With Each French Birth, a Dividend From the State

Vast Welfare Support Network Is an Enduring Government Feature, Even During Financial Downturns

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ALBI, France -- Stéphanie Guiraud-Chaumeil was still in law school when her son Paul was born 14 years ago. Later came Valentine, a daughter now 10. Then Mathieu, 9, and finally little Louise, 7.

With four children to raise, and a doctor for a husband and provider, Guiraud-Chaumeil, 37, might have become a stay-at-home mother. Instead, she pursued her career, consulting on brand name and intellectual property rights. This spring, she took her professional life a step further. After a time-consuming campaign, she was elected to the city council of Albi, a medieval city 45 miles northeast of Toulouse in the softly rolling hills of southwestern France.

Supported by an elaborate and costly network of social welfare programs designed to promote childbearing, French women such as Guiraud-Chaumeil increasingly have found it possible to combine careers with motherhood. Largely as a result, France recently overtook Ireland as Europe's most fertile nation, with women having an average of more than two children each at a time when most of the continent is battling a declining birthrate and a graying population.

"If I had been obliged to choose between working and having children, I probably would have chosen children," Guiraud-Chaumeil said in an interview at city hall. "But I didn't have to choose."

The family-friendly measures -- including long maternity leaves, child-support payments, public schooling for toddlers and even nanny subsidies -- have become a heavy burden on the French budget as they have expanded over the years. They have grown increasingly expensive for businesses as well. But even in this time of financial crisis and economic slump, when deficits are growing and leaders are looking for cuts everywhere, no one in France, from the left or the right, has proposed reducing government expenditures to promote childbearing.

When the Socialist mayor of Lille, Martine Aubry, recently suggested that President Nicolas Sarkozy's government might consider a reduction in government spending on day-care centers for children younger than 3, conservative Education Minister Xavier Darcos responded, "That's an absurdity and a gross distortion of the truth."

His tart response reflected awareness of a long-standing political reality. Since the conservative Charles de Gaulle immediately after World War II embraced once-leftist social policies such as the 40-hour workweek and paid vacations, France has had broad political consensus on generous government benefits. Although the Socialists and other leftist parties have been identified more closely with pioneering such policies, extensive welfare programs have endured for generations under rightist as well as leftist governments.

Some of these programs have been criticized as restraints on the French economy as it seeks to modernize and become more competitive. But so many French people of all political persuasions have remained attached to their privileges -- and apparently willing to accept the competitive drawbacks and high taxes they entail -- that politicians are loath to propose abolishing them.

Sarkozy, a conservative in the Gaullist tradition, was elected on a slogan of breaking with the old system and "working more to earn more." But he found it politically impossible to mount a direct challenge to the 35-hour workweek instituted eight years ago under the Socialists, despite denouncing it as crippling to the economy.

Similarly, in seeking to reduce government expenditures as the economy grinds to a no-growth halt, he has not broached any cutbacks in the network of child-rearing subsidies, which would be even more politically sensitive. In addition, most French people traditionally have regarded a high birthrate as a promise of future economic growth and a guarantee against the imbalance between elderly retirees and active workers that threatens much of Europe.

"You couldn't imagine bringing up an end to this system in France," said Rachel Silvera, a specialist on women in the workplace at the University of Paris.

Southwestern France -- the country's most fertile region, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies-- has a particular tradition of big families. Catholicism has remained strong here.

For the past several years, the Albi edition of the regional newspaper, the Depeche du Midi, has been running prominent color photographs of newborns at the local hospital, often mentioning siblings as well and showing them alongside the infants. "Corentin, 2, shows us his little sister Maelle," read the caption for a photo of two little heads published Tuesday under the headline "Babies of the Day."

But not all family traditions have endured. More than half the babies in France are now born out of wedlock, according to the official statistics institute. This is due in large measure to the growing number of couples who live together without formalizing the relationship with a marriage certificate. At the same time, women increasingly have extended their childbearing years, with the average age for mothers nearly 30.

The stigma once associated with out-of-wedlock births seems to have largely disappeared. For example, Justice Minister Rachida Dati is visibly pregnant but is not married as far as is known and refuses to reveal who is the father.

In any case, Silvera said, the overriding reason for France's growing birthrate is the government programs that allow women, married or unmarried, to raise children without abandoning their jobs. About 60 percent of women have entered the workforce, she said, a number that is rising even as the fertility rate grows.

"Encouraging women to work, this is also encouraging a strong birthrate, and this is new," she added.

Gilles Pinson, a specialist at the National Institute for Demographic Studies, noted that in general, Northern European countries with strong representation of women in the workforce are also those with the continent's highest birthrates. The reason, he explained, is that those countries also are the ones with the most social benefits for working mothers.

Tiphaine Chevreil, who gave birth to her third child Tuesday in the Albi hospital, said she was looking forward to a six-month paid maternity leave, which is standard practice for the third child. Chevreil, a diplomat stationed along with her husband at the French Embassy in Tel Aviv, said she would not suffer professionally from her absence because government officials are so used to the procedure that it is considered automatic.

Public schools, for instance, long have offered free instruction beginning at age 3. Many localities offer child care even before that, reaching about half the country's infants. But crowded urban areas often have an insufficient number of places in infant care facilities. To make up for the scarcity, many local governments offer subsidies for private nannies or pay for their unemployment and health insurance.

The basic monthly child-support payments, which have been in place for decades and vary according to the number of children, have been significantly strengthened over the years by the additional supports. Taken together, a mother of two calculated, the various programs of financial support can rise to more than $800 a month, plus the value of the public schooling for babies.

A more recent measure has made it possible for mothers of three children to take off up to three years while receiving about $600 a month, in addition to the usual child-support payments. More than half a million mothers have received benefits under the program since it began in the 1990s.

But Guislaine Bonnet, who gave birth to her second son last Saturday, said that was attractive mostly to mothers with low salaries. After the standard maternity leave, she said, she plans to return to work at a local government agency that advises poor families how to handle their finances. In any case, she added, the cost of having a child or the impact on her career never entered into the discussion when she and her husband were talking about having another.

"The question does not come up," she said in an interview as her newborn, Florian, slept beside her in a hospital room. "I have always known it like this. I never asked the question."