

# Lie behind surrogacy is that we can have it all



Are women mistaken in delaying childbirth for the sake of work?

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**R**enate Klein's recent piece on these pages, titled "Baby Gammy has shown the need for debate on surrogacy", while thoughtful and interesting, fails to address the real root cause of the rise in surrogacy. That is, it doesn't address the lie being sold to women that they can have it all.

Women think they can put off childbearing until their late 30s and early 40s, but many can't. There is a biological clock. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, since the 1950s fertility rates for Australian women overall have fallen, with the medium age of women giving birth rising. While there has always been infertility, the dramatic increase is due in large part to older women trying to conceive. Surrogacy, while impossible not that long ago, comes into play with the sad truth that fertility itself falls with age. Putting off childbearing too long in favour of a career can leave many women childless.

Fifty years ago the absence of reliable contraception and restricting unmarried women's access to what contraception there was, ensured a steady supply of unwanted babies for adoption to

infertile, married, heterosexual couples. The sexual revolution of the 1960s coupled with the advent of safe, reliable contraception gave birth to the career woman and her delayed family. It also led to a greatly diminished supply of children to adopt and for many women, the time for natural children never came. The belief that childbearing could be delayed indefinitely proved to be an empty lie.

As it has transpired that Gammy and his sister came from donor eggs, Wendy Farnell may well be a victim of the same unreliable fertility narrative that left so many women childless and desperate.

The drive to reproduce is powerful. And while the drive to reproduce is equally strong in men and women, the sexes aren't created equal when it comes to reproduction. The average man has many years over the average woman to decide whether he wants children or not. Surrogacy has become pervasive because no one is warning young women about these sad truths.

Safe, reliable contraception changed the education of women. Women no longer needed to know how to build a private life. They joined men in the commuter lines



and put off finding a mate. And why not? Given a choice, who would want to be a homemaker and live a life of servitude and dependence? Men's lives were exciting; they had money and power. And so women pushed off childbearing for a few more years. IVF. Egg freezing. So many choices became available that young women scoffed at the idea of a biological clock. The question evolved from will I reproduce? to how will I reproduce?

In addition, many young women don't know that they're going to want children. As an 18-year-old feminist I demanded to have my tubes tied. The doctor refused saying I might change my mind. I came

out of that consultation shaking with rage. How dare he? It was my body and my decision. I vowed to prove him wrong. What a debt of gratitude I and my three children owe this man. He was right and I was wrong. If he'd done what I asked I might be lined up outside a Thai surrogacy clinic by now.

The unkindest silence comes from the generation of women before mine. These women got to enjoy the full benefit of social change. Women like Madeleine Albright, Nancy Pelosi, and Betty Friedan were already young housewives and mothers at the dawn of the sexual revolution. They raised their consciousness, burnt their

bras and returned to work after they had had children. The workplace made room for their return, but they closed the door behind themselves.

Today, women who leave the workforce to raise kids may never recover. I work harder than I did before I had kids 27 years ago, for less money and with no job security. The punishment for time out never ends.

Young women see me and know they must wait, wait, wait to give birth.

By the time they feel well established enough it's often too late. With their fertility spent and their programming in high gear, they turn to IVF and other fertility treatments. If that fails, the glad-handling, money hungry surrogacy agents step forward promising to take away the pain of childlessness. It's a simple matter of supply, demand and resources. Childless women in developed countries have the money; poor women in the developing world have the wombs.

While we can educate young women on the need to act on their fertility before it's too late, it is also essential that the workforce accommodates women who want to have children.

Employers must open pathways for women to return to the workforce after time at home. If we don't, we'll need to become anaesthetised to the baby Gammy stories. Because if nothing changes, there will be more baby Gammys, many more.

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