

Germany in angst over low birthrate [DE] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS In Germany, there is a word for a woman who has both a child and a full-time job. It's "rabenmutter" and it means uncaring mother. The term flourished in the 1930s through the heyday of the Nazi party and is now still used in "umgangssprache" or informal talk, especially in rural areas of Germany. Then there's the word for housewife, "hausmutterchen," often used to slight women who choose to stay home with the kids. "It implies being a little bit stupid," says Kerstin Klopp-Koch a working mother in Berlin. "Leaving all decisions to your husband." While neither word is exactly on the tip of everyone's tongue in Germany, both words are common enough to bother young women who are making decisions about work and motherhood. "I wish we didn't have this kind of moral judgment," says Maja Hampe who lives in Gottingen, Niedersachsen in northwest Germany. As women with children either work for pay or stay home with their children, the choices they make are being closely studied amid growing national dismay over a declining birth rate. At 1.3 babies per woman of child-bearing age, the birth rate is far less than the 2.1 rate that researchers say is needed to maintain a stable population. With federal elections approaching in 2006, the country's family minister, Renate Schmidt, has made more child care--as a way of reversing the population decline--into a high-profile issue. Last year she announced the passage of a bill to allocate \$1.5 billion from 2005 to 2010 for full-day kindergartens that would include children under the age of 3. Currently, child care is available for children between 3 and 6 and operates only four hours a day, which is inadequate for parents who work full time. Critics of the current child care system say it reflects a nation that has been clinging to traditions that prescribe the man as breadwinner, woman as procreator. The discomfort of being compelled to choose between the two extremes apparently is influencing women to remain childless. The persistence of the "kindergeld"--a federal income tax break that began in 1955 in West Germany--is another symptom of what critics see as the country's adherence to traditional gender roles. The break goes to married couples in which one of the couple--in practice it's usually the mother--earns no salary. "The tradition is that the woman stays at home and the husband gets a tax break," says Klopp-Koch. Hampe and Klopp-Koch are women who have made different choices about work and motherhood. While Hampe has chosen to suspend her career to be at home with her children, Klopp-Koch is the married mother of an 18-month-old son who works for pay full time. The two women's choices echo differences that used to divide the country between a capitalist West and a communist East. In Berlin, Klopp-Koch inhabits a pocket of diversity and opportunity in an otherwise highly traditional country. "Being a mother in Berlin is certainly different from being a mother in a town in West Germany," says Klopp-Koch. One difference is that women in the more traditional areas of the West--particularly those in the highly Catholic, southwestern regions where the stay-at-home mother is the norm--are having more babies. By contrast, says Steffen Kroehnert, researcher for the Institute for Population and Development in Berlin, women outside of such traditional places appear even more reluctant about motherhood. "In other areas, there is this contradiction between modern women and relatively traditional society," says Kroehnert. "The lack of child care makes women dependent on their husbands. And most women don't like this." - reprinted from Women's e-News

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