

**What Women Want:  
Antecedent Conditions for the Initiation of Childbearing**

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## **Abstract**

The transition to motherhood has gained increasing significance in demography, particularly in low-fertility societies. Yet past research on determinants of first-birth timing offers little practical insight to policy-makers faced with the difficult task of arresting, if not reversing, fertility decline. More theoretical explanations of fertility behaviour provide deeper insights but are difficult to test empirically.

This paper argues that the main tenets of such theories operate through antecedent conditions (such as marriage, financial security and home ownership) that individuals want in place before initiating childbearing, and that decisions about the transition to motherhood are based on the interplay of such conditions, how strongly these conditions are valued, and the strength of an individuals' desire for children.

Quantitative and qualitative analytical approaches are used to examine the antecedent conditions for childbearing initiation, drawing on data from a nationally-representative survey of Australian women aged 25–39 years and focus-group data.

## Introduction

As an area of social enquiry, the transition to motherhood has gained increasing significance in demography, particularly in low-fertility societies where reproductive choice, at least in preventing or postponing unwanted births, is largely universal. In developing countries to date, analysis of the onset of childbearing has predominantly focused on demonstrating a shift in timing toward later ages (Ruzicka 1976; Wilkie 1981; Bloom 1982a; Choi and Ruzicka 1987; Jacobson and Heaton et al. 1988; Tuma and Huinink 1990; Ram 1990), estimating the proportion of women who will remain childless (Bloom 1982b; Abma and Peterson 1995; Jacobson and Heaton et al. 1988; Merlo and Rowland 2000), and identifying determinants of timing using characteristics of individuals' past and present situations (Wilkie 1981, Bloom 1982; Trussell and Bloom 1983; Bloom and Trussell 1984; Rindfuss and St John 1983; Ram 1990; Loh and Ram 1990; Kravdal 1994).

Despite a degree of variability in findings, past research has consistently highlighted the impact of education on the transition to motherhood. Yet this finding offers little practical insight to policy-makers faced with the difficult task of arresting, if not reversing, fertility decline. Indeed, Rindfuss et al. (1984) have shown that period (aggregate-time) effects have a greater effect on first-birth probabilities than do socio-structural variables such as education and religion, and that predictive models of the probability of having a first birth lose power as age (individual-time) increases, particularly beyond age 25.

More theoretical (causal) explanations of fertility behaviour—rational choice theories such as Becker's (1981) theory of increased female economic autonomy and Easterlin's (1980) theory of relative economic deprivation; Lesthaeghe's theories of increasing individualism (1986) and cultural diffusion (1988); and Freidman's (1994) uncertainty reduction theory—may provide deeper insights into the dynamics of fertility decision making. Unfortunately, however, such theories, or 'sub-narratives' to use van de Kaa's (1996) terminology, are difficult to test empirically and hence cannot be confirmed or rejected.

In reality, each of these theories likely contributes to our understanding of fertility decision-making. However, this paper argues that the main tenets of such theories operate through antecedent conditions (such as marriage, financial security and home ownership) that individuals want to have in place before initiating childbearing, and that decisions about the transition to motherhood are based on the interplay of such conditions, how strongly these conditions are valued, and the strength of an individuals' (or couple's) desire for children. The antecedent conditions identified in this paper largely mirror the 'preconditions', or basic requirements, for the transition to motherhood that Hobcraft and Keirnan (1995) have previously identified. They argue that the 'process of entry into parenthood...involves the individual or couple in assessing current and likely future circumstances over a series of domains including partnership, employment and income, housing, and time commitments' (Hobcraft and Keirnan 1995:4).

Such a framework is consistent with recent calls for a different analytical approach to the study of demographic transitions—one that recognises demographic behaviour has a future orientation and, more specifically, that fertility decisions are influenced by future hopes and expectations (McDonald 1996; von der Lippe, Billari and Reis 2002).

Further, as the age at which women initiate childbearing has a direct impact on completed fertility, investigation of the conditions under which women would and would not make the transition to motherhood may identify concrete issues to address in future population policies, particularly in countries experiencing below-replacement fertility.

The analysis presented here represents a first step in examining conditions for the initiation of childbearing, as expressed by Australian women. It is a 'work-in-progress', a largely descriptive and exploratory account of what women want to have in place before they consider motherhood.

## Data and method

In examining the conditions women want to have in place before having children, this paper uses data from the Women's Views on Children Survey (WVCS), a nationally-representative study of over 1,000 Australian women aged 25–39 years in 2001. Data were collected during March–June 2001 using a combination of telephone interviewing and self-completion, mail-back questionnaires.

Survey respondents were obtained by randomly selecting telephone numbers from the national residential phone listing (Stage 1) and from a database of market research informants (Stage 2) to identify households containing women in the target age group.<sup>1</sup> Only one woman per household was selected for interview. In households containing more than one eligible woman, the respondent was selected at random using the most-recent-birthday method. This situation occurred in only 6.3 per cent of households, and inverse probability weights are used to adjust for unequal probability of selection. Geographic stratification was employed to ensure adequate representation (proportional to population size) across metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas in each Australian State and Territory.

The average interview length was 41 minutes and the survey response rate is estimated to be 49 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Although this rate of response may appear low, Australian research suggests that survey response rates have fallen by some three per cent per year since 1980 (Bednall, Cavenett and Shaw, 2000). Additionally, a comparison of the weighted sample and 1996 census data reveals no significant difference in the distribution of age, marital status, cohabiting status and labour force status of Australian mothers and childless women.

University graduates were over-represented in the WVCS (33% compared with the national average of 21% in 1996).

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<sup>1</sup> The original survey design specified the random selection of phone numbers from the residential telephone listing for both stages. The decision to adopt a different sampling frame for Stage 2 was an attempt to minimise the number of interviewing hours taken to achieve Stage 2 interviews, as the cost of interviewing hours during Stage 1 significantly exceeded the budget of the research, due primarily to the high proportion (48%) of calls to households containing no eligible women.

<sup>2</sup> The calculation of an exact response rate is not possible as a significant proportion of calls were terminated before establishing whether or not the household contained at least one eligible woman. The estimated response rate reported here is based on the assumption that the proportion of eligible households for which calls were terminated prior to establishing eligibility matched the known distribution.

As the survey's primary aim was to investigate aspects of childlessness, childless women were intentionally over-sampled, resulting in completed interviews from 688 childless women and a comparison group of 328 mothers. Post-stratification weights are used to remove this design effect when analysing differences between women with and without children<sup>3</sup>. Consistent with 1996 Australian Census figures, childless women comprise 34 per cent (n=343) of the weighted sample and mothers 66 per cent (n=673).

The survey represents a unique data source to explore fertility choices of a relatively large and nationally-representative sample of currently childless Australian women, and enables reliable comparisons between childless women and mothers.

Survey information exploring the importance of conditions for childbearing come from a series of questions in which mothers and childless women who wanted children were asked to indicate how important each of thirteen pre-defined conditions was in deciding when to start having children. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *very important* to *not important at all*. There is some retrospectivity in the views of mothers—they were asked to report how important each condition was before the birth of their first child.

The pre-defined conditions included: relationship conditions (to have found your ideal partner, to be married, to be in a secure relationship); financial conditions (to have a good job, to have a partner with a good job, to be financially secure, to own or be buying your own home); human capital conditions (to have completed a post-school qualification, to have established a career); social capital conditions (to have family and friends nearby to assist); and personal conditions (to have had time to travel/do other things you wanted to do, to be sure you could manage work and family responsibilities, to feel ready to handle the responsibilities of raising a child).

Exploratory analysis of factors associated with each of these conditions and with the number of conditions considered important is undertaken using logistic regression and OLS regression, respectively. The former case uses thirteen dependent variables, one for each

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<sup>3</sup> Post-stratification weights are based on usual resident estimates from the 1996 Census as 'children ever born' was not asked at the 2001 Census.

condition, and models the importance of each. The number of conditions is a weighted sum of each of the thirteen conditions, where *very important* responses are assigned a weight of 1.5, *important* responses have a unit weight, and all other responses have a zero weight.

Additionally, the paper draws on qualitative data obtained through the conduct of two focus groups of women in Sydney to provide a deeper understanding of childbearing preconditions—and their expressed meaning to women currently grappling with pre- and post-motherhood concerns. Each focus group consisted of four informants aged between 27 and 36, and included a mixture of childless women and mothers, and partnered and unpartnered women. Participants were selected geographically from the WVCS respondent list. Sessions lasted two and a half hours each, and were held in October 2003 in two areas of Sydney: North Sydney, which is an area of high socioeconomic status; and Inner-East Sydney, containing areas of average to moderately high socioeconomic status. Additional focus groups targeting the lower end of the socioeconomic scale are planned for 2004.

## **Findings**

Across all women, a secure relationship and an ideal partner stand as the most important prerequisites to motherhood, identified as important by the overwhelming majority of respondents (Table 1). Over 90 per cent of women also reported that they wanted to feel ready to handle the responsibilities of raising a child before starting a family. Financial security and having a partner with a good job were important prerequisites for at least one in four women. Perhaps surprisingly, human capital conditions were not considered high priorities for survey respondents—the attainment of tertiary qualifications and establishing a career were the two conditions most likely to be ranked as unimportant. It is clear that variables measuring the importance of conditions are heavily skewed (usually positively), and may suggest the need for an alternative scaling system.

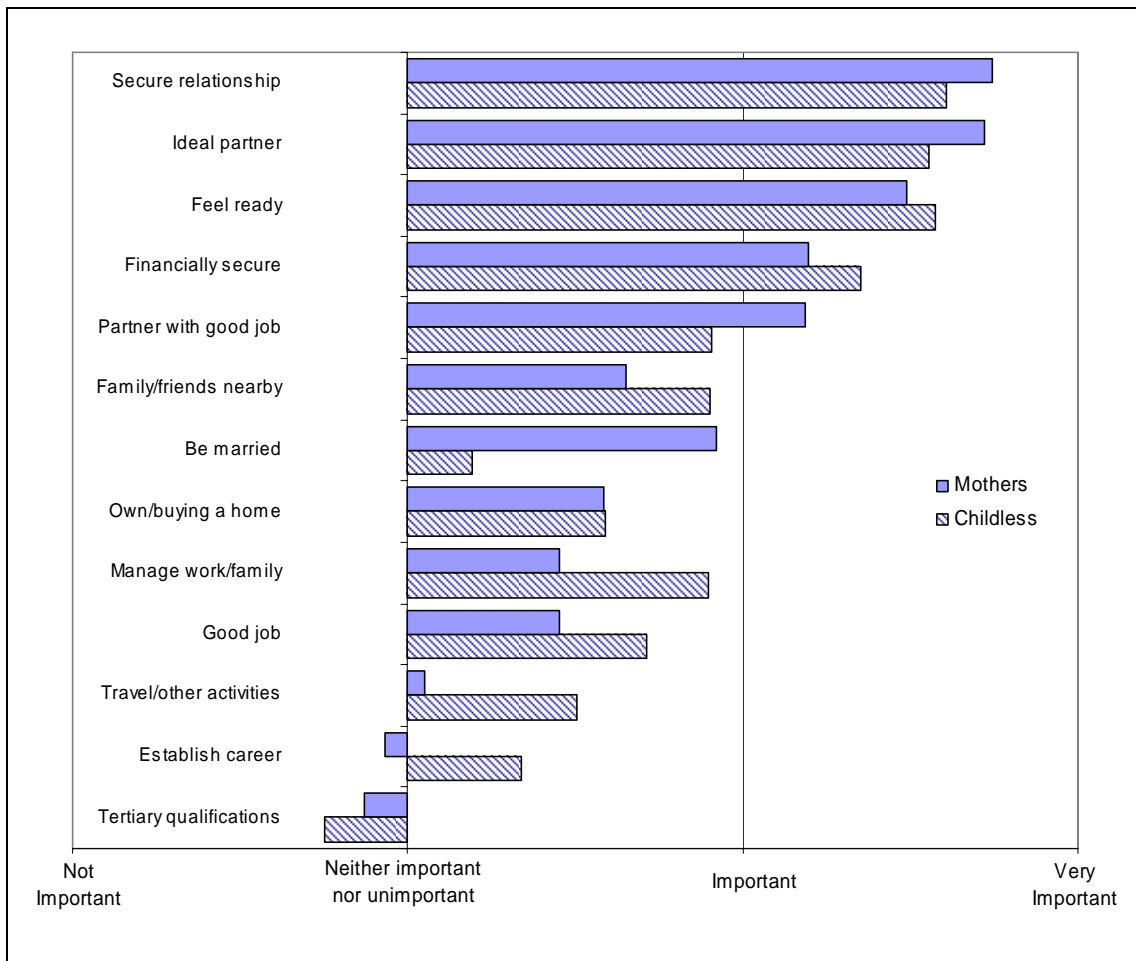
Table 1: Conditions for childbearing: Frequency distributions

	Very important	Important	Neither	Not important	Not at all important	Total	N
<i>Relationship conditions</i>							
Secure relationship	78.7	16.6	1.8	2.2	0.7	100.0	868
Ideal partner	74.9	21.0	1.4	1.9	0.8	100.0	866
Marriage	41.5	24.3	8.5	15.5	10.3	100.0	867
<i>Financial conditions</i>							
Good job	23.0	40.5	9.7	19.8	7.0	100.0	865
Partner with good job	37.6	45.7	8.4	6.4	2.0	100.0	866
Financial security	47.3	39.9	5.1	4.9	2.7	100.0	867
Own or buying a home	28.4	35.5	8.0	22.6	5.5	100.0	867
<i>Human capital conditions</i>							
Tertiary qualification	16.7	21.6	9.7	32.4	19.5	100.0	862
Establish a career	16.5	30.0	9.7	29.2	14.6	100.0	867
<i>Social capital conditions</i>							
Family/friends nearby	34.9	32.4	7.4	20.7	4.6	100.0	867
<i>Personal conditions</i>							
Ability to manage work and family	29.0	36.1	8.3	16.9	9.7	100.0	859
Time for travel/other activities	17.8	29.6	14.1	29.9	8.6	100.0	862
Be ready	65.2	27.1	3.5	2.5	1.7	100.0	864

To facilitate inspection of the relative importance of each condition, Figure 1 presents average evaluations of mothers and women who were childless at the time of the survey. Responses were computed by rescaling original variables to range from -2 (not important at all) to +2 (very important), summing across all variables and dividing by total respondents.

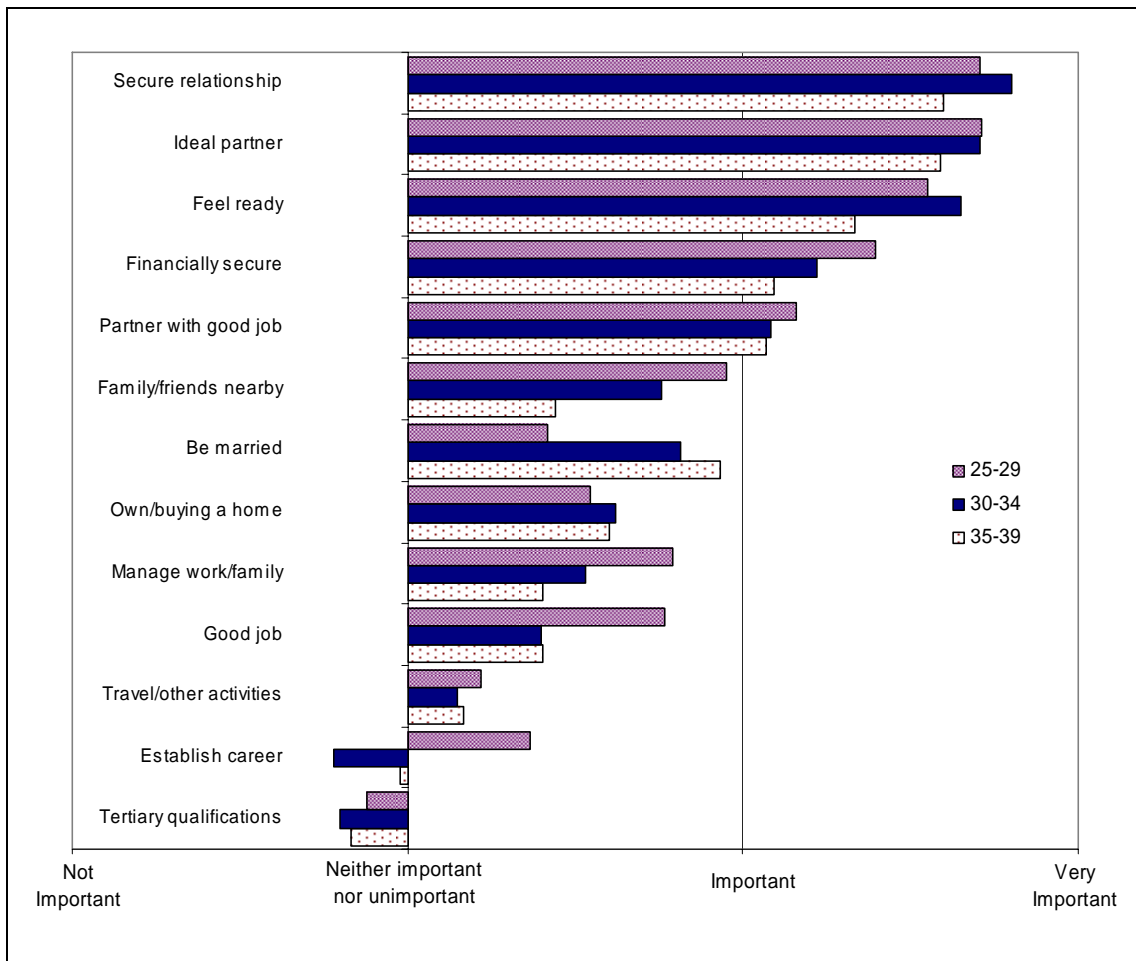
As this figure makes clear, most mothers and childless women view a secure relationship, an ideal partner, financial security and a sense of readiness as important childbearing prerequisites. On average, mothers favoured relationship-related conditions, including marriage and having a partner with a good job, while childless women were more likely to list having good job themselves, feeling able to manage work and family, and having had time to travel or to pursue other personal activities. Establishing a career was considered to be on the 'not important' side of the scale for mothers, while for childless women, a career was important but secondary to most of the other conditions examined in the survey. Both mothers and childless women were ambivalent about requiring a tertiary qualification before having a child.





**Figure 1: Importance of antecedent conditions for childbearing by childless status.**

However, if women’s age is taken into account (see Figure 2), the work-related conditions of having a good job, being able to manage work and family, and establishing a career were more likely to be nominated as preconditions for childbearing by younger women. One possible explanation is that such conditions become less important over time because they are largely satisfied by the time a woman reaches age 30. Alternatively, as women age they may re-evaluate the contribution of work to personal fulfilment. Even among women aged 25–29 years, however, such conditions were secondary to relationship conditions, a personal sense of readiness, and having a social support network for assistance with childrearing.



**Figure 2: Importance of antecedent conditions for childbearing by age group.**

In addition to these preconditions, survey respondents were given the opportunity to specify other conditions they wanted to have had satisfied before starting a family. Of the 119 respondents providing additional information, over one-third suggested health-related conditions. In the main, women reporting such conditions wanted to ensure they were sufficiently fit and healthy to undergo pregnancy and childbirth; a minority wanted assurance that their children would be free from genetic abnormalities.

Apart from a handful of miscellaneous responses that could not be categorised (such as that from one woman: *the Olympics had to be over—I didn't want to be pregnant during the Olympics*), most other responses reflected categories previously discussed.

## Effects on perceived conditions for childbearing

To investigate factors associated with preconditions for the transition to motherhood, preliminary ordinal multinomial logistic regression models were developed. For simplicity, reported importance levels have been collapsed into the three ordered categories of *very important*, *important* and *not important*. Responses are ordered such that the importance of a condition is modeled.

Although models for each condition were evaluated, only five are discussed here: the probability of wanting a secure relationship, marriage, a partner with a good job, to have entered home ownership, and time to travel and do other things. Remaining models did not satisfy the proportionality assumption<sup>4</sup> and require further investigation.

Childlessness, as an indicator of whether the transition to motherhood has been achieved, is included in the models to assess the extent to which preconditions of mothers and childless women vary significantly. Age is included because it is hypothesised that, all else being equal, the importance of conditions will diminish over time as women achieve their desired conditions (especially if this occurs early in life), or as they re-evaluate priorities as they approach the end of their reproductive lifespan. Desire for children, measured on a scale from 1 (don't want children) to 10 (desperately want children), is hypothesised to have a negative effect on the importance of childbearing prerequisites, as a strong motivating force to procreate may predominate over other life goals. Dichotomous indicators of tertiary qualifications and full-time employment are included, as higher educational qualifications and attachment to the labour force are expected to increase the importance of human capital and financial conditions. Indicators of current cohabitation and previous cohabitation of at least three months (excluding the current relationship) are also included, as the transition to motherhood most often involves a joint decision between spouses.

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<sup>4</sup> That is, that the odds of considering a condition important versus very important are the same as those considering a condition not important versus important. Additional attempts using four and, then, five category evaluative response variables also failed to satisfy the proportional odds assumption.

However, only significant effects, or effects that were approaching statistical significance, were retained. In all cases, the selected model provides a significant improvement to the constant-only model, but reliability in accurately predicting cases is limited. Results of these analyses are shown in Table 4.

Current and prior cohabitation, engagement in full-time employment and desire for children all have significant positive effects on the chances of regarding a secure relationship as a precondition of having children. Women currently living with their partner had considerably greater chance (twice the odds) than non-cohabiting women of viewing this condition as important, while the odds for full-time employees are almost 80% greater than for women not employed full-time. Childless status appears to decrease these odds (but the effect of this variable only approaches significance). The model's prediction success rate, however, was just 64 per cent.

For increased importance of marriage as a precondition of having children, the age, childless status, previous cohabitation and desire for children variables all produce statistically significant effects. The odds of considering marriage as an important precursor to childbearing were 60% greater for women who, excluding any currently relationship, had not previously cohabited than for those who had. Childless women were less likely than mothers to want to be married before having a child. Controlling for childless status and prior cohabitation, an increased desire for children and increasing age both increased the chances of rating marriage as an important prerequisite. The ability of this model to accurately predict the importance of being married was 67 per cent—marginally higher than in the previous model.

Models of the importance of having a partner with a good job and owning or buying a home had little predictive power, accurately predicting 58 per cent of cases only. A slightly higher success rate (62%) was found in trying to predict whether women highly valued time to travel or undertake other activities. In this model, childless women had twice the odds than mothers of wanting such time before making the transition to motherhood. Tertiary

qualifications were also associated with a greater likelihood of wanting to satisfy travel and related goals, while increased desire for children served to decrease the odds of having this precondition.

Table 4: Ordinal logistic regression of selected prerequisites for the transition to motherhood

	<b>b</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>p</b>	<b>Odds Ratio</b>
<b>Secure relationship</b>				
Childless	-0.437	0.227	0.0538	0.646
Living with partner	0.745	0.215	0.0005	2.107
Previous cohabitation	-0.647	0.188	0.0006	0.524
Full-time employment	0.570	0.208	0.0062	1.769
Desire for children	0.229	0.039	<.0001	1.257
Intercept(1)	-0.645	0.350	0.0654	0.524
Intercept(2)	1.210	0.367	0.0010	3.352
-2 Log likelihood	Intercept only	1082.62	Likelihood ratio $\chi^2$	86.89
	With covariates	995.74	p<	0.0001
<b>Marriage</b>				
Age (years)	0.069	0.017	<.0001	1.072
Childless	-0.718	0.157	<.0001	0.488
Previous cohabitation	-0.923	0.145	<.0001	0.397
Desire for children	0.156	0.031	<.0001	1.169
Intercept(1)	-3.248	0.638	<.0001	0.039
Intercept(2)	-2.124	0.632	0.0008	0.120
-2 Log likelihood	Intercept only	1857.88	Likelihood ratio $\chi^2$	125.76
	With covariates	1732.12	p<	0.0001
<b>Partner with a good job</b>				
Age (years)	-0.050	0.016	0.0021	0.951
Childless	-0.920	0.186	<.0001	0.399
Living with partner	0.333	0.165	0.0441	1.395
Full-time employment	0.358	0.151	0.0178	1.430
Intercept(1)	0.949	0.570	0.0959	2.584
Intercept(2)	3.147	0.580	<.0001	23.276
-2 Log likelihood	Intercept only	1767.86	Likelihood ratio $\chi^2$	42.29
	With covariates	1725.57	p<	0.0001
<b>Own/buy own home</b>				
Age (years)	0.032	0.015	0.0338	1.033
Living with partner	0.411	0.163	0.0116	1.509
Previous cohabitation	-0.764	0.150	<.0001	0.466
Full-time employment	0.373	0.137	0.0063	1.453
Intercept(1)	-2.235	0.516	<.0001	0.107
Intercept(2)	-0.659	0.510	0.1965	0.517
-2 Log likelihood	Intercept only	1886.83	Likelihood ratio $\chi^2$	52.12
	With covariates	1834.71	p<	0.0001
<b>Time for travel/other things</b>				
Age (years)	0.039	0.017	0.0249	1.039
Childless	0.763	0.160	<.0001	2.145
Tertiary qualifications	0.393	0.146	0.0070	1.481
Desire for children	-0.138	0.031	<.0001	0.871
Intercept(1)	-2.197	0.661	0.0009	0.111
Intercept(2)	-0.698	0.657	0.2880	0.498
-2 Log likelihood	Intercept only	1723.90	Likelihood ratio $\chi^2$	59.26
	With covariates	1664.64	p<	0.0001

## **Women in their own words**

Qualitative information from the two Sydney focus groups supports the findings of the survey—a secure relationship with the right partner, a sense of being ready to tackle the challenges that the transition to motherhood brings, and some sense of financial security and responsibility were considered ideal prerequisites for having children. However, reports from women in their own words highlight a number of themes that are (perhaps inevitably) masked by survey data. Before examining these in details, a short introduction to these women is warranted.

### *The protagonists*

Jennifer is 35 and, after a six-year, on again- off again courtship, she and her partner decided to move in together and became parents six years later. Currently a full-time mum, Jennifer (having left the workforce for the first time 18 months ago to have her first child) expects to return soon to work on a part-time basis.

Ellen is a 34-year-old information technology professional who works full-time. She and her husband have been married for three years, and lived together for two years before their marriage. As yet, they do not have any children, and Ellen admits that she's not yet sure whether they ever will.

Twenty-eight-year-old Lea works full time. She has never been married and does not currently have a partner. She has no children but would like to be a mother some day.

Suzie is 30 and, until the birth of her first child eight months ago, was working full-time as a children's health-care professional—a job to which she expects to return part time once her maternity leave expires. She and her husband have been married for less than two years but have been together for nine.

Diana is a 35-year-old childless woman, currently without a partner but with a very strong desire to have children. She is between jobs at the moment, trying to find work wherever she can.

Maria is 28 and works full time as an administration officer. She is engaged to her partner of four years and expects to be wed some time next year. Currently childless, Maria strongly wants children and expects to have her first within two years of getting married.

Emily has just turned 29 and works full time as a teacher. She and her partner have been married for four years and recently purchased their first home. They currently don't have children and, despite her strong desire to become a mother, Emily admits she is very unsure about when that will happen.

At 37, Stacey is the oldest of the group. She has been with her husband for eight years but married for five. Also a teacher by trade, Stacey is currently a full-time mother to her two-year-old son, but works casually for her former employer.

### *The issues*

All of these women agreed that a stable and loving relationship was the ideal precondition for the transition to motherhood. Indeed, all but one indicated that they would not contemplate having a child alone, in recognition of the difficult challenges parenthood brings. Partnership stability, however, did not necessarily mean marriage. Even though all other focus group-participants said they did not view marriage as necessary for the transition to motherhood, two of the three mothers had married *before* having their child, and Maria, for one, let it slip that she and her partner were planning to have children *after* they wed. Diana was the only woman to clearly articulate that marriage for her was a necessary condition, but her preference stemmed from her religious values and because, to use her words, "*I'd kill my parents, otherwise*".

Although marriage was largely immaterial, partnership wasn't. Women clearly wanted to share the responsibility of childrearing with a partner. Most agreed with Stacey's comment that "*I wouldn't do it [have a child] on my own*". Only Monica felt comfortable taking on the role of

sole parent, primarily because single motherhood was common in her family, and because she had an extended network of relatives living close-by who could be called on for help.

But for these women, not just any partner would do—the ‘right’ partner was consistently raised as an important prerequisite. Despite having a very strong desire for children, Diana had come to terms with the possibility that the absence of a suitable partner might prevent her from becoming a mother, especially as she refuses to compromise (not that she hasn’t tried) and settle for someone less than ideal:

*I feel like the decision [about having children] is out of my hands...I have a position, but not a decision (laughs). My position is that I would like kids, or at least a kid; however, I’ve never been in a position to have one, and I’m not having one without a father, and I don’t have a father. So...maybe that’s not going to be in my future, which is ok. I mean, you know, it makes me a bit sad but I figure, there’s no point worrying...and, you know, if it’s not to be, it’s not to be and so that’s that...And I think...yeah and I’m lucky too because I’m not prepared to put the blinkers on ‘cause, you know, I’m ok with not having kids.*

In the main, time was considered an important part of having a stable, loving relationship, but the reasons for needing time were multifaceted. For Suzie, time meant having the opportunity to establish whether or not she was with the ‘right’ partner, which for her involved gaining knowledge, assessing commitment and developing trust:

*...for me, it takes a while to get to know someone really well. I think that’s why we took some time to get married I think...in order to decide, you know, that it was ok to live together...to me it was a long time, two and a half years or three years. You know there are stages [in a relationship] so I personally wouldn’t decide that I could have a child with somebody that I was going out with for six months, because I don’t think that would be enough example of the person’s commitment to a relationship and enough time to develop your sense of trust, which I think is important.*

Stacey agreed that time to develop a deep knowledge of one’s partner was important, as was time to share experiences without the responsibility of parenting:

*For us it was five years, before we had children. Somebody mentioned earlier too, it’s about having that time for each other before you introduce another little one in your life...you’ve got to share then so it’s important to have that time together as a couple. And a number of friends have actually mentioned that to me.*

Yet some discussants were acutely aware that ‘couple-time’ was a luxury often beyond reach:



*... it's also very different sitting on this side of the fence, when you have been with a partner for some time as opposed to being 32, just broken up from a relationship, would love to have a child and you meet somebody in the next couple of years. You don't have that much time. So it depends where you are when you meet that person.*

Diana, who was 'running out of time', agreed:

*I don't know. This is a really tricky one for me because, you know, time is probably not going to be an option, thank you very much! If it is going to happen at all and, yeah, for me, I don't think the time is as important as 'the rightness'. And the rightness encompasses all those things: a stable and loving relationship, and [a partner] wanting children and being the right person to spend your life with... So it's more the rightness really, rather than the length for me.*

But the dimension of time applied not only to a relationship, but to the individual as well.

Emotional maturity and readiness were consistently raised as a childbearing precondition.

Stacey summed this up as:

*Oh, being responsible for another person, to care for another person. I mean they are totally, totally dependent on you...just dealing with those—yeah some difficult times!—you know? Screaming at three o'clock in the morning when you're really sleep deprived... I mean those times can get really, really tough. I couldn't have done that when I was 25...See, ideally—physically we're prepared for motherhood at 25 rather than at 35, but emotionally...[shakes her head].*

Clearly, part of being ready to have a child was a feeling of having 'been there, done that' and a willingness to give up personal freedom and opportunities. Women articulated the sacrifices that motherhood entails—the need to 'put yourself second'—and so expressed a need to get certain things 'out of your system':

*...the travel, the dinner parties, the night clubs—all that. Like, you've been there, you've done that. I could never have a child—and I admire people who have a child—at 26 where at that age you are travelling, usually, and night clubbing and stuff like that. How do they do it? ... Yeah it's sort of getting over all that and getting over the travel. For me that was big!*

But more than the activities was the sense that they had had the opportunity to live life spontaneously, free from the responsibilities of parenthood. As Maria expressed:

*It's just that sometimes, you're having a great time and, you know, you're living in the moment and, you know, you just, you know that by having a child that's just going*

*to...you're taking on responsibility and you can't be doing stuff like that while you have a baby.*

And for Lea (and others), getting to such a point in one's life and having had time for self-exploration, enjoyment and personal achievement was felt necessary to avoid potential resentment toward the child—something they had seen in other mothers:

*...because I think that when that child turns 13 and you're one of those angry mothers who says, "Oh I never got to travel, I never got to do this or do you have any idea...". I would hate to be one of those mothers, who resents and berates my child because of something that I didn't feel that I was satisfied with.*

In summing up a discourse on 'being ready', Jennifer offered her answer of "Basically having lived", to which I responded, "Cause your life is over now [that you've had a child]?". Her reply indirectly revealed the importance of work to her life, and how conditions around work-family issues generally come to light after the transition to motherhood:

*Well, it's quite funny, you know. From six months to 12 months [after childbirth] I thought, "my life's over, I'm never working again, blah, blah, blah", and then it must have gone away for a little while and I...was having coffee with a girlfriend the other day and I thought "Oh my god my life is over! It's just all gone!". And I saw ...[a friend who's] six months pregnant and ... she was saying, "Oh yes, I'm going to work from home a couple of days a week when the baby is three months, and I'm going to go back to work four days a week when the bub's five months old." [My partner and I were] sitting there going "Ah, ha?" and as soon as they left, [he] turned to me and said, "God, that sounded like you [before childbirth]".*

What is interesting about this comment is that it was one of the very few that concerned work at all. Indeed, consistent with findings from the WVC Survey, focus group participants did not offer career or educational qualifications as required conditions prior to starting a family. Initial prompts for comment on this issue were met blankly in one group, and with dismissive laughter in another. Both Emily and Maria, two of the youngest participants, flatly denied the importance of a career in decisions about the timing of the initiation of childbearing with laughter, vigorous shakes of the head and cries of "nah!" and "I won't say that!". Diana was more expansive:

*Life has a way of disestablishing my career for me every couple of years so it's like so totally out of my control that, you know, I don't even think about it. I mean, that's*

*particularly obvious in the situation I'm in at the moment. So none of it's ever driven by me in a sense so I always just end up somewhere and it'll either be a job or a career and then, for whatever reason, that will end.*

Apart from Jennifer's indirect reference, Suzie was the only other to admit that career issues were important in first-birth timing:

*For me making an ideal situation was—I didn't want to be in the situation where after 15 years, you know after having a family, I kind of resented the children because I felt that I hadn't got as far as I needed to in my career in order to get back into it, or whatever, to keep going, either laterally or further up the ladder. So ideally I wanted to get a few things established and ticked off ... before I went into the family thing.*

Correspondingly, she was the only one to explicitly touch on the need to satisfy a desire to maintain links to the labour force after childbirth:

*I also sort of wanted to have things set up so I was flexible, so that if I didn't enjoy spending 99% of my time or whatever with child ... I'd be able to slip back into work ... so that I could then have some more choices after having a child.*

Like Diana, Lea also mentioned a destabilised work history and by her introductory comment of “I'd love to be unemployed” suggested that work for her was a means to an end, not an end (or childbearing prerequisite) in itself. Work provided the financial resources necessary for life in general and childbearing in particular.

In discussing the relationship between financial considerations and fertility decision-making, participants made it clear that financial security was a key childbearing precondition, and involved several distinct dimensions. Each in turn is considered below.

The concept of debt, or desired absence of debt, was raised in both focus groups, and in both a distinction was made between housing-related debt and personal debt. It was acceptable for would-be mothers to have a mortgage, but to be otherwise financially encumbered was not conducive to starting a family. For Stacey, being debt-free meant having sufficient means to cover the immediate costs of expanding the household:

*I'd have to say, some financial stability. I wouldn't have a child if I was in lots of debt or didn't have some income. Mortgage, I wouldn't factor in...you know that's just part of Australian society but, yeah, not a lot of like credit card debt and things like that ...you*

*need some savings. I mean, just starting out, having a child, you have to buy a cot, you know? That's \$800! You have to buy a pram, that's \$500!... So you need some savings. You need something behind you.*

The absence of personal debt also signalled financial management skills, which Jennifer saw as an important part of parenthood:

*I think practically, you wanna be debt free. Like, not mortgage-debt free, but I think personal-debt free... I look at my peer group and how many people earn significant incomes, but are permanently in debt to Visa and Amex—to their lifestyle. And for me, I wouldn't feel comfortable having a child if I couldn't even manage my own salary packet.*

Financial security also meant a sense of being able to 'cope financially'—to meet the substantial long-term costs associated with having children, of which most women were acutely aware. Managing the drop from two to one income was an issue for Maria, who was planning to marry next year and have a child in two years' time:

*We still rent at the moment but we've bought investment properties. So...it's sort of setting ourselves up because once we do start having children, we'll just start selling off the investment properties.*

Financial planning was also seen as necessary to provide adequately for the child's future. For Stacey, financial stability and planning had increased in importance as a result of perceived changes over time in affordability:

*... we've already set up a bank account for Luke's education. I think we have to now. It's like, things are changing...a lot of people have HECS<sup>5</sup> debts and it's huge...that's what I'm concerned about – tertiary education. We figure, you know, if we put \$20 in a bank account every fortnight now, maybe we'll have enough in 20 years' time for his education. That's something you need to think about.*

For some, buying a home was a key part of financial security and a way of enforcing the accumulation of savings. Emily could see the value of home ownership, despite having invested in the property market at an inopportune time:

*Oh I think [financial security] is important! That, the idea of have some savings, a disposable pool you can tap into. But we've just bought a two bedroom apartment at the highest (laughs) of Sydney prices (laughter). So yeah, I don't know if our equity's ever going*

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<sup>5</sup> Higher Education Contribution Scheme—a government-administered tertiary education loan scheme introduced in 1989. HECS effectively re-introduced tuition charges at Australian tertiary institutions which had been abolished in 1973.

*to be there or if we're permanently going to be in negative equity. But, ... I think it's [home ownership] the next step... Just thinking, "oh, I'm pushing 30 and my partner's 33...we've got nothing! We spend everything we've earned for the last five years. We should have something!"*

Home ownership also provided non-financial benefits, including ontological security.. In discussing what she wanted to have in place before having children, Ellen, married and in her mid-thirties, wanted:

*Somewhere to live...For me it's owning a home, but for other people it might be renting. I know these people...[who] decided that they would pack up, sell everything...They travelled the world for a couple of years and then came back here, and came back here pregnant, and didn't have anywhere to live! Had no money, moved in with my colleague and her husband, but they were perfectly happy with that. They thought that was a great arrangement. That would make me feel really insecure—not having my own place to live [in].*

There were also more practical advantages to home ownership:

*...having a screaming baby in the middle of the night, being in a flat would just be so much more stressful—worrying about whether the neighbours could hear it, so a house would have to be a definite.*

Despite general agreement about the importance of being able to cope financially with raising a child, the desire for children seemed to outweigh the ideal of financial security and entry into home ownership, particularly as women approached the end of their reproductive lifespan. Diana indicated that, for her, financial stability and home ownership were desirable, but not a necessary condition to initiate childbearing:

*But, I mean, basically, I think family is more important than all those [financial] things... poor people have babies all the time. It's called the perpetuation of the species and, um, you know, and it's very rare that...children come along in the most ideal circumstances.*

Jennifer, in discussing how critical it was for her and her husband to have been financially secure and home owners, agreed that the importance of such factors waned over time and with circumstance. She says, for instance:

*... if you get to a stage in your life where you really want one [a child], you probably will have one because— especially if you thought your time was running out.*

What seems clear from these women's discourses is that the ideal 'space' in which to commence childbearing cannot be easily considered as a series of independent preconditions which, when 'ticked off', open the door to starting a family. Although women valued financial security, couple-time and personal time, not all desired preconditions occur simultaneously, and what is initially considered important may have to be 'traded-off' as women come to the realisation that the opportunity for having children is finite. Yet most would not compromise on the partnership criterion. The WVCS confirms this finding—of the 458 childless women who wanted children, 59 per cent said they definitely would not have a child if they were not entirely happy in their relationship and just 35 per cent said they would consider having a child without a partner.

### **Precondition sets**

At this stage, no analysis has been undertaken to identify different combinations of preconditions that women report, and whether these 'precondition sets' vary by individual characteristics. However, the following analysis, using OLS regression, outlines the factors affecting the weighted number of childbearing preconditions. The dependent variable being modeled is a sum of the number of preconditions identified as important by survey respondents, weighted by the degree of importance—that is, where a condition was rated as *very important*, the overall precondition score was incremented by 1.5; a rating of *important* added 1 to the overall precondition score, while the score was unaffected by all other ratings. The scale ranges from zero to 18, with a mean value of 11 and a standard deviation of 3.4. As with the preceding analysis, models were initially fitted with the explanatory variables of age, childless status, previous and current cohabitation, tertiary qualifications, full-time employment, and desire for children.

A single model for both childless women and mothers is described in Table 2. At the outset, it should be noted that very little (6%) of the variance in women's precondition set is explained by the selected independent variables; nonetheless, there are some significant differences. Perhaps surprisingly, childless women reported lower scores on the precondition scale than

did mothers, once all other variables in the model had been held constant. As expected, women in full-time employment and those with tertiary qualifications scored higher on the weighted scale of preconditions. Previous cohabitation status depresses the weighted number of preconditions, while those currently living with a partner recorded slightly higher average scores. Surprisingly, desire for children was positively associated with conditions for childbearing.

**Table 2: OLS regression of weighted number of conditions for childbearing**

Variable	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>t</i> -Statistic	<i>P</i>	Standardised Beta
Childless	-0.821	0.466	-1.76	0.0782	-0.081
Age (years)	-0.072	0.042	-1.72	0.0851	-0.068
Living with partner	0.926	0.442	2.09	0.0366	0.088
Previous cohabitation	-0.794	0.379	-2.09	0.0366	-0.080
Tertiary qualification	0.956	0.369	2.59	0.0098	0.097
Full-time employment	1.030	0.384	2.68	0.0075	0.110
Desire for children	0.047	0.076	0.62	0.5333	0.023
Intercept	15.211	1.638	9.28	<.0001	0

Model  $R^2 = 0.049$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.040$ ; F statistic = 5.52,  $p < .0001$

In an effort to improve this model, and to investigate possible explanations for the counter-intuitive findings, an age-childless status interaction term was included to assess whether the effect of increasing age on the desired number of childbearing preconditions was different for mothers and childless women. Although a significant interaction effect was found, the introduction of this term also introduced multicollinearity. As a result, separate models for mothers and childless women were constructed (see Table 3).

When analysed separately, the effects of cohabitation (both current and previous) and desire for children are no longer statistically significant for each group.<sup>6</sup> In fact, among mothers, the model as originally specified contained no statistically significant effects. The fit of the model was improved, however, by replacing respondent age with age at first birth which, on its own, explains almost all of the variance explained by the refitted model presented here (7% compared with 9%, respectively).

<sup>6</sup> However, the effect of a previous cohabiting relationship, which has a negative impact on the weighted number of preconditions, does approach statistical significance.

Earlier transition to motherhood was associated with lower scores on the precondition scale; or, put another way, an increase in the number of years spent childless was associated with an increase in the weighted number of childbearing preconditions. There are two possible alternative explanations for this finding. Firstly, women making the transition to parenthood at younger ages may have had fewer conditions they wanted to have satisfied, thereby facilitating entry to motherhood. Secondly, that the retrospective reporting of conditions by these mothers was affected by problems of recall or, if their desired preconditions were not satisfied, by post-hoc rationalisation.

For childless women, the model has slightly less explanatory power (7% compared with 9% for mothers), but significant effects are found for age, tertiary qualifications and full-time employment. Net of all other effects in the model, increasing age reduces childless women's precondition set, which suggests they re-evaluate priorities in light of their diminishing reproductive opportunity, or that conditions become less important as they are met. On the other hand, full-time employment and tertiary qualifications act to increase the weighted number of desired childbearing prerequisites.

Table 3: OLS regression of weighted number of conditions for childbearing, for mothers and childless women separately

Variable	<i>b</i>	Standard error	<i>t</i> -Statistic	<i>P</i>	Standardised Beta
<b>Mothers</b>					
Age at first birth (years)	0.253	0.062	4.05	<.0001	0.233
Living with partner	0.589	0.887	0.66	0.5074	0.042
Previous cohabitation	-1.252	0.661	-1.89	0.0592	-0.118
Tertiary qualification	0.928	0.677	1.37	0.1717	0.079
Full-time employment	1.021	0.649	1.57	0.1166	0.089
Desire for children	0.171	0.119	1.43	0.1530	0.080
Intercept	5.856	1.982	2.95	0.0034	0
<b>Childless women</b>					
Age (years)	-0.242	0.053	-4.54	<.0001	-0.218
Living with partner	0.431	0.403	1.07	0.2845	0.049
Previous cohabitation	-0.267	0.419	-0.64	0.5246	-0.029
Tertiary qualification	0.924	0.399	2.31	0.0211	0.105
Full-time employment	0.960	0.465	2.06	0.0395	0.094
Desire for children	-0.071	0.096	-0.74	0.4580	-0.035
Intercept	20.424	1.972	10.35	<.0001	0

Mothers: Model  $R^2 = 0.106$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.087$ ; F statistic = 5.76,  $p < .0001$

Childless women: Model  $R^2 = 0.081$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.069$ ; F statistic = 6.66,  $p < .0001$



## Summary

This paper takes the theoretical position that fertility decision-making concerning the transition to motherhood depends in large part on women's desired antecedent conditions (including personal, relationship, financial and human and social capital conditions), how strongly these conditions are valued, and the desire for children. It uses data from the 2001 Women's Views on Children Survey (WVCS), a nationally representative survey of (largely childless) Australian women aged 25–39 years, and qualitative data from two focus groups of respondents living in Sydney to examine what women want in place before having children.

The true value of the WVCS lies in the potential for longitudinal analysis, as follow-up interviews with respondents would facilitate assessment of the extent to which and when women achieve their desired conditions for childbearing, and the interval between satisfaction of these conditions and first-birth timing. Here, the survey provides an exploratory account of women's ideal space in which to start a family.

There is general agreement among women who have and have not made the transition to parenthood that a secure relationship and ideal partner are important prerequisites for having children. As a group, mothers valued these conditions slightly more than childless women, and were considerably more likely to want to be married before having children and to want a partner with a good job. Women who had not, at the time of the survey, made the transition to motherhood were more likely than mothers to value financial security, time to travel and undertake other personal activities, the availability of social networks, a good job and the ability to manage work and family responsibilities. Financial and work-related conditions were more commonly expressed by younger women.

The need to feel ready to deal with the responsibility of raising a child was also considered an important childbearing prerequisite, independent of motherhood but more commonly expressed by women aged 30–34 years.

Predictive models of childbearing preconditions require further investigation; however, desire for children has a net positive effect on valuing marriage and a secure relationship, and a net negative effect on valuing time for travel and other personal activities.

The number of desired preconditions, weighted by importance, are largely independent of demographic characteristics and desire for children, as explanatory models provided a poor fit to the data. For mothers, the weighted number of preconditions increased with age at first birth, suggesting that women making the transition to motherhood early in life have fewer conditions to satisfy. For childless women, increasing age reduces the number of desired preconditions, while full-time employment and tertiary qualifications act to increase the weighted number of desired childbearing prerequisites.

Qualitative data support the survey findings that the requisite conditions are having a secure and loving relationship with a suitable partner, and reaching a stage in one's life. However, women's discourse suggest that the answer to what women want before having children is complex. What was clear from these discussions was that the transition to motherhood is increasingly impacted by chance—when, if ever, will I meet Mr Right?; will I still be in a relationship when I feel ready to have a child?; will I be financially able to cope when that happens?

Facing increasing rates of divorce and understanding of the difficulties of raising a child alone, women are perhaps becoming more aware of the need to choose carefully in order to maximise the probability of building a lasting relationship. Yet as their biological clocks approach 'midnight', women seem more willing to trade off once-desired conditions, such as couple-time, but appear unwilling to compromise when it comes to the right partner. Even, however, when no significant barriers to childbearing exist, making the transition to motherhood is often too difficult to contemplate. As Emily explained:

*Well, if it [unplanned pregnancy] happened to me, that would be a blessing 'cause then I wouldn't need to make the decision. I know we'd cope with it absolutely fine if it happened. We've got a solid enough relationship, we could manage, but just making that decision—"I'm going to give up all this time and all this money to do it" It's a hard decision!*

The focus on reaching a stage in one's life and ensuring the existence of a stable, loving relationship with an ideal partner does not augur well for government-initiated, short-term fixes to increase fertility, which, to be successful to any degree, must attempt to reduce the age at first birth. Indeed, when asked about the 'Baby Bonus', a financial incentive for childbearing recently introduced by the Australian government, focus-group participants indicated that this initiative would have little bearing on their decision to have children, preferring instead longer paid maternity leave and access to quality, affordable childcare.

As women appear to adjust their childbearing prerequisites in the face of diminishing opportunities to have children, they would benefit from more education on the realities of age-related infecundity and the limited success of in-vitro fertilisation. Although the flow of such information in the public arena has increased over recent years, some women have unrealistic expectations about their reproductive lifespan. As 35-year-old Diana highlighted:

*...hang on a minute! I was led to believe I had another 5 years to get this [childbearing] underway... Now you're telling me my eggs are geriatric?*

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