

## WHAT MATTERS TO WOMEN: BEYOND REPRODUCTIVE STEREOTYPES

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*This article reports on a qualitative study of reproductive decision-making. The findings suggest that many of the popular stereotypes of women's aspirations and motivations that fuel public discussions of Australia's falling birth-rate and policy initiatives such as paid maternity leave are inaccurate and unhelpful. The article also challenges the efficacy of preference theory in accounting for women's choices with respect to work and family.*

Susan McDaniel has argued that 'fertility, childbearing, and reproduction are the focus of several profoundly different contemporary social debates. It is at the convergence of these debates that the synthesis of demographic and feminist perspectives can be most fruitfully explored and developed into a new framework'.<sup>1</sup> Our study takes up McDaniel's challenge in the context of recent heightened attention to Australia's falling national birth rate and the ensuing public debate on the role and provision of policy initiatives designed to encourage and support those Australians planning or raising families.

While the demographic shifts underpinning Australia's falling birth-rate have been well documented,<sup>2</sup> we were concerned that reliance on quantitative studies alone reduced women to voiceless variables in an important national debate. With their individual behaviours and subjectivities flattened out and allocated to simple types or categories of being, women's aspirations and motivations emerged as apparently uniform, transparent and predictable. Catherine Hakim, for example, has suggested that 'in sum, lifestyle preferences help to determine: women's fertility — the incidence of childlessness and, for the majority who do have children, family sizes; women's employment patterns over the lifecycle — choices between careers and jobs, full-time and part-time work, and

associated job values; and women's responsiveness — to public policies, employer policies, economic and social circumstances.<sup>3</sup> But our concern with the validity of these assumptions about women's behaviour that generally underpinned discussions of fertility decline in Australia was a key factor in our team's decision to adopt a different approach to examining how individual women assessed the costs and benefits of having children, the way various social and cultural factors influenced their decision-making, and how these choices were negotiated in relation to career, personal and relationship goals.<sup>4</sup>

While in no way challenging the efficacy of social demography in mapping population change, we concurred with McDaniel that 'much about contemporary fertility patterns and changes...remains elusive to demographic explanation'.<sup>5</sup> Hakim has argued that 'if we want to know what women want, it makes sense to ask them directly about their preferences, and to take their responses seriously'.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, we believed that it was crucially important to reposition women as central actors in childbearing decisions and to seek out what they actually say about their needs and aspirations in the realm of reproduction. In this way we hoped to be able to draw out how women 'negotiate fertility decisions within the constraints set and opportunities provided [to them] by broader macro-societal conditions'.<sup>7</sup>

Findings from our qualitative study contest common assumptions about women without children being primarily career-focused and antipathetic to motherhood; about women with multiple children being strongly self-identified as maternal; and about fertility patterns reflecting women's active choices or planning around reproduction. Instead, we found strong degrees of career attachment in women with children, respect for motherhood among women without children, and a substantial number of women describing their fertility outcomes as 'accidental' or unintended. We also found that 'differing life goals'<sup>8</sup> did not produce conflicting attitudes to policy initiatives around employment, childcare and other support mechanisms.

The one hundred women in this study, whether childfree or not, in fulltime or part-time employment or out of the workforce, reported the importance of flexible work, supportive workplaces, community services and cultural attitudes to how they chose to negotiate their varying life aspirations. While they did focus on paid and unpaid maternity leave as an important aspect of this, it was clear that single policy initiatives like this need to be provided in the context of broader support for women. Rebecca Kippen has said that 'given that the fall in fertility is the result of changes in first-birth and second-birth rates, research designed to identify ways of facilitating the transition to first birth, and the transition from first to second birth would seem prudent'.<sup>9</sup>

Our research found that eight of the 26 women with one child in the study were not considering having more, despite earlier thoughts of doing so. All 42 women without children in the study, whether or not they wanted to have children (22 of

these women *had decided not* to have children) described negotiating limited and polarised expectations of acceptable roles and aspirations for women. These findings suggest that policy settings that address families without also engaging with employment and the wider social landscape are not going to be effective in addressing women's needs and aspirations in the reproductive realm.

#### **STUDY OUTLINE**

We interviewed 100 women from five different areas across Victoria: City of Port Phillip, Casey, the North West (focused particularly on Brimbank and Maribyrnong), Gippsland, and Bendigo. In each of these areas, participants were recruited using from the following groups:<sup>10</sup> women with no children, women with one child, women with two or more children, young women, and women raising children alone. This recruitment pattern was designed to ensure that we achieved a small-scale but substantially representative account of fertility decision making across the community.<sup>11</sup> By recruiting from each of these groups in each of our target areas, we were able to achieve social, economic and geographical diversity as well as representing a variety of reproductive decisions. The only group excluded from the study were those who identified themselves as involuntarily infertile, since this study was focused on how people made decisions about reproduction. Our final sample included 58 women with children and 42 without children. The women ranged in age from 21-52. Of the women with children, the average issue was two children (including current pregnancies) and the mean age at first birth for these women was 28.43 years.<sup>12</sup>

## KEY FINDINGS

### **Women without children do not prioritise careers over motherhood**

Reflecting on the Canadian context, Wu and MacNeill have argued that education and employment will fundamentally influence whether or not a woman will choose to become a mother and suggested that, as women experience more gains from employment, they are less likely to desire motherhood.<sup>13</sup> Popular media portrayals of voluntarily childless women, moreover, frequently suggest there is some direct causal link between increasing levels of childlessness among women and their access to high-powered careers.<sup>14</sup> In this study, the majority of the women without children had comparatively high levels of education (for example, some form of post-secondary education) and, as we have seen 22 indicated they had decided not to have children. However, childless women did not demonstrate any stronger degree of attachment to the labour force or career trajectories than any other group of women in the study. In the words of Gwen,<sup>15</sup> aged 39, from Port Philip, her childless status;

wasn't a career thing ... I had decided I didn't want children before that when I had, you know, no expectations of going on and doing — having a career or going to uni or anything.

For this group, choices about motherhood were more likely to be associated with perceived social ambivalence about motherhood and the lack of support for mothers than with specific career or employment-related objectives. Some, like Rita, noted that perceptions surrounding motherhood nevertheless had marked impacts on potential career or employment pathways: 'I can see it being a real dent in your career ...once you've had a child ... [You're perceived] as not as

career focused'. A small number of these women noted that self-education would be made more difficult by childbearing and that this had influenced them in their decisions. The younger women (aged under 26) who were certain that they would not have children were often concerned about their capacity to support the financial commitment of children and their capacity to cope with the combined pressure of mothering and other life aspirations. Four in this group also cited environmental concerns about overpopulation. Twelve of the 14 young women in this group were open to having children, although they did not plan on doing so in the near future but only three were determined to have children.

Recent debate has focused attention on the issue of partnering as an important factor in women's reproductive decision making.<sup>16</sup> The proposition that childless women must have failed to partner successfully and that this can account for their childless state was not borne out by our findings as the issue of partnering was not a central determinant of childlessness. Twenty-two of the 42 women without children were partnered (four were married) and eleven of these women were clear about their decision not to have children. These women did not view children as a necessary or inevitable next stage in their relationship. Indeed, some worried that having children would in fact interfere with the quality of their relationship.

### **Women who have large numbers of children do not prioritise mothering over all other life goals**

There were twenty women in our sample who had three or more children. These women were mainly married. Only four women in the study identified as single and none as defacto, rather than married.

Overall, in our study, 37 of the 100 women were married and 33 of these women had children.) Thirteen of the group with three or more children were tertiary educated, which was a higher rate of tertiary education than the women in the study overall. Of these 20 women, only five had no current contact with the labour force; 13 of them were working in professional occupations, one woman was receiving a pension and one was a semi-skilled worker. Interestingly, women with more than four children reported more negative than positive comments about their reproductive patterns. As Molly said, 'There were a few people there who said 'oh you're not having another one, are you?' ... I said "yes" ... It is almost like they think you have got the plague when you have six children'.

But contrary to our expectations, it was this group of women who focused most attention on workplace issues in their accounts of fertility decisions. Like Lilian with three children who held down a full-time professional job in the education sector, they did not generally describe themselves as particularly maternal: 'I'm not a person who was ever particularly fond of children, or babies or things like that... I ... surprised myself with my own'. For these women, access to flexible workplaces that they were able to enter and exit with relative ease, (unpaid) maternity leave, and the availability of short-term or part-time work, were conditions that facilitated their desire for more children, since they did not desire mothering as their sole occupation.<sup>17</sup> Maureen described her choice to have third child in the following way. 'I knew there was the availability of part time [work], certainly that was part of our consideration at the time... I felt I was making a really good compromise. ... I varied the amount I worked'.

While Hakim<sup>18</sup> has argued that 'it is

foolish to assume women's employment patterns necessarily reflect their preferences', it is clear that most of these women chose to go on having children because they found ways to pursue other activities in conjunction with child-rearing. Their stories suggest they were keen to go on working and, since they could combine that with multiple child-bearing, they did so. We suggest these women are different to Hakim's 'adaptive women', who in her view 'prefer to combine employment and family without giving a fixed priority to either'.<sup>19</sup> These women prioritized their access to work in their lives. Rosemary said, 'I will be flat out with three children and that in itself is a full time job, but just something for myself, that I work and I've got another identity'. Peter McDonald has argued that 'the principal policy issue is the extent to which those who have already become mothers are able to have more than one child and to gradually return to the labour force'.<sup>20</sup> This group of women substantively confirms this, since they were able to achieve flexible and satisfactory work outcomes that they identified as encouraging them in their continued child bearing. Susan Lambert<sup>21</sup> has argued that research confirms that job autonomy and opportunities are important factors in assessing women and men's satisfaction with work and personal life and this was borne out by many in this group who combined above average numbers of children with paid employment.

By contrast, amongst the 38 women who had one or two children, less than half had accessed any kind of maternity leave and less than half of the group who taken maternity leave had been paid. Their choices about more children (only three women with two children were considering an additional baby) were not directly predicated on access to such leave,

although they indicated that maternity leave was one of the important factors affecting how they considered their reproductive options.

**Do women's fertility patterns really reflect their reproductive 'planning'?**

This study revealed that the concept of reproductive decision-making itself may need rethinking. Common accounts of reproductive choices focus on careful planning and thoughtfulness in decision-making, such as this one offered by Julianne Schultz:

Listen to a group of thirtysomething would-be mothers and the conversation is far removed from the old notion of 'falling pregnant'. These women don't fall anywhere, they make informed decisions: there are supplements to take, tests to be had, results to be analyzed.<sup>22</sup>

Hakim has argued that control over fertility is a crucial element in understanding contemporary family patterns and supporting her 'preference theory'.<sup>23</sup> But amongst the 58 women with children, 28 women said that their first pregnancy was an accident of some form, either a complete accident or an accident of timing. Of those 28 women, only eight indicated it was an accident of timing; the rest simply identified their pregnancy as accidental or unexpected.

These women crossed the spectrum in terms of age, partnering status, educational attainments and employment status. Only three women expressed strong anti-abortion sentiments as the reason for their decisions to continue with these unexpected pregnancies. The rest indicated that it had been a process of negotiation whereby they had come around to accepting the presence of children in their lives, sometimes in conjunction with their partners and sometimes in conjunction with other life goals. Additionally, 17 of the 42

women without children considered they *might* have children, but only eight were relatively confident that they *would* have children (five of these women were currently single). Thus, assumptions about explicit planning of reproductive outcomes were not borne out here with a high degree of chance and circumstance being crucial to reproductive outcomes for women with and without children.<sup>24</sup>

**Women with children and women without are not critical of each other's choices.**

Among the 100 women interviewed, there was overwhelming support for the choices other women made, and a shared recognition of the value of caring labour. There was no evidence of the 'mummy wars' that Barbara Pocock has identified as so central to media discussions of the work-life balance, where mother's working and mother's at home are represented in conflict.<sup>25</sup> In addition, conflict between women with and without children was not evident here. In the group of mothers, there was uniform support for women's reproductive choices, whatever those might be. A number of the women noted wryly that motherhood was an extremely hard gig and it was wise to think about it carefully. There was a group of eight of these women who said that they felt sad when women decided not to have children, as they felt it was the best thing they themselves had done. But they did not judge negatively. As Helena with one child said, 'I admire the self awareness' [of people who know they don't want to have children]. In the entire sample, there were really only three negative comments about the choices other women had made and these were three of the women with no children who indicated that they felt that women with children 'whinged' or complained. On being questioned about the provision of specific

benefits such as paid maternity leave, women expressed support for these initiatives even when they did not expect to access themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, negative views of mothering children were not cited as a reason for childlessness. In the group of 42 women without children, 18 were absolutely resolute that they would not have children (22 said they felt they would not have children),<sup>27</sup> but 10 of those 18 (aged 22-43) who were definite about not having children expressed very positive views about mothers' labour. These women talked about what mothers did and how society treated mothers. Only three out of the group spoke of mothers in negative ways, with the rest being respectful of mothering even if they did not intend to have children themselves.

But women without children were the ones most affected by prescriptive accounts of motherhood. They most consistently described 'good' mothering as a full time occupation and expressed the greatest ambivalence about the use of childcare, which was generally positively viewed by all women with children. Like women with children, however, they understood social ambivalence to mothering work. Elizabeth said, 'Personally I think it's quite positive but I think in society... it doesn't have the value that it probably should have'. McDaniel has suggested that 'the discourse of glorified motherhood parallels the enhanced societal need for unpaid reproductive and caring labour'.<sup>28</sup> The women in our study who were without children clearly recognized that the value attributed to motherhood did not result in actual social or workplace support for mothers. Abigail's comment was tellingly representative here: 'I've got a friend who's got two kids [and she] can't [go back to work]. She's lost her husband and can't work because she can't get her kids

into crèche. ... She wants to go back to work but the support is not there from society'.

## CONCLUSION

Hakim's assertion that social attitudes have marginal impact on women's behaviour and choices was not borne out in the responses of the women we interviewed.<sup>29</sup> Although one hundred is a small sample, the range of women interviewed and the semi-structured methodology allowed us to explore diverse women's views and experiences and gather their own descriptions of their 'lifestyle preferences'. For these women, social attitudes were identified as critical in how they managed their reproductive and other life aspirations, as ideas about motherhood clearly affected their choices. These women also suggested an important link between social attitudes and their experiences of policy development and implementation. As Cherry suggested, when describing how difficult it was for her to take the maternity leave to which she was entitled, family friendly policies need to be backed up by supportive attitudes by those in the workplace and in society more generally.

All the women noted the limited success in making workplaces family friendly that they had observed, the limited support offered by government services for child rearing and many referred to limited support from managers and supervisors. It was clear that different groups of women value different policy initiatives, and, while women generally did not cite these factors as determining their fertility decisions, they identified a range of supportive measures as important to the landscape in which their fertility negotiation occurred.

About four of the 38 women with one or two children in this study were explicit

about having reduced their preferred family size in the light of their experience of managing paid work and mothering in the current policy environment, but about six others described these impacts in terms of timing childbearing and their degree of certainty about having more children. As Norah said, 'I think people like me and this generation tend to sort of think of things in more of a practical sense, like rather than emotions. You might think well, this is my income and this is what I want to have out of life and then think, you know, whether with the second child, you can actually achieve all that'. This bears out Lambert's contention that most family-responsive or family-friendly policies in fact 'make it easier for workers to adjust their family life to conform to work requirements rather than altering work requirements to accommodate family responsibilities',<sup>30</sup> since women are reducing family sizes and work expectations in the light of work realities.

Linda Hantrais has noted that 'attempts by demographers and economists to test [the] assumption ... that by offering generous financial support and by creating a family-friendly environment, governments could persuade, or at least encourage, couples to have more children ... empirically by measuring the correlation between benefits paid to families (as of right and means-tested) and fertility rates, however, have produced contradictory and inconclusive findings'.<sup>31</sup> We suggest seeking to measure a *direct relationship* between benefits and fertility will result in

such contradictory findings. When we asked if women decided about having children on the basis of benefits, they generally said that they had not relied directly on such benefits in their choices. But when they described the course of their reproductive lives and experiences, workplace conditions, good maternity leave provisions, other ancillary services, and social attitudes featured strongly in their descriptions of how they made such choices.

This study is small-scale and qualitative, but it does provide an opportunity to examine what women say matters to them. Rather than relying on stereotypes to develop policy and inform public debate, these findings suggest the urgent necessity of developing far more nuanced explanatory frameworks for interpreting women's choices with respect to motherhood and to work. The choices of the women in this study indicated that women consider the social and employment conditions facing them as they think about being mothers, and that these factors influence them as they make reproductive decisions. These findings point to the need for policies aimed at fertility to engage much more fully with women's personal and professional aspirations, if governments desire increased fertility.

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#### **References**

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- <sup>2</sup> P. McDonald, 'Contemporary Fertility Patterns in Australia: First Data from the 1996 Census', *People and Place*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1998, pp. 1-13; R. Merlo and D. Rowland, 'The prevalence of childlessness in Australia', *People and Place*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2000, pp. 21-32.
- <sup>3</sup> C. Hakim, 'Competing family models, competing social policies', *Family Matters*, vol. 64, 2003, pp. 52-61, p. 56; C. Hakim, 'Taking women seriously', *People and Place*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2001, pp. 1-6.

- <sup>4</sup> For this study, we were also interested in men's views. Only 14 men, however, responded and 11 of these had children. These men indicated that they had been active in decision-making about having children. They reported substantially less conflict in this process than the women we interviewed.
- <sup>5</sup> McDaniel, op.cit., p. 83
- <sup>6</sup> Hakim, op.cit., 2001, p. 1
- <sup>7</sup> P. Teo and B.S.A. Yeoh, 'Interweaving of the public and the private: Women's responses to population policy shifts in Singapore', *International Journal of Population Geography*, vol. 5, 1999, pp.79-96
- <sup>8</sup> Hakim, op.cit., 2003, p. 55
- <sup>9</sup> R. Kippen, 'Declines in first and second order birth rates and their effect on levels of fertility', *People and Place*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2004, pp. 28-37
- <sup>10</sup> Flyers and informational material were distributed to targeted locations in each area; these included public libraries, community health centres, and the YWCA where appropriate. Community advertisements were placed in the local newspapers in each of the areas. Tertiary education institutions and email distribution lists were contacted. At later stages in the project, radio approaches were made to specific groups in some areas, women with no children for example, in order to ensure recruitment targets were met. Snowballing was used where appropriate.
- <sup>11</sup> We aimed to recruit 20 in each of these categories, but ended with lower numbers in the group of women raising children alone (14 instead of 20), and in the group of young women, (16 instead of 20). When we analysed the data, these categories did not form the basis of analysis, as young women for example were also often women without children.
- <sup>12</sup> This first birth age varied across the five areas studied, with a notably lower average age for the first birth among women in Bendigo (24.0 years) and a higher one in City of Port Phillip (30.29 years) and in Casey (31.66). In the western region it was 27.29 years and it was 27.92 years in Gippsland.
- <sup>13</sup> Z. Wu and L. MacNeill, 'Education, work and childbearing after age 30', *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2002, pp. 191-117.
- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, V. Haussegger, 'The sins of our feminist mothers', *The Age*, 23 July, 2002, p. 11; J. Albrechtsen, 'No commitment to breed: Blame feminism for falling fertility rates and family breakdown in Australia', *The Australian*, 3 July, 2002, p. 1; L. Taylor and M. Taylor, 'Why don't we have kids anymore?', *The Good Weekend*, 1 September, 2001, pp. 50-52
- <sup>15</sup> Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the anonymity of respondents.
- <sup>16</sup> B. Birrell, V. Rapson and C. Hourigan, *Men and Women Apart — Partnering in Australia*, The Australian Family Association and Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, Melbourne, 2004
- <sup>17</sup> P. McGovern, D. Gjerdingen and D. Froberg, 'The Parental leave debate: implications for policy relevant research', *Women & Health*, vol. 18, no.1, 1992, pp. 97-117.
- <sup>18</sup> Hakim, op.cit., 2001
- <sup>19</sup> Hakim, op.cit., 2003, p. 55
- <sup>20</sup> P. McDonald, 'Work-family policies are the right approach to the prevention of very low fertility', *People and Place*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2001, pp. 17-27
- <sup>21</sup> S. Lambert, 'Workplace policies as social policies', *Social Service Review*, 1993, pp. 237-260
- <sup>22</sup> J. Schultz, 'From Conception to Perfection: Introduction', *Griffith Review: Making Perfect Bodies*, Winter, 2004, pp. 7-12.
- <sup>23</sup> Hakim, op.cit., 2003
- <sup>24</sup> Marian May has suggested that qualitative research approaches are very useful when seeking information about the timing of first births and degree of planning in first births, as structured interviews questions cannot address all the important variations in women's responses. See M. May, 'Asking women what determined the birth of a child: An examination of interaction on a field-coded (semi-open) question in Negotiating the Life Course', NLC Workshop, University of Queensland, June 2004.
- <sup>25</sup> B. Pocock, *The work/life collision: what work is doing to Australians and what to do about it*, Annandale, New South Wales, Federation Press, 2003, p.1.
- <sup>26</sup> Here the data contradicts Hakim's point that resentment is often felt by women mothering full-time about the use of their husbands' taxes to support working mothers (See Hakim, op.cit., 2003). A number of newspaper articles, too, have focused upon an apparent element of resentment among those without children who feel their taxes pay for family benefits and policies they do not access. See, for example, M. Steketee, 'Conceiving a new family structure', *The Weekend Australian*, 1-2 September, 2001, p. 23, and T. Nankivell, 'Snouts in the trough', *The Australian*, 3 September, 2001, p. 11
- <sup>27</sup> When defining their decisions not to have children, some of the women's stories often indicated a degree of uncertainty. Some women indicated that they would not, but later on made statements like, 'I revisit this decision quite often'. Therefore, in the 42 women without children, we have 22 indicating that they would not have children, but four of these later express some uncertainty about that decision.
- <sup>28</sup> McDaniel, op.cit., p. 92
- <sup>29</sup> Hakim, op.cit., 2003, p. 54
- <sup>30</sup> Lambert, op.cit., p. 238



<sup>31</sup> L. Hantrais, 'Exploring relationships between social policy and changing family forms within the European Union', *European Journal of Population*, vol. 13, 1997, pp. 339-379.