

# Demography

## Men Not at Work

*Men, women, young people are opting out of labor-force participation.*

**W**omen's increased participation in the labor force since the 1950s is a well-known trend. Less remarked upon is the fact that men have been decreasing their participation, albeit more gradually, over the course of the same period, according to a new report by U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics economist Mitra Toossi. If current trends continue, by 2020 only 70% of working-age men will participate in the U.S. labor force, and by 2050, only 66%.

"The number of men in the labor force has always been more than the number of women. The men's labor force was 69 million in 1990, 76.3 million in 2000, and 80 million in 2005," writes Toossi. There will still be more men in the labor force than women by 2050 (103 million vs. 91 million, according to her projections), but the participation rate of men will continue to decline. Meanwhile, she says, the participation of women will level off.

Harvard University economist Claudia Goldin says that the figures are indicative of phenomena that have been evolving for some time. They suggest that more people are exploring options outside of conventional work or choosing to opt out of the labor force all together.

"Women's participation has been going up and now they've reached a kind of plateau, whereas men's [participation] has been going slightly down for a pretty long time. That has to do with retirement, early retirement, taking time off—the choices that people make," says Goldin, who concedes that retirement may not be as big a factor in this trend as people in their 20s delaying their entrance into the workforce.

"If I talk to my students who leave Harvard at age 22 to 23, they say, 'Well, it's off to the Himalayas for a year.' There is a lot of not doing much of anything. Young people seem to have turned the idea of re-

tirement on its head, working less now to work more later."

Decreased participation in the workforce can mean different things depending on where it is occurring, she argues. For instance, in Europe, such a decline would suggest a worsening job market. The official unemployment rate for the European Union is 9%, far higher than the official 4% unemployment rate for the United States. The unemployment rate for European men, particularly young men, is higher still. "These people can't get jobs, so they get discouraged. Unemployment rates for people in their 20s in Europe are in double digits, so they stay in school and get stipends for staying in school. In the United States, on the other hand, the unemployment rate for young people isn't very high, and so people are making their own choices."

There are many possible reasons why people might be feeling less pressure to participate in the workforce. For instance, people in their 20s are waiting longer to get married: The median age for a man to wed in the United States is 27, up from 23 during the 1950s. The presence or absence of a family to support may also influence workforce participation. In addition, young people are now more likely to move from one job to another in search of the ideal position, according to a recent RAND study. As they transition between jobs, or move from professional school to full-time employment, they may take "stop-gap" positions or simply refrain from work, thus decreasing their labor-force participation. Additionally, more young people, and especially more young women, are seeking secondary and postsecondary education. People who are in school are much less likely to participate in the labor force.

Differing generational approaches to work have greater significance than does the apparent fall-off in male participation. "Everyone in their twenties seems to be doing a little bit less in the workforce," says Goldin. "But these aren't giant changes and they're not radically different. They're relatively small,

### About World Trends & Forecasts

The trends and forecasts in this section are divided into the six categories commonly used in business planning:

**Demography** covers specific population groups, family composition, public-health issues, etc.

**Economics** includes finance, business, work and careers, and management.

**Environment** includes resources, ecosystems, species, and habitats.

**Government** includes world affairs, politics, laws, and public policy.

**Society** covers lifestyles, values, religion, leisure, culture, and education.

**Technology** includes innovations, scientific discoveries, and their impacts.

In many cases, a single trend could be discussed in several different sectors. By categorizing a trend in one sector, however, the editors intend to focus attention on a specific aspect of the trend.

This initial organization has proven helpful in understanding global complexities. Over time, readers will acquire a useful framework for thinking about the future.

over the past 15 years or so.”

—Patrick Tucker

Sources: “Changes in Men’s and Women’s Labor Force Participation Rates” by Mitra Toossi, *The Monthly Labor Review* (November 2006). Web site [www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/welcome.htm](http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/welcome.htm). Claudia Goldin, telephone interview.

## Promoting Parenthood In Japan

**W**ith a declining birthrate and the steady attrition of its aging population, Japan may run out of people in the next 900 years, claims one professor. Long before that scenario plays out, however, the nation is seriously addressing the challenges of its *shoshika* society (declining children).

Like many Western countries, Japan’s demographic future has been shaped by social trends such as those toward delaying or forgoing marriage and childbearing. Average age at first marriage for Japanese men has increased from 27.0 in 1975 to 29.8 in 2005; for women, from 24.7 to 28.0. And the number of children per married couple fell from 2.2 in 1972 to just under 2.1 in 2005. Meanwhile, average life expectancy is now 82, according to the Population Reference Bureau.

The most-visible impacts of Japan’s aging society are seen in school buildings converted to other uses, such as community meetings.



**Birth dearth in Japan prompts new government policies to promote childbirth, such as encouraging fathers to make greater use of child-care leave from work.**

Tama City, for instance, has now closed six of its 37 elementary schools, with three more scheduled to be shut down, reports *The Japan Journal*. Other consequences will be growing numbers of pensioners and fewer workers to support them.

Fearing that the decline of children will destabilize its society and economy, the Japanese government in 2005 established a new Ministry of State for Gender Equality and Social Affairs, aimed at addressing issues that deter childbearing.

The tugs of a shrinking workforce pose a painful dilemma for business: Well-educated women are in growing demand in multinational compa-

nies like Toshiba, but to also encourage these women to have children requires new personnel strategies. Toshiba now offers up to three years’ leave for child care, reports *The Japan Journal*.

The advantage of such programs is that they can also be applied to men, so that dual-income parents can take turns raising the children and bringing home the income. However, few dads have taken advantage of such policies so far—just 0.5%, a figure the government hopes to boost to 10%.

—Cynthia G. Wagner

Source: “1.25: Rising to the Challenge of the Falling Birthrate,” *The Japan Journal* (October 2006).

## Upcoming Meetings of the World Future Society

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for the 21st Century**

Hilton Minneapolis  
Minneapolis, Minnesota  
Professional Members’  
Forum: August 1, 2007

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Washington Hilton  
and Towers

Washington, D.C.

Professional Members’  
Forum: July 29, 2008

**2009**

July 17-19

Chicago Hilton and Towers  
Chicago, Illinois

Professional Members’  
Forum: July 20, 2009

**2010**

July 8-10

The Westin Boston  
Waterfront Hotel

Boston, Massachusetts  
Professional Members’  
Forum: July 11, 2009

**Details: [www.wfs.org/meetings.htm](http://www.wfs.org/meetings.htm)**

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