

Liberté, Égalité, Fertilité ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Could there be any worse time to leave Paris?

The City of Light is more luminous than ever, after the sunniest spring and summer I've experienced during my decade here (a recent wet spell notwithstanding).

Line 1 on the Métro, my fast track to work, is being automated and could thus soon be shielded from the ritual strikes.

And, as austerity bites in several parts of Europe, the French are collectively boarding their ever-expanding fleets of high-speed trains to head for the annual August break - a painful reminder of the long paid vacations that few employees can hope to get anywhere else.

Worse, I'm six months pregnant, the point at which all maternity-related health care here becomes 100 percent state-covered, while my daughter is almost eligible for the free full-time child care offered by the *maternelle* - state preschools available to toddlers from the age of 3.

On the long list of things to miss about France, the climate, public transport and generous amounts of vacation do of course feature prominently.

But, for this woman at least, none of that can beat a combination of free preschools, family allowances, tax deductions for each child, a paid, four-month maternity leave and to top it all off, an extended course of gymnastics, complete with personal trainer and electric stimulation devices, to get you and your birth canal muscles back into shape, courtesy of the taxpayer. (I still remember my physiotherapist cheerfully promising me a "six-pack" in time for the bikini season after I gave birth the last time.)

For my French girlfriends, having children is just another thing you do in life. You fit them in - one, two and often three of them - with your career, your relationship, your other projects.

In my native Germany, it's your life that has to fit in with the child. Having a baby (it's rarely more than one these days) is still a profoundly disruptive event for women, one that tends to curtail career ambition and earning potential in keeping with a stubbornly traditional vision of motherhood.

Even in my generation of thirty-somethings, the stigma weighing on working mothers remains heavy. One result: Germany's birthrate is one of the lowest in Europe, and our rate of female part-time work among the highest.

In Anglo-Saxon countries like the United States, and Britain, where I'll be posted next, the situation is different again. Working moms don't face the stigma there - but at the same time have much less of the government aid that French women enjoy.

Perhaps my biggest shock in transferring to London was to discover that as a working mother of two I would be paying about €2,000, or \$2,900, more in income tax per year. Only for single people, or married couples without children, does the widely held assumption hold true that you pay a lot less tax in Britain than in France.

Child care in London is also more expensive, and those costs don't necessarily cease at school age: A large variance in quality between state schools means that parents more often turn to private schooling. The debate about school districts does of course exist on both sides of the Channel. But if private schools in France are often Catholic schools with fees that are counted in hundreds, not thousands, of euros, in London you're sometimes talking about tens of thousands of pounds in education fees before your child even applies to college - or find yourself paying a premium on real estate in the immediate vicinity of decently ranked state schools.

I have another list, a much shorter one, of all the things I won't miss about France: the overrated coffee, the smell of andouillettes, the "do not walk on the grass" signs in public parks and all the unnecessary traffic congestion due to cars piling into the intersection just as the light turns yellow. There are also the early-morning ticket controls in the Métro that in my experience seem to focus mostly on black and Arab-looking commuters.

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France ranks 46th in the World Economic Forum's 2010 gender equality report, lagging behind the United States, most of Europe, but also Kazakhstan and Jamaica. Women in France earn on average 26 percent less than men but do two-thirds of the housework.

As the historian Michelle Perrot put it to me a few months ago, "France may be Scandinavian in its employment statistics, but it remains

profoundly Latin in attitude."

And still, this is the only European country where I've routinely met successful businesswomen with three children and an enviable figure. At a time of aging populations and ballooning debt levels across the Western world, other countries can at least learn this from France's 200-year-old natalist obsession: Investing in a public infrastructure that supports working mothers pays off three times. It raises employment rates, bolsters tax revenue and in the process grooms the workforce and taxpayers of tomorrow.

- reprinted from the New York Times

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