Chapter 7
The Economic Rationality of Late Parenthood

Joop Schippers

Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century women in Dutch society tend to be subject of persistent concern. Some people, including policy makers, complain that Dutch women participate too little in paid work. They point to the low number of paid hours supplied by Dutch women, working primarily in parttime jobs, compared to the hours supplied by women in other European countries. Others worry about Dutch women having too little children and having their children too late. Once again, the Netherlands is at the edge of the spectre: for a long time Dutch women were considered to be the European champions in the field of postponement of motherhood. So, at first glance we are dealing with the contradictory situation that in a country where women have oceans of time available for care it takes them longer than most European women before they decide to be a mother. That is why the Netherlands constitutes a case that is worthwhile studying in the context of this book. If Dutch women can or will not opt for motherhood who else in Europe will?

Those in the Netherlands who support the view that women should increase their labour market participation – and this is also the official point of view of the Dutch government, as laid down in the so-called Lisbon targets of the European Union and the message the European Union keeps sending to The Hague year after year – usually do not pay much attention to fertility rates and the "timing" of children, that is the age at which mothers have their (first) child(ren). Yet, in the course of time increasingly more policy measures have been taken and facilities have been called into existence for a better and easier reconciliation of work and family life. In this respect the Netherlands have never been among the frontrunners, who can primarily be found among the Scandinavian welfare states (see Chapter 8 by Van Doorne-Huiskes & Doorten elsewhere in this book). Still, the Dutch government that came into office in 2007 shows a great concern for the well being of families and children

J. Schippers (✉)
Professor of Labour Economics and the Economics of Equal Opportunities, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands
e-mail: j.j.schippers@uu.nl

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over and over again. It has also made large budgets available for childcare and tax cuts for families.

Those who hold the opinion that Dutch women should have more children and should enter the process of family formation at an earlier age usually do not support the idea that women should engage in paid work *more*. On the contrary, many of them do not oppose the idea of working women or working mothers as such, but they often consider paid work as an obstacle for and too much of a restriction on (timely) motherhood. In this field the Dutch government abstains from expressing an explicit view, except for the idea that decisions concerning motherhood or parenthood in general are a personal matter and not subject to government interference. This holds for the number of children that parents would like to "take" as well as for the timing of any children. This neutral position is in line with international legal obligations to which the Netherlands has committed itself. For many people it also echoes the resistance to twentieth century nazi family policies and the longstanding Roman Catholic tradition, broadly practiced until the 1960s, that the local priest came by every year to "ask" whether parents had any plans for another baby.

If policy makers show any concern whatsoever with respect to developments around motherhood this usually relates to the number of children being born. Looking at annual birth rates and often disregarding figures on women's total fertility rate (see Chapter 6 by Beets elsewhere in this book) they conclude that women have too few babies to "live up" to the magic 2.1 baby per woman, i.e. the replacement level that is necessary for a stable population. Especially during the last few years this discussion is mingled with the discussion on ageing. A plea for more babies is then connected with the ageing of the labour force and the affordability of the social welfare state; in the final section of this chapter we will come back to this issue. But even within this framework policy makers consider parental/maternal decisions to have no children or only one child to be autonomous choices that should be respected and must be treated as firm and solid restrictions for government policies (see for instance CPB, 2006). If ever the "timing" of children is brought up in the discussion, this is only in a derived way, namely from the perspective that with respect to having a baby one of these days may be none of these days.

The formal abstinence of population policy does not wash away the fact that all kind of other policies, including specific measures that have been taken, may affect getting/having children: there are rules regarding pregnancy and birth leave, others regarding parental leave, children are fiscally supported and there are rules and arrangements concerning the quality and finance of different forms of childcare. Some rules and arrangements make it easier to have children; others may make it more difficult. Put in economic terms: different policies do influence the "price of children". This is a dimension of "implicit population policy" where there are huge differences between European countries. Some countries, like Sweden and Norway seem to be more family friendly than other European countries, even though it is difficult to bunch all dimensions of family friendliness into one mark for each country. Consider for instance a country like Switzerland where childcare is relatively expensive and many parents do not find it rewarding that both of them have a paid job. Public transport, however and the traffic system as a whole is much more family

friendly than in most European countries. Moreover, as Den Dulk (2001) has shown countries do not only differ with respect to government policies, but there are also major differences with respect to the opportunities for the reconciliation of work and family life at the organisational level. And to some extent public arrangements and organisational arrangements or agreements between the social partners can be considered substitutes. We will come back to the role of these implicit prices of having children in the course of this chapter.

Could it be that both parties in the discussion are right and that women in the Netherlands should both participate more in paid work *and* have more children and have these children at an earlier age? Or do paid work and motherhood interfere so much that this will prove to be an illusion? This chapter investigates the validity of the hypothesis that women's labour market activities set a restriction to their number of children and can be hold responsible for the fact that women in the Netherlands who become a mother for the first time do so at a relatively high age (around the age of 30). Before we go deeper into these questions, however, we will demonstrate that the Netherlands constitutes a very particular case in Europe, because there is hardly any other country that leaves men and especially women so much time for family life.

More and More Women Participate, but "Parttime" Is the Watchword

Women's labour market participation in the Netherlands has been increasing for decades now. This becomes especially clear when we look at the participation behaviour of consecutive birth cohorts (see Fig. 7.1).

At the start it was primarily women who were not married (yet), childless women and especially high educated women who populated the labour market. During the 1990s mothers and women with secondary education caught up substantially. In the meantime, particularly for women with higher and secondary education entering the labour market and *staying* in the labour market has become the rule rather than the exception. The concept of "staying in the labour market" is especially illustrated by the gradual disappearance of the so-called "children's dip" in women's labour market participation, i.e. the period during which women from older cohorts interrupted their career, gave birth to their children and were fulltime involved in caring and bringing up the children. With younger cohorts these interruptions occur less frequent and they gradually disappear.

Looking from a European perspective the Dutch participation figures have moved up in the European bunch from a place at the back to the rows just behind the frontrunners (see Fig. 7.2).

Yet, on the occasion of motherhood many women change their fulltime job for a parttime job, or a large parttime job for a smaller one. Figure 7.3 shows the development of the number of weekly work hours for successive cohorts of women. In this respect there is hardly any difference between the generations. Parttime work was the watchword for the first generations of Dutch women who massively entered the

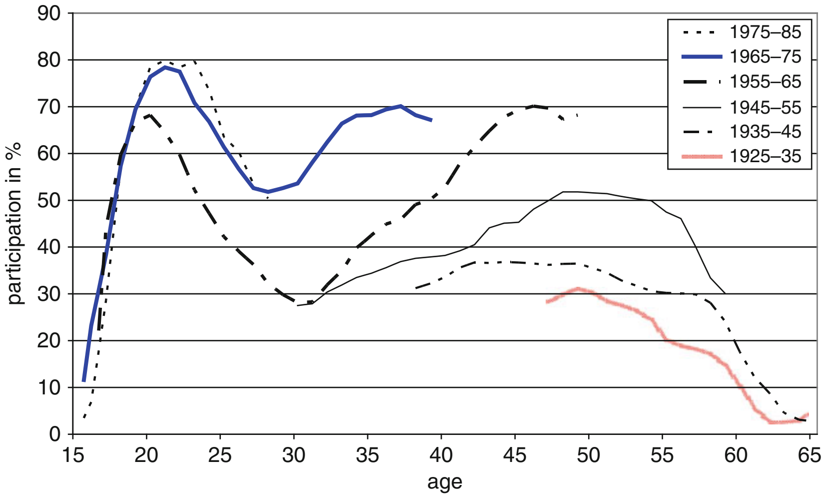

Fig. 7.1 Participation by age and cohort, all women as measured between 1980 and 2004. Source: Román & Schippers (2007)

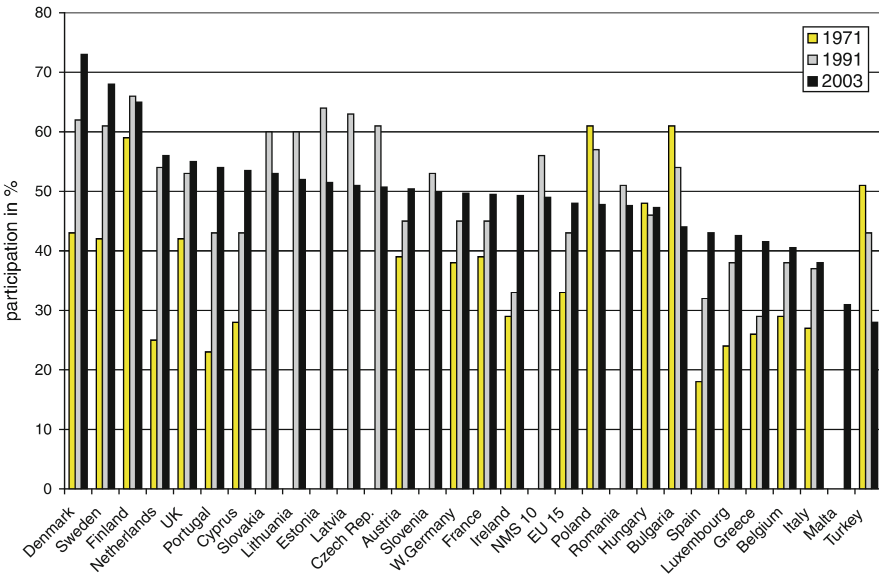

Fig. 7.2 Total labour force participation rates of women (15+) Source: Van Nimwegen & Beets (2006, p. 120)

labour market and parttime work still is the watchword for “the” working woman in the Netherlands.

A comparison of Figs. 7.4 and 7.5 shows, it is true, some difference between women with and women without children, but this difference – about half a day to

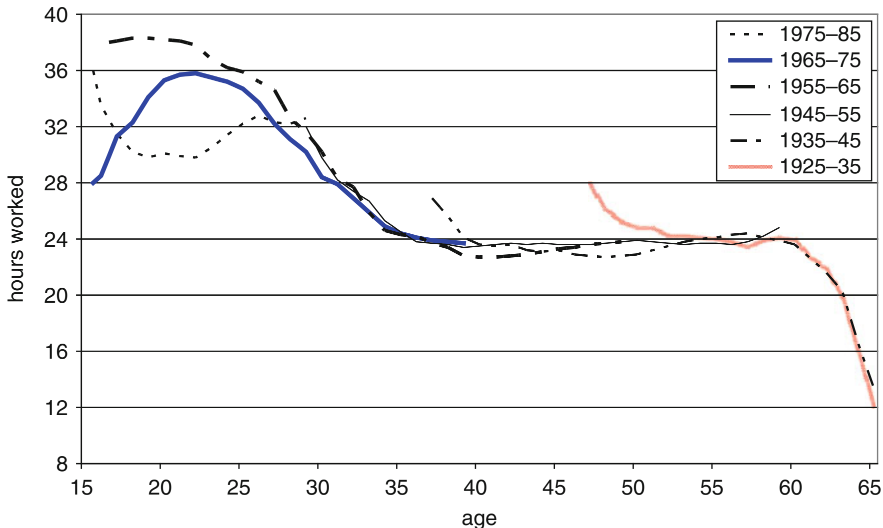

Fig. 7.3 Weekly hours by age and cohort, all women as measured between 1980 and 2004. Source: Román & Schippers (2007)

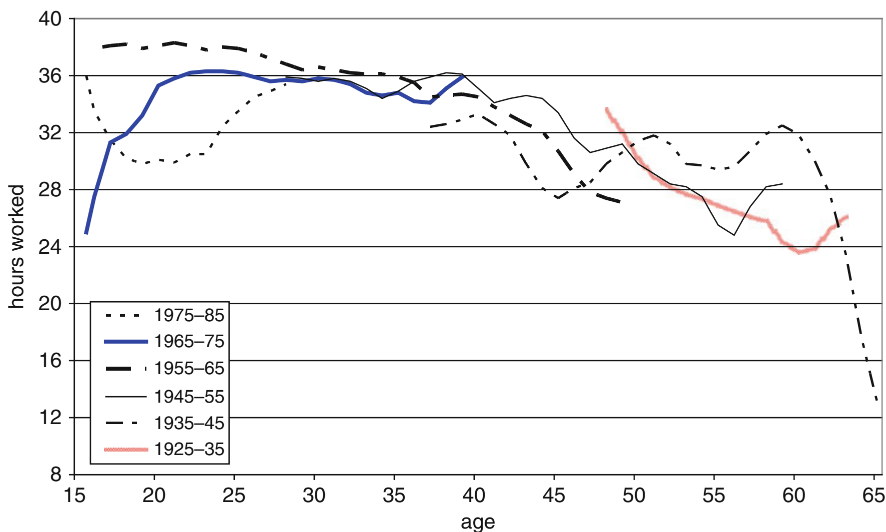

Fig. 7.4 Weekly hours by age and cohort, women without children measured between 1980 and 2004. Source: Román & Schippers (2007)

1 day a week – does by no means correspond to the weekly hours women spend on the care for children, as measured by the Dutch *Emancipatiemonitor* (SCP/CBS, 2006). If it was for this difference women without children could supply substantially more hours. Another remarkable fact with respect to mothers' work hours is that the average numbers per cohort hardly rise even after women of a cohort have

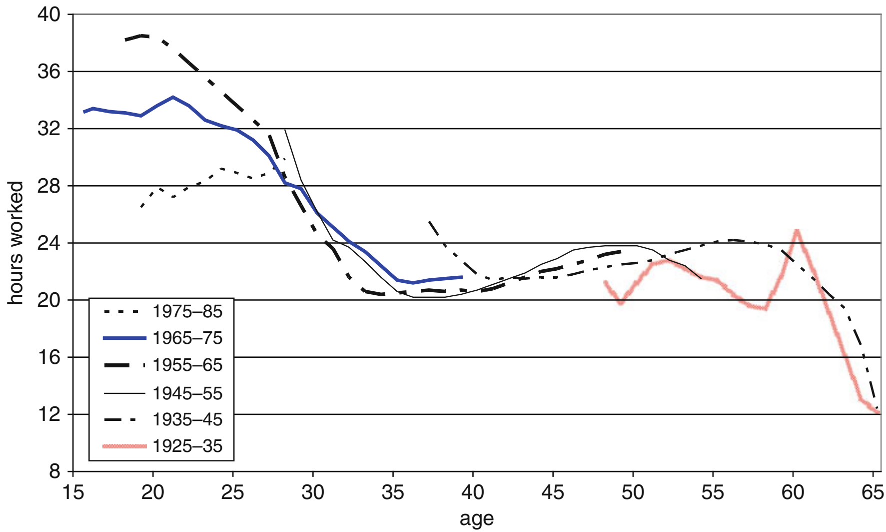

Fig. 7.5 Weekly hours by age and cohort, women with children measured between 1980 and 2004. Source: Román & Schippers (2007)

reached the stage in their life course at which children cannot be expected to call upon mother's presence continuously. Framed in the language of rational choice theory: after a certain age children are no longer a restriction on their mother's labour market participation. But all the same those mothers do not opt for working more hours. Women of consecutive cohorts show hardly any differences at this point. It looks like for many women a parttime job serves like "a warm, comfortable coat" that is not taken off easily or only reluctantly. Not only do women lack the desire to change their parttime job for a fulltime job (again); so far within the Dutch welfare state there was no necessity to do so either: breadwinners' incomes sufficed to pay for all necessary family expenditures. In many families women's incomes can be used for additional expenditures: the cream on the cake.

With respect to parttime work the situation in the Netherlands is quite different from the situation in most European countries (see Fig. 7.6). There is no other country where mothers on average work so little hours as in the Netherlands. However, also women without children work about 1 day a week less than their European "sisters".

In some European countries having a parttime job is a kind of second best solution for those who cannot find a "proper", fulltime job. This is, however not the case in the Netherlands. Parttime work in the Netherlands is the "first best" choice that highly corresponds to women's preferences. This is illustrated by the answers to the question with respect to the preferred number of weekly work hours. Only a small minority of women aspires to a fulltime job (see Table 7.1). Many women work parttime and are satisfied with that (apart from the fact that some of them would prefer to work half a day more or half a day less). Men show much more unfulfilled preferences for a parttime job. A large group of male fulltime workers would actually prefer a parttime job. Research also shows, however that only a small share of men with

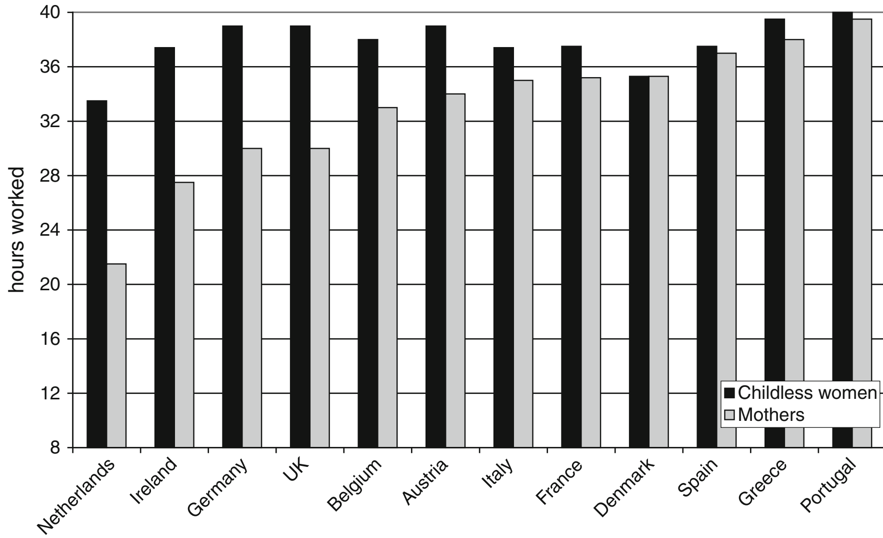

Fig. 7.6 Average weekly working hours of mothers and childless women between 25 and 54 years old (2001, for some countries the figures refer to earlier years). Source: Van Nimwegen & Beets (2006, p. 120)

Table 7.1 Preferred weekly work hours (% by age group)

	25–34 yr	35–44 yr	45–54 yr	55–64 yr
Men				
25–34 h	15	16	18	28
35+	83	81	78	61
Women				
13–24 h	34	54	50	50
25–34	31	24	32	27
35+	33	13	13	13

Source: OSA-Labour supply panel 2006.

a stated preference for a parttime job practically realises this preference (Baaijens, 2005). And so most men continue to work fulltime, also when they become a father. As a consequence – as we can learn again from the *Emancipatiemonitor 2006* (SCP/CBS, 2006; see for example Fig. 5.9 at p. 135) – also in the year 2006 a skew distribution of care tasks between partners continues to exist.

When we compare Dutch women's weekly work hours with those of women from other EU Member States the conclusion seems obvious that the extent to which women in the Netherlands are actively participating in the labour market should hardly be considered an obstacle for the opportunities to become a mother and raise a family. Dutch women work massively in parttime jobs and they adapt their labour market career to their family career. Culturally the ideology of motherhood is the dominating force. The idea is still firmly rooted in society, including in many women's head, that a woman's life is incomplete without children. And if – as a woman; for men it is a completely different thing – you have a child in the first place you have to be a good mother. As a consequence many women like to keep

a large share of the care for and the raising of their children in their own hands. Of course, growing numbers of women cherish the aspiration to be a good and successful professional in the labour market too. But when the activities and obligations in the two domains of life, labour and care, are in each other's way most women still give priority to their caring tasks. So, if already Dutch women would not be able to opt for motherhood, which women in Europe would?

One may conclude that even at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century children in the Netherlands put a firm restriction on women's labour market activities. Especially the crumbled school hours and opening hours of daycare facilities that show a big lack of uniformity (SCP, 2006a) appear to be a major obstacle. Moreover, daycare and after school facilities suffer from a rather unfavourable image: parents have their doubts about the quality of daycare and many of them complain about the lack of flexibility (see for example SCP, 2006b). The decline over the life course of work hours for women *without* children and the fact that the number of work hours of mothers does not increase after their children have entered their teens reveals that children are not the only factors that can (for a limited period in life) explain Dutch women's relatively low number of work hours. There are also other determinants involved, like a strong commitment to motherhood and the family.

Economics of the Family

This way of reasoning is completely in line with the ideas of Nobel Prize winning economist Gary Becker (1981). He argues that rational individuals balance costs and benefits of their decisions, be it in the supermarket, be it on educational choices or be it on raising a family. Children present benefits as they give you love, as young children they may be cute, as grown ups they may support you (with care or financially) and they offer you an opportunity to pass on your genes and ideas. Undoubtedly there are also costs involved: raising children takes time and money.

Looking at what has happened over the years with these costs and benefits one can notice several trends. A first one is that the potential benefits have fallen. The role of grown up children in parents' late life has declined. Contrary to the situation in pre-welfare state society old parents do not have to depend on their children for their physical survival any more. Or – as an old Dutch grandmother put it in the 1960s – "since the introduction of the old age state pension in 1956 I can choose to live where I want in stead of being passed on from one child to another every 4 weeks. Now I can pay for my own living and housing." Of course, children may be important from a social and psychological point of view, but in well developed welfare states of the social democratic type (Esping-Andersen, 1990) there is a growing number of arrangements that may replace family members in this area too.

As better health care has resulted in higher survival rates for new born babies there is no need any longer to have large numbers of children to secure the survival of at least a few of them. This also implies that as a woman you do not have to spend your complete fertile period in life on being pregnant and having babies, but that there is room for other activities during this period.

Next to these trends on the benefit side of the balance there is one major trend on the costs side and that is the increase of women's wage levels. Due to increasing education or (as economists like to put it) human capital investments women's opportunities to earn an income in the labour market have increased dramatically. Their time has become so costly that they will spend only a small part of it on housework and raising a family. For the rest of their time they have "more rewarding" things to do. This argument could, when we still follow the path set out by Becker, also explain why high educated women more often choose to have only one child or no children at all and low educated women more often have more children.

Of course, this typically economic way of arguing – and some even consider it a typically male way – has been criticised in several ways. Some criticise the way "human values" are reduced to simple costs and benefits, others doubt the concept of rational economic (wo)man and still others think there is much more involved in terms of feelings, hormones and values than Becker (and his adherents) are inclined to incorporate in their models. Still, the fact remains that the relatively simple economic model performs rather well in explaining the major long term trends regarding demographic behaviour.

The Rationality of "Late" Parenthood

From the perspective of individual women or couples who desire to have children there seem to exist mainly considerations (be they implicit or explicit) not to start the process of family formation too early in life. To start with, the length of the period of young adulthood has increased over the years (see also SZW, 2002). In many cases there is no need to take up "the responsibilities of adulthood": when one is young, the world offers a variety of things and places to be discovered and a lot of things to be experienced. Why exclude options in life when this is not necessary (yet)? An important drive behind this development is the ever increasing educational level of consecutive cohorts of young people, which as such has resulted in the postponement in the average age at which they leave the educational system and enter "the grown up" world. On average today's school leavers enter the labour market at a later age than those of a quarter or half a century ago. Besides, most recent cohorts know the way of the world: having grown up with television and the internet they are well aware of all options in life (concerning places to go, films to be seen, books to be read, goods to be bought, parties to go to, etc.). Moreover, they

have grown up in an era in which they have learned that opportunities are there to be taken and chances to be seized. Personal development has become a major maxim for those who have completed initial education. Growing welfare offers many young people the opportunities to realise part of these personal ambitions while they are still participating in education. For many of them the theme of the first part of their labour market career is to earn money to realise the rest of these ambitions. But of course, all these things not only take money, but also time. As a consequence other "things to be done" and other choices – especially difficult ones like those with respect to entering a lasting bond with a partner and creating and taking the responsibility for new life – are pushed away into the future.

In many cases women in their (late) 20s report that they do not have a well-established relationship (yet) and/or do not confide in entering the process of family formation with their current partner (Esveldt et al., 2001). Earlier we mentioned the limited role many men (do and want to) play when it comes to care. Many women, and especially high educated women, are fervent adherents of equally, i.e. on a 50/50-base, sharing care tasks with their male partners (Schippers, 2006). Moreover at an individual level twenty-first century babies in Western societies are no longer a necessary guarantee for parents' survival in later life (see also the box on "Economics of the family"); it is not *your* kids that are responsible to provide for *you* when you are old and can no longer earn a living by yourself. This responsibility has been "outsourced" to the welfare state. Getting/raising a child – and this is closely connected with the "personal development argument" presented before – seems to have become more and more of an experience (if not an event) on the list that should be completed to reap the fruits of modern life as much as possible. In that case, however, one single child suffices and the timing of this "experience" is of less concern. Economists might say that in stead of an "investment good" children have developed more and more into a "consumer good". This last development is also reflected in the fact that many parents are no longer satisfied with a child or children as such, but that it matters very much to them that the children are "nice" and "attractive", i.e. that they are "high-quality" kids[1] – like you are talking about a car or a tv-set!

Also from the perspective of having a career for many women getting your children at a later age seems more attractive than having your children during an earlier stage of the life course. A woman who has her first child when she is in her early 20s starts the process of family formation during a career stage when the career dies have not been cast yet. Reducing work hours or interrupting the career at that stage might easily give way to the employer's perception of the woman as being less committed and less career oriented than when she postpones the process of family formation for a while. As a – also theoretically well-founded – consequence organisations may conclude that it will not be very rewarding to invest in these relatively young mothers (for instance in terms of training, management development

[1]From the perspective that "high-quality" children cost extra money this might constitute an argument by itself to enter the process of family formation only after one has settled financially.

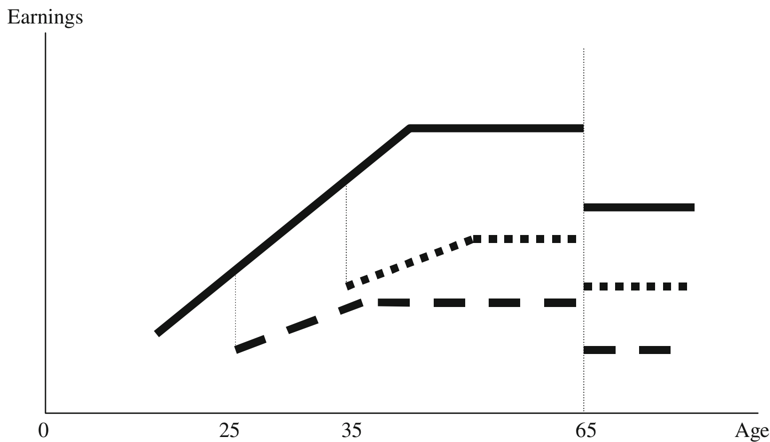

Fig. 7.7 Lifetime earnings and the "timing" of the first child

etc.). Women who actively show commitment during the early stages of their job career and put their heart and soul into their work build up a strong position within the organisation. When in time they eventually decide in favour of motherhood, the employer has invested so much in them and they have become important enough for the organisation that it is in the employer's interest to have them back at work after the period of pregnancy and maternity leave. So, it is not by coincidence that employers are particularly willing to invest in arrangements and facilities for high educated professional women to help them reconcile work and family life (Remery et al., 2002). Staff members that are difficult to replace are one up in this respect compared to those who come ten a penny. However, this one up has to be earned first.

Figure 7.7 presents a stylized image of these different career paths. The continuous line belongs to a career without children or a career that is at least not influenced by the presence of children (like we usually find for men). The large-dotted line represents early motherhood and the small-dotted line represents relatively late motherhood. In both cases we hypothesize that women will continue to work part-time after the birth of their first child. A woman who has established a firm bridgehead with her employer experiences far less "damage" in terms of lifetime earnings (i.e. the total amount of earnings throughout the life course) of a (partial) career interruption than those women who do not hold such a bridgehead yet. So, for women who want to combine a career in paid employment with a career in motherhood it pays not to start the process of family formation too early.

It has to be noticed that this argument leans heavily on the prevailing career system in most organisations. Main characteristics of this system are that you make your way up in the organisation between the age of 25 and the age of 40 or 45, at the age of 45 your career has to be home and dry, because afterwards you are not likely to make major career steps. During this crucial part of the work life – often

also crucial from the perspective of family formation – the sheep will be separated from the goats. He or – often – she who has not got ahead before the age of 40 will – notwithstanding the favourable exceptions – hardly be able to do so anymore. The (economic) argument brought forward by organisations is simple: the closer employees get to their (actual) retirement age the shorter the pay-off period of and thereby the lower the return on any investment in the employee's career. So, decisions to invest in workers will usually be in favour of those who are in their 20s or 30s and at a disadvantage of those who are already in their 40s or even older. A similar line of reasoning is often brought forward to explain why it is much less likely for part-timers to get ahead than for full-time workers.

Empirical studies by Mertens (1998) and Bloemen and Kalwij (2001) show that the higher women's educational level the more likely that they choose a later moment in life to be a mother for the first time. According to Bloemen and Kalwij this postponement does not affect women's total fertility rate; in the end they realise their desired number of children and achieve – at least from their own individual perspective – "the best of both worlds": a successful professional career and a successful career in motherhood.[2]

Opposed to this triplet of arguments – more opportunities for individual development, a bigger chance of having found "Mister Right" and a better chance of having your career going and achieving a higher lifetime income – that point into the direction of "let's wait a while with having kids", there is usually just one single argument against postponement of motherhood and that concerns the risk that postponement might increase the risk of not getting pregnant, not getting pregnant right away or of any complications around pregnancy and birth. First, not all women may be aware of these risks and if they are aware it is not unlikely that these risks are widely underestimated when it comes to translating them into *personal risks*. "Of course, these things happen, but how big are in the end the odds that it will happen to me?" is a natural reaction of many women. Besides, many women (and men) of consecutive generations have – stimulated by a strong media focus on new "inventions" on the frontier of medical science – developed a rock-solid confidence in possible solutions offered by medical technology in case of any future problems.

So, if the benefits are legion and the perceived costs only limited, from an individual perspective the choice for late motherhood or parenthood can be considered a rational one.

The Government: Mother's Little Helper?

As mentioned in the introduction European governments are heavily committed to stimulate women's labour market participation and increase women's labour supply.

[2]Bloemen and Kalwij (2001) underline the importance of taking account of the (large) variation in women's preferences in the analyses. Disregarding this variation results in an overestimation of the effect of the restrictions and of the possibilities to change individual behaviour by way of the price mechanism.

Increased labour supply is a remedy against future labour market shortages resulting from the ageing and dejuvenation of the labour force. It also contributes to a firm financial base and the affordibility of the welfare state (all women engaged in paid work contribute to the nation's tax base). It safeguards the returns to investments in women's education (which these days in many EU-Member States tend to be equally high for women and for men) and it contributes to equal opportunities for women and for men in society. Ever since the establishment of the EU and its predecessors the latter goal has been a key one in European cooperation.

From this perspective promoting (early) motherhood does not sound as the logical thing to do for the Dutch government; doing so it would only make things difficult for itself. Earlier born or more children do not contribute to the increase in labour supply that is necessary to counter the outflow of older workers during the next 2 decades. On the contrary, as mothers reduce their participation or at least their work hours an increase in birth rates would *reduce* labour supply during the next decades. When this new "green wave" would enter the labour market from about 2025 these "new recruits" would be too late from the perspective of ageing labour markets. In stead, they would again challenge the equilibrium that is expected for the period after the baby boom generation has left the labour market. In the meantime they would add to and complicate labour market and welfare state problems with additional claims on the work force and government budgets for childcare and education. Finally, even those who fear a decline of the original European population (whatever that may be!) do not have to worry: total fertility rates for the post war birth cohorts of women amount to 1.6 or 1.9 in many countries, which is not dramatically below the replacement level. So, also from this perspective there is no justification for a government to call upon women to increase their "reproductive activity rate".

But even if a national government would like to, it can hardly change individual women's or couples' cost-benefit analysis as described earlier in this chapter. Of course, by way of media campaigns the government may expressly point to the possible risks of the postponement of motherhood, just like the government frequently warns against smoking, against not wearing one's seat belts, against the combination of drinking and driving. Usually these campaigns have only limited and temporary success and often they drown in the everyday stream of news, commercials and the "noise of daily life". And of course, the government might – and should – start a discussion with social partners about the (de)merits of the prevailing career system and point to the fact that due to the extension of the life course more people reach the age of 65 in good health. As a consequence employees of 40 years old still have a quarter of a century ahead in their paid career. So, investing in training and management development of individuals who are in their 40s may be rewarding after all (see e.g. Sap & Schippers, 2005). If this form of "social innovation" finds any response, its effects will only become manifest in the long run. Even though it may take a while before changes in this field may in the end result in behavioural changes of individual women and men. Thus, even though the government should not leave aside these opportunities, it would be a mistake to expect too much from this type of intervention.

A similar warning is in order when it comes to "dealing with" problematic school hours, which currently are a major obstacle for many Dutch women to take any more than just a small part-time job. Of course, these problems should be solved and examples from other EU-Member States show that they can be solved successfully, i.e. to the advantage of both the children and the parents *and* the national economy that may benefit from higher activity rates. There is even evidence that better facilities could boost birth rates, but this does not seem to be a lasting effect as it effects mainly the timing of children and not the number.

Even if the government would set all signals at clear and even if it would invest heavily in arrangements to facilitate the combination of care for children and paid work – which is absolute necessary, looking from the perspective of emancipation and equal opportunities for women and men – there is no ground for the assumption that women would spontaneously get their children earlier or that women would have more children. A government that is to play this card, is likely to be disappointed. In this respect modern citizens, including modern, emancipated women do not want the law to be laid down on them – and the government rightfully supports this independent attitude – nor do they fall automatically for financial incentives. The maximum the government seems to be able to achieve is to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life to such an extent that a further increase in the age at which women get their first child will be prevented. Even though this can not be empirically founded (yet) it seems that the (potential) father may be one of the spearheads of policy, even though many women do not have very high hopes of men when it comes to realising better opportunities to combine work and family life. Many women – we have mentioned it before (see also SCP/CBS, 2006, p. 135) – are in favour of equally sharing care tasks. The more men are prepared to share these tasks, the less women will feel to be the only one responsible for the combination of paid work and unpaid care. "Attachment leave" for fathers, at the end of the mother's maternity leave (which itself has to last at least as long as the mother feels healthy and capable to go back to work again), may be a first step as it helps her to resume her professional activities with an easy mind ("the father is watching our little one"). Reconsidering and developing "smart" variations of the so-called combination scenario that has been developed in the Netherlands during the 1990s (SZW, 1995) and the "two times three quarters model" of the National Committee on Equal Opportunities (Emancipatieraad, 1996) seem to be necessary and logical sequel steps.

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