



### The baby bust

*The women who can most afford motherhood are the least likely to have babies*

YOUNG WOMEN TODAY think long and hard about when, and even whether, to become mothers. They observe the changes that occur in their sisters' or friends' lives when they have babies; changes that are for the most part dramatic and, of course, irreversible, and it gives them serious pause for thought. It is not something most of them are going to do until they are really, really sure that it is the right thing — and the right time — for them.

Most young women want to wait until they have experienced the world, then acquired a financial base and made sure they are with the right man before embarking on the long journey of parenthood. Sometimes, after waiting until their early 30s to get everything in place, they find they can't bring themselves to change. They are not sure they can cope with the dislocation and chaos a baby will bring into their lives. There is a big decision to be made and, for the first time in history, women are in control of that decision. Exercising it gives them a great sense of power — and a freedom previous generations of women could not even have dreamed of.

Australian women today are the first generation to effectively have total control of their fertility and this has dramatically changed everything for them. One hundred and fifty years ago, nearly half of all Australian women could expect to have around nine confinements.<sup>1</sup> Early in the 20th century, it was not uncommon for a woman to have “a toddler at her skirt, another at her breast and a third in her womb”.<sup>2</sup> Less than 50 years ago, in 1961, women were having on average 3.6 children each. Today, around 28% of women will not have children at all and those who do have them are having fewer than any previous generation.

In 1993, the fertility rate in Australia (the number of babies a woman will bear over her lifetime) was 1.9, down from 2.1 in 1976. The 1970s rate was the same as the previous lowest level — in 1934, during the Great Depression. Rural women still have more babies — an average of 2.27 in 2001, and the rate for Indigenous women was 2.21, whereas in the same year the national average birth rate had fallen further to 1.7. In some areas it is even lower, for instance in metropolitan Melbourne, which has a birth rate of just over 1.5. A birth rate of 2.1 is required for a country to reproduce itself, so Australia now has to rely on immigration just to maintain its population. This phenomenon of a dramatically declining birth rate is sometimes called the “baby bust” — in contrast to the post-World War II “baby boom”, from 1946 to 1963, during which Australia's birth rate soared. Demographers, politicians, editorialists and others are constantly fulminating against this decline. What can they do (they bluster with increasing frustration) to make women have more babies?

Why are women having fewer and fewer babies? The reasons are complicated, but the answer in some ways is surprisingly simple. As a society, we ask women to give up too much when they have children and we give them far too little in return. The pleasures of children are, in the

pragmatic calculus now undertaken by most young Australian women, not compensated for by what they have to forgo. They are expected to give up their jobs or at least cut back on them, often after having been given a hard time while they were pregnant. They can expect to suffer a significant loss in earnings, from which over a lifetime they will never recover, as they will rarely be able to return to do the same level of work as before. Even the government admits that stopping work to have a child means “the family cash income will drop sharply”. According to *Fact Sheets on Work and Family* issued in 2002 by Senator Amanda Vanstone, the federal Minister for Family and Community Services, when a double-income family, both on average weekly earnings, moves to a single income, they suffer a 38% fall in income that government payments do not come close to redressing. Economist Dr Bruce Chapman from the Australian National University and others have calculated that a woman who has completed secondary education will forgo lifetime earnings, after tax, of around \$160 000 for a first child, and about \$12 000–\$15 000 for each additional child.<sup>3</sup> Unlike a similarly industrialised country such as the United States, where mothers are far more likely to return to full-time work even when their children are quite small, Australia seldom makes this a feasible option for new mothers who wish to retain an attachment to the full-time workforce.

As a consequence, it will be difficult for mothers to hang on to their skills, let alone to upgrade them so they can keep up with their former colleagues. There are now clear trends showing that the more educated a woman is, and the higher her income, the fewer children she will have. Women aged 30 years and over with a university or higher degree have the lowest birth rate. Women in this group have slightly less than half the number of children of other, less qualified women of the same age. Since the rate of women's participation in university education is continuing to increase (from 8.4% in 1986–87 to 20.2% in 2000–01),<sup>4</sup> it seems likely that the fertility rate will also continue to decline. Professional women are almost twice as likely to be childless as women in clerical and sales occupations, and when fertility is correlated with the socioeconomic status of where women live, those in the highest status areas have less than half the number of children than those in the poorest areas.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the women who can most afford motherhood are the least likely to have babies. They know how much they would be giving up in a society that pays lip service to maternity, but which in fact treats mothers very badly.

Is it any wonder there is a “baby bust”? As a society we do almost nothing to make it easier for women to combine a satisfying and productive life with having a family. Instead, we place all sorts of obstacles in her way, and we cruelly force her into choices that are unfair and discriminatory. Men expect to be able to have families and still enjoy their jobs or careers and, increasingly, so do women. Women are

no longer prepared to sacrifice themselves on the altar of maternity, or to be doormats for their families. They want a life — and they are entitled to have one. If we refuse to let them have it, something has to give and, as we have already had amply demonstrated to us over the past 10 years, that something will be having children. Finally, women — younger women especially — are starting to put themselves first.

**Anne Summers**

Writer and commentator, Sydney, NSW  
annesummers@pacific.net.au

1. Siedlecky S, Wyndham D. *Populate or perish*. Australian women's fight for birth control. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990: 13.
2. Knightly P. *Australia. A biography of a nation*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2000: 48.
3. Chapman B, Dunlop Y, Gray M, et al. The impact of children on the lifetime earnings of Australian women: evidence from the 1990s. *Aust Econ Rev* 2001; 14(4): 373-389.
4. More educated women tend to have fewer children. Fact Sheets on Work and Family (released by the Minister for Family and Community Services, Amanda Vanstone). Canberra: July 2002. Available at: [http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/via/min\\_factsheets/\\$File/work\\_family.pdf](http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/via/min_factsheets/$File/work_family.pdf) (accessed May 2003).
5. Women on higher incomes tend to have fewer children. Fact Sheets on Work and Family (released by the Minister for Family and Community Services, Amanda Vanstone). Canberra: July 2002. Available at: [http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/via/min\\_factsheets/\\$File/work\\_family.pdf](http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/via/min_factsheets/$File/work_family.pdf) (accessed May 2003). □