

Baby, It's Time

Living together sounds modern and mature, but it often masks a lack of commitment that can cruel women's chances of having children, writes Bettina Arndt.

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"I never expected to be 41, on my own and childless. Being single is not so terrible. You can always find a companion and I have many other good things in my life. But I always wanted to be a mum and am upset about the possibility I won't have kids. That really dogs me."

This is Alison, now happily working in a bookshop after a successful career in the finance industry. She's one of a growing number of women likely to miss out on having children. More than a quarter of today's young women will never be mothers, the Australia Bureau of Statistics estimates.

Most women still want children, but up to 10 per cent of couples are infertile often due to age-related problems and large numbers are missing out because of the hazards of modern partnering patterns.

One of the main reasons Australian women, particularly better-educated women, end up childless is they don't have the right man at the right time. More than a quarter of Australian women in those critical years between 35 and 39 don't have partners, and about a fifth have never married, according to research by Bob Birrell at Monash University, using data from the latest census. (Not all of them, however, are childless a quarter of women in this age group with degrees, and more than half of those without post-secondary qualifications, are single mothers.)

Research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) shows that 13 per cent of the unpartnered childless group have been married, but separated before having children. Many more experience another type of relationship breakdown a live-in relationship that splits up.

James Sweet, a sociology professor at the University of Wisconsin, dubbed these relationships "pre-marital divorces", which implies an easy way out for relationships destined not to last. In the long term, these relationships may carry heavy penalties, especially for women.

These relationships are scrutinised by international researchers, who have observed that in most Western countries in recent years, cohabitation has replaced marriage as the first "live-in" relationship. And, whereas these relationships once led to marriage, this is now less likely. The AIFS has found that two-thirds of cohabiting couples married within five years in the early '70s. The rate in the '90s was only 40 per cent. A further 20 per cent remained living together and the rest broke up.

The result is many women hit their 40s unmarried and childless, often after spending time in a number of live-in relationships. Living together may cruel women's chances of mating in time to have children. Adding to the problem is the fact that most women, particularly educated women, don't even consider marriage until their late 20s, which leaves precious few years for achieving family goals.

A woman who spends too long in cohabiting relationships begins to incur what economists call "opportunity costs", explains Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, in her new book, *Why There are No Good Men Left: The Romantic Plight of the New Single Woman* (Broadway Books, 2003). "Each year she spends in a cohabiting relationship that doesn't 'work out' is one less year available to invest in a successful search for a life partner . . . While she is waiting for Mr Not Ready or Mr Maybe or Mr

Someday to make up his mind, she is missing opportunities to meet other potential partners she may be ready and willing to marry.” (And have children with, we might add.)

The average age for a woman to marry for the first time is now 27. The time crunch is really on. The Sydney fertility expert Robert Jansen warned in the Australian Medical Journal recently of steady falls in success rates for IVF from the age of 33.

Jill, a Sydney preschool teacher, spent six years with her Mr Maybe. She met him when she was 35. It was the children issue that brought them unstuck. He’d been married before and had grown-up children of his own. Only now does Jill acknowledge how much she glossed over his reluctance to add to his family. They married after four years of living together and tried to conceive, but the marriage was quickly on the rocks. At the time of her first critical ovulation, Jill found herself alone. Her husband was suddenly absent on an unnecessary interstate trip.

Now 46, single and childless, Jill realises the timing of this failed relationship was crucial. “If I’d made that mistake at 28 or 29, I’d still have had those other years.”

And she’s also aware that she didn’t push hard enough to find out where her husband really stood on the children issue. “My husband didn’t want to do it, but he wanted to keep me,” she concludes.

One characteristic of live-in relationships is that the couple often avoid the hard questions, Whitehead says. “People can slide into living together, without any serious discussion or mutual understanding as to its meaning, purpose or likely duration . . . As a consequence, cohabitation-as-courtship can contribute to confusion, misunderstanding, miscommunication and faulty assumptions. It is easy for a couple to decide to live together and, at the same time, harbour very different expectations for the relationship.”

Given this ambiguity, it becomes easy for a woman to think the relationship is progressing towards marriage while her partner is content with the status quo.

Gemma, 28, is a Melbourne yoga teacher. She’s always known she wanted to have children and would have been happy to start her family in her early 20s. But issues of marriage and children were never raised in the four-year live-in relationship she had at the time. “I never talked to him about it. I think I knew deep down that he was always less committed and to make my desires so overt would have pushed him away.”

Andrew Cargill is a Melbourne psychotherapist who has worked with women in live-in relationships. “Many are so anxious, they don’t even dare voice or fully acknowledge their own expectations for fear he will withdraw, scamper, end the relationship.” He says it isn’t uncommon for these relationships to drift on for years in this uncertainty an uncertainty he feels suits many men. “They feel they have a lot to lose. Our culture has encouraged a hedonistic lifestyle and they are reluctant to give it up.”

The result is many men embrace live-in relationships as the answer to all their dreams. Last year, Whitehead and David Popenoe, who are co-directors of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, conducted focus groups in which they asked men aged 25 to 33 why they weren’t married. Their answers included: easy access to sex; cohabitation provided the benefits of marriage without the downside; they wanted to avoid divorce and its financial risks; they wanted to enjoy the single life as long as they could; they wanted to wait till they were older to have children; they feared marriage would require too many changes and compromises; they were waiting for their soul mate; they faced few social pressures to marry; they were reluctant to marry a woman with children; and they wanted a house first.

Many of these answers gel with what Cargill has been hearing. But he also finds that many men are unimpressed by what they have seen of marriage and family life. "They've looked at their parents' marriage and said: 'I don't want to go there.' They haven't seen their fathers as being all that satisfied with being married, or being a father." It's hardly surprising young men are nervous many have seen fathers end up divorced and alienated from their children.

Also, some men simply find themselves in live-in relationships that aren't fulfilling. Steve, a Sydney pilot, spent two years in such a relationship in his late 20s. "I was losing interest but I knew she wasn't," he says. It got a bit scary towards the end. "You don't like someone to keep having the wrong impression. You've got to either spell it out or you do it the soft way and ease yourself out of the situation." They never talked about it. He eased himself out by taking a job interstate. Now 54, he has just married. His former live-in partner is in her early 40s, married and childless.

But there's also a broader issue, affecting both young men and women namely that children are no longer seen as rewarding. "Many young people don't see children as bringing something into your life. Children are seen as taking something from you," says Cargill. The research bears him out. Surveys show that far fewer people see children as important to life satisfaction. In 1971, two-thirds of people agreed that "a woman is only really fulfilled when she becomes a mother". By 1991, this figure had dropped to 7 per cent, according to research by AIFS and the Australian National University.

The reason for this shift, according to Whitehead, lies in efforts to encourage girls to aim for independence by acquiring a good education and a successful career. What she calls "the girl project" has been an astonishing success but, in the process, the traditional goals of marriage and children have been denigrated or relegated to a distant someday that often never arrives.

Virginia Haussegger, a news presenter for ABC TV in Canberra, says: "The message I heard was that to have children and marry young was a cop-out. That women miss out if they do that. I always used to say: 'I'm never having children.' " In the past year, Haussegger has written newspaper articles claiming women of her generation were duped into believing that satisfaction lay in having rich careers, with the result that many are now childless, alone or drifting in "ambiguous, uncommitted" relationships.

"None of our purple-clad feminist mothers thought to tell us the truth about the biological clock . . . the one that would eventually reach exploding point inside us . . . None of our mothers thought to warn us that we would need to stop, take time out and learn to nurture our partnerships and relationships. Or, if they did, we were running too fast to hear it," she wrote.

Although Haussegger's articles have been greeted with sympathy and support, she also has attracted considerable hostility, laced with a sense of betrayal. "How very petulant of you. I would expect as much from my 15-year-old," one woman responded. "Stop bleating . . . None of us has it all," said another. "Some feminists don't have babies and live with that choice because it was just that: a choice," said a third.

But it's often a misguided choice arrived at through distorted messages about life satisfaction, says Cargill, who notes the irony that "therapists have long worked with men in their 40s who arrive at a disillusionment because their careers didn't end up fulfilling them".

AIFS research shows that nearly half of all people who start out not wanting children end up changing their minds. But, with infertility increasing so sharply with age, the change may come too late for many.

Yet, for every single woman unhappy at missing out on marriage and children, there is another quite content. Like Suzi, 48, a Sydney physiotherapist: "I never felt I wanted to live in a couple situation forever. I find it very stifling. It's unlikely I will do it now unless it is an exceptional sort of person and a very big house," she says. "I always knew I didn't want to spend my whole life wiping noses, cooking dinners and all that stuff. Marriage is a so much better deal for men." Suzi has spent time in two live-in relationships. She was always the one who wanted out. "They wanted more commitment than I could give."

So there are women, as well as men, shying away from long-term commitment, and there are also couples living together in long-term relationships who share a mutual lack of interest in marriage or children. The AIFS has just finished research, to be published in the coming week, which has found that fewer than half of couples who have lived together for more than five years expect to marry. Other AIFS research suggests many of them are committed to a long-term relationship and have no interest in tying the knot.

Indeed, increasing numbers are having children in such relationships. But this is far less common for educated women: among 30 to 49-year-olds who have never married and who live alone, only 13 per cent have had children from live-in relationships. This compares with 59 per cent of those who haven't finished school, according to data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey (conducted for the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services).

But within that group of live-in couples will be people whose low expectations are based on problems in the relationship, or simply the knowledge that their partner isn't in it for the long haul. And, while men's more leisurely body clock means they can afford to dally, women seeking marriage and children do not have that luxury.

As Whitehead says, we've come a long way from the time when the crowning achievement of a woman's life was her youthful marriage. But, along with the support that exists for women's success in education and work, they must also be encouraged to achieve the equally important goals of commitment and children, by being more intentional about their private lives. If they are to find partners by their late 20s and early 30s, they can afford to waste very little time away from the main game.