is so tough! Why do you look so tired when you come back?

Nevertheless, Chia-ling's husband does provide some 'hands-on' care, spending a couple of hours with his child in the evenings and three or four hours on weekends. She highlights her husband's co-parenting as a reason to look forward to having their second child; Hui-chun on the other hand, in a more common narrative in women's interviews, singles out her husband's insufficient childcare as her motivation for wanting to stop childbearing:

At the first moment I knew I was pregnant, I was afraid...It is better than I expected. Perhaps [because] my husband, he is also very considerate. So, I can, just enjoy caring for children.

[Chia-ling]

My husband pays very limited attention to our child! ... He will just provide lip-service: 'I love kids!' But, why do you spend so little time on him? ... I just feel he makes little effort on it which deters me from having more kids... If he is the person who is very actively involved in children, I would be looking forward to having another baby. But, he is not! Sometimes he is at home with his child [rather than at the office or his leisure activities], but he does his own business! Oh! Surfing [the Internet] with his mobile phone ... the child is left alone, he doesn't play with him, interact with him... So I just feel the child is my responsibility. I have to take care of him, keep him with me. I just think, forget about it... I don't want to have a child now. Really, I don't want to. Because I feel the pressure is all on me. If I give birth, I have to bring them up... One is already tough, I don't want a second. It is pretty tiresome. Moreover, I love myself more! I feel I want my own life instead of being too much deprived.

[Hui-chun, emphasis added]

While women parenting alone explicitly highlighted not sharing childcare as a reason for not wanting more children, women parenting with their partner typically identified other reasons for wanting or occasionally not wanting more children, and discussed their decision-making as one part of a team ('we' want more' rather than 'I' don't want more'). However, on the other hand, although gender inequity within families influenced participants' childbearing intentions, our analysis suggests women in gender inequitable marriages may be less likely to act on their intentions. For example Shih-han found parenting her first two children difficult and had decided to have no more children. She had given away the clothes her children had outgrown and had made plans to continue her education. However at the time of the interview Shih-han was pregnant. She reported that although her husband had convinced her to continue the pregnancy, she remained reluctant to leave her formal employment to provide all the 'hands-on' care for the new baby:

- Shih-han: If grandma is willing to take care of the child, I will let her do it.
Interviewer: So you can still go to work?
Shih-han: Right. Right. Right. Right. However, my husband always asks me to take parental leave without pay.
Interviewer: Why?
Shih-han: He says 'you just take care of children at home'
Interviewer: Why?
Shih-han: He just says, '[there's] no need'. Hey! I don't know! He says money is not enough [to pay for childcare]. However, I feel the cost is not much! Why? [It's because] he thinks I should care for children by myself... However, I have taken this into account. This psychological part: I can't be with children all day long. And my seniority [at work] will be discontinued!

Nevertheless, her interview narrative oscillates between her disappointment in being pregnant again and her positive acceptance of her changed circumstances. Significantly, her positivity is predicated on how having further children might reduce her parenting burden:

After having the second child, I considered stopping. My husband and I had discussions last year... Later, I just feel: 'Hey! In this way, actually, having a few

more children, it's nothing bad'. I have a selfish idea for the future. I just think that if you have more children, each child can share [caring] responsibility! [It is better that] two people take turns, three people take turns, four people take turns. It is different. Later, I just think: 'Well, having one more child is not bad.'

Shih-han's positivity about having another child is not consistent. When asked why other people in Taiwan chose smaller families, her answer is couched in her own experiences of parenting and fertility decision-making:

It is probably taking care of children is too tiring! Unequal division of household work. Right. I feel this is the reason! Because men usually- he won't take care of children! Moreover, women usually do all the household work... She feels so tired. Right! [Only] fools like us will want children.

A life of one's own

Many participants reported that sharing hands-on childcare enabled them to have their 'own life'. In participants' narratives, a life of one's own referred to having time for leisure activities and opportunity to participate in the social world. Participants who provided exclusively hands-on care for their children and those sharing provision of this care made a distinction between time spent with their children and their 'own' time.

Chia-hao provides primarily financial support for his son and hands-on care for an hour on weekday evenings and at the weekends:

Chia-hao: If he is awake, I don't have my own time. That is, all my activities shall stop for him! ... I am tied-up looking after him.

Interviewer: ...How about weekend? How many hours did you spend with him last weekend?

Chia-hao: Weekend? Nearly all day long on my weekends.

Interviewer: Will you spend all day long with him?

Chia-hao: Probably! Sometimes, I will go out and have fun, so [my wife] takes care of him.... Otherwise, when he falls asleep at night, it is my time, I

will go out. Then, play, play, play... Then, my sleeping time is very short... I have to take care of him, so I have to sacrifice my sleeping time to play.

However, Chia-hao was light hearted about his 'sacrifice' and reported planning to have more children in the future. Loss of 'own time' appeared to be more significant, and more associated with intentions to limit childbearing, for participants who perceived themselves to be providing more hands-on care than Chai-hao did.

For example, Shu-hui provided more 'hands-on' care than Chai-hao, but shared this with her husband: her husband cared for their son after work from 7pm-10pm, and Shu-hui took over from 10pm through the night. At the weekends they cared for him together. As such, Shu-hui reported that loss of her own time was manageable. However she understood that having a second child would increase the time she would have to spend providing 'hands-on' care and mean leaving her job as an editor, a sacrifice she was unwilling to make:

My husband and I... look after our child together. We both feel [having one child] is the extent of what we can reach... I actually feel I prefer freedom. Therefore, I think having fewer children for me is better. For example, having one child, I can keep my job. Although I probably get distracted because of the child, it is still within the acceptable limit. Right! But for me, if I have to have one more child, I think it maybe not possible. Because I set high criteria for my work and life, I set my standard high... [my] job is pretty important to me. It is a self-realisation! ... I find my friends, people who are willing to have two children, they all leave their jobs and stay at home to take care of their babies... They say to us that they envy us for being able to go out to work or something... Some people, like in my situation, [we have only one child] because we want to keep our own life.

Shu-hui's case however is rather rare in our sample: while sharing childcare with her husband meant that the time she sacrificed was 'within the acceptable limit', her understanding of what would happen if she had a second child was based on her observations of friends' experiences. It was much more common among our participants that intentions to cease childbearing in order to limit the loss of one's 'own life' were based on their *own* experience of providing the majority of 'hands-on' parenting. Reflecting the gendered nature of leisure

activities reported, for these (exclusively) women, own time typically involved time spent with their friends or husbands.

Indeed, social isolation due to parenting was a dominant narrative among participants who reported providing most of the hands-on care for their children. For example, employment was frequently presented by lone-‘hands-on’ carers, not employed and employed (as well as some of their partners), as being important for social integration, and significantly, maintaining a sense of self beyond motherhood. Nevertheless, women who worked outside of the home discussed how their parenting responsibilities meant they were unable to participate in social or career-advancing activities after core employed hours.

If you don't have a child, you are still a free individual. Wherever you want to go, you don't have to worry too much. But, after you have a baby, he cries piteously for food! You have to take care of him! Get along with him! So, I feel the difference is personal relationships. You are really alienated from others. There is no solution. I can only stay at home... After having kids, when time is up [at work], I have to say: ‘Sorry, I have to go home. I have to pick my kids up’ ... My colleagues will not ask me if I want to go out for dinner and where we can go together. Right! Basically, it is very difficult. We don't have free time... you have to give up.

[Mei-ling, female, two children]

Withdrawal from the social world shaped these women's experiences of parenthood and subsequently, their desire for having further children:

Women enjoy economic independence and high autonomy. Relatively speaking, they won't feel children are born to be cared for by women. They will feel the couple shall raise children together... In fact, when men still have that traditional idea, that kids are born to be their mothers' responsibilities... there [will be] many women who will think they can live alone [without child] and their life will be good. They don't need one more person to influence their life. Right.

[Shu-fen, female, one child]

Sharing ‘hands-on’ care with extended family

Some women providing all or most of the ‘hands-on’ care for their children did not elaborate on not sharing care with their husbands. This may reflect alignment of their experiences of parenting with their pre-existing gendered expectations of how care should – or at least would – be shared between parents. For them, caring alone referred to providing care without the help of extended family. Sharing ‘hands-on’ parenting with extended family was a motivating factor in decisions over future childbearing for these participants.

Take Pei-chun for example. She is had a 3-year old son. Without her husband to share hands-on parenting with (*‘After I give birth to him, I take care of him most of time! I do more. My husband is only responsible for taking a shower for him. He is even unwilling to feed him, play with him’*), Pei-chun turned to her parents-in-law for support. However, despite encouraging her to have children – both her first and now more – she reports that they do not offer enough support to make that a viable option for her:

I am looking forward to having a kid. But, I think it's too tiring, it is better not to... Forget about it. Because parents-in-law will not support us, they provide little support... Their family financial situation is still OK. But, they won't help. They will only ask you to give birth! But, they will not help you to take care, they won't give you a hand... I don't want a baby actually. [I am] too tired. I have to bring the child up on my own. They don't help, either. I asked them to give some money to help me. Nor did they give any money. In the beginning I was asked by them to give birth!... I have no help. I have no time for baby. It is too tiring... They have to help me bear him, then I will agree.

However, other than Pei-chun, participants rarely reported being ‘let down’ by their parents or parents-in-law in the impassioned way some participants reported being ‘let down’ by their spouse. While some narratives indicate that familial care may well be socially expected, participants not sharing parenting with their parents reported that their parents were *unable*

rather than unwilling to provide care, either because of their age and health, their living arrangements or their own work and social lives.

In all participants' narratives, responsibility for either providing or sourcing hands-on care from extended family was shouldered by women. Similarly, discussion about whether or not to use formal carers such as babysitters was presented as a choice exclusively between mothers-only caring, or mothers and formal care-givers.

Discussion

Our analysis strongly suggests that for men and women in Taipei, experience of parenting is the primary determinant of whether or not to have further children (on a positive intention of doing so). Although economic paradigmatic drivers identified in previous studies had some influence, the *social* costs of childbearing and parenting played the most critical role in forming intentions for participants in this study. Parenting was profoundly gendered, with women shouldering much more responsibility for the day-to-day 'hands-on' care of a child. The extent to which these responsibilities were shared, primarily between spouses, but also with parents and in-laws (to a lesser extent), strongly shaped the experiences of female participants and, in turn, their attitudes towards childbearing. As well as being linked to physical and emotional tiredness, skewed responsibility for 'hands on' childcare was linked to a frustration (or resignation) regarding women's ability to live the life they wanted.

Our analysis directly corresponds with the writing of Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernshiem (2001) on individualisation and risk society. We highlight these frameworks because of their salience for theorising our findings. Based on our grounded analysis, we

argue that key elements of the frameworks may be a means to compare and identify commonalities in experiences of very low fertility in settings beyond Taipei.

In terms of looking towards the positive likelihood of having a second child, our evidence suggests the extent to which raising the first child was a ‘team effort’ rather than an individual one for women was the most important factor in their decision-making. This came across both in terms of the impact that shouldering the burden had on female employment, but also, and primarily, in terms of the emotional and physical impact upon women and, crucially, their capacity to ‘build a life of one’s own’.

Our analysis adds nuance to the ‘incomplete gender revolution’ argument for low fertility in Pacific Asia by placing the story within men and women’s narratives of a tension between ‘building a life of one’s own’ and a gendered disproportionate burden of childcare responsibilities. The implications of the findings in Taiwan must be viewed in the context of the ‘moral panic’ regarding very low fertility and the wide array of family policy interventions which have been implemented to try to reverse the pattern (Chen, 2012; Mei-Lin Lee & Lin, 2016). Our evidence suggests that ‘simple’ family policy measures to enable women to combine work and family may not be enough, inasmuch as they would tackle only one component of the tension outlined above. In the very least, policy measures to enable (and encourage) women *and men* to combine work and family would be more appropriate. Skewed gendered responsibilities in the household appear to be central to the shaping of fertility. The manifestation of this (via the physical sense of extreme tiredness, and the psychological frustrations of not being able to properly design one’s own life biography) is a ‘risk-averse’ strategy of limiting childbearing.

Normative gendered childcare roles still held sway with some of our participants. While most women parenting alone lamented their husband's lack of engagement, others were resigned to it or accepted it as normal. Similarly, both those receiving and not receiving the help of their parents in caregiving presented such extended family care as customary, if not expected because of personal circumstances. As expectations and early life opportunities (e.g. education) to build a life of one's own become more equitable, as surely they must and should, the residual influence of these norms on women's acceptance of the requirement that they alone 'hold the whole thing' is likely to dissolve. If so, and in the absence of equity in later life opportunities for a 'life of one's own', could we even entertain the idea that fertility in Taipei could stagnate at very low levels, or even decline further?

Table 1. Participant characteristics

	Taipei (n)
Gender	
Female	16
Male	16
Age	
<30	3
30-34	20
35-40	5
>40	1
Missing	3
Number of children	
1	16
2	16
Age of youngest child	
<1 year	6
1-2 years	16
3-4 years	6
5+ years	2
Missing	2
Number of siblings	
0 (only child)	3
1 sibling	8
2 siblings	13
3+ siblings	6
Missing	2

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