

Baby come lately; Late (great) expectations

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Today's better-educated women put off having babies until they feel they can give their kids the best. But delaying motherhood comes with a host of problems.

THE Singapore Mum today is likely to be a graduate in her 30s, holding a well-paying white-collar job.

Twenty years ago, the average mother was likely to be in her mid-20s to early 30s, with primary education or lower. She was also probably a housewife, or stuck in a low-wage job.

Today's older, better-educated mothers, who put off having children till they are financially and emotionally ready, may augur well for Singapore's stock - though not its stork.

Better-educated mothers tend to beget better-educated children, which is good news for a society whose most valuable resource is its human capital.

But the trend towards delaying motherhood has many downsides. Older women are likely to end up having fewer or no children, which adds to Singapore's acute baby woes, demographers point out.

Last year, more than 60 per cent of babies were born to mothers aged 30 or older. And almost one in four (23.6 per cent) of the 37,967 babies born here had a mum aged 35 or older - which is considered 'advanced maternal age' in medical terms.

This is almost double the 12.7 per cent of babies born to older mothers in 1990, going by figures obtained from the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA).

The ICA publishes an annual report, Registration of Births and Deaths, with the 2010 report released last week.

Modern mums also tend to be highly educated.

Last year, almost half (45.2 per cent) of all babies born had a university graduate mother - seven times more than the 6.3 per cent of babies with graduate mums in 1990.

In fact, the largest proportion of babies born last year had graduate mothers, while the smallest share of babies (12.2 per cent) were born to mums with no educational qualification or just primary school education. In 1990, the reverse was true.

This significant jump is probably a reflection of the growing number of Singaporean women with tertiary education and the influx of highly educated immigrants in recent years, said Dr Yap Mui Teng, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

Armed with higher qualifications, greater earning power and more options in life, today's women tend to have higher expectations of their husbands, experts say. This means they do not tie the knot until they find Mr Absolutely Right, and they place a higher premium on getting ahead in their jobs first before going the family way.

Professor Jean Yeung of the Asia Research Institute noted: 'In the past, women didn't have lots of options. The way to gain social status was to marry a rich man and have children. But now, women see things differently and have found other ways to lead a fulfilling life, besides marriage and having children.'

Aside from their desire to climb the corporate ladder, she added that they have to save up for longer to give Junior the best possible start, given the high cost of raising children here.

Cash, car, credit card, condo and country club first; children later

WHAT this all means is that the Singapore woman ends up marrying and having children later.

And the statistics bear this out. The median age of first-time brides last year was 27.7 years, up from 26.2 years in 2000. Meanwhile, the median age of first-time mums was 29.8 years last year, up from 28.5 years in 2000.

Take architect Kimberly Toh, 41. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of Oklahoma when she was 28, and focused on building her career before walking down the aisle with her architect boyfriend of six years at age 36.

After marriage, they busied themselves setting up an architecture firm together. Having children was 'not high' on her priority list as she was reluctant to be 'tied down' by a baby. By the time she felt ready to be a mother, she was 38.

However, her first pregnancy ran into serious complications and had to be terminated.

Last October, at age 40, she and her husband, Mr Goh Chioh Hui, 45, finally welcomed their first child, Rheia.

Then there are women like Elaine (not her real name), 42, who spent her 20s and early 30s hard at work feathering the nest, only to encounter fertility problems when she was finally ready to be a mother.

She had her first child at 37, almost 10 years after she got married.

The banker, who has a master's degree in economics from Cambridge University, said: 'Women like us want everything in life. We want to be known for ourselves, we

want to have a good career and we also want to have a family. But we don't want to give up everything just to have children.'

After tying the knot, she slogged long hours to 'make it big'. When her maternal instincts kicked in in her mid-30s, she had problems conceiving.

She turned to science, spending about \$100,000 on in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), to conceive two children – a four-year-old daughter and a son, who is turning one.

Meanwhile, children were always on the cards for housewife Paulin Tan, 40, who did not consciously choose to delay motherhood, but met Mr Right only later in life.

'I waited a long time for the right guy to come along,' said Mrs Tan, who has a master's degree in Southeast Asian studies from the University of London. 'You can't just marry any guy who comes along.'

She had three previous boyfriends before meeting her TV producer husband, who is six years her junior, at age 32. They got married when she was 35.

She and her husband, Mr Ivan Tan, 34, had their first child, Noelle, a year later; and last year she gave birth to their second daughter, Kate.

Another reason there are significantly more older mothers today is the rising number of remarriages.

Dr Paul Tseng, of TLC Gynaecology Practice, said the growing number of divorces and remarriages means that more women are starting a family with their second spouses, naturally at an older age.

Dangers of being an older mum

TO REFLECT the growing number of older mothers, a one-time exercise was carried out in 2008 to revise Singapore's total fertility rate (TFR) from 1980 onwards.

The TFR is now calculated with women aged up to 49 being counted as being of child-bearing age, up from 44 previously, the Department of Statistics told The Straits Times.

By including women up to 49 years of age, this raises Singapore's TFR 'a little bit', said Dr Yap. The TFR measures the average number of children a woman will bear in her lifetime.

According to Professor Peter McDonald, director of the Australian Demographic and Social Research Institute, this brings Singapore in line with other developed nations, which usually include women up to 50 years of age in their calculation of the TFR.

However, doctors caution women against delaying motherhood because the chances of getting pregnant fall and the risk of pregnancies running into problems increases with the mother's age.

Many women think they have the 'luxury of time', without realising that their biological clock is ticking away, said Dr Yong Tze Tein, a senior consultant at the Singapore General Hospital's (SGH) department of obstetrics and gynaecology.

She added: 'They want to wait to have the 5Cs (cash, car, credit card, condo and country club) before starting a family.'

For example, Dr Yong has a 36-year-old patient who is now trying for a baby through IVF. 'She waited to buy a car and a condo first before having children. Now that she has the car and condo, she finds that she can't conceive,' she said.

And reports of celebrities giving birth way past their fertility prime can also be misleading, Dr Yong added, giving women a false sense of security that having a baby at an older age is easily possible.

Unfortunately, many Singaporean women continue to bank on science to help them justify their decision to delay motherhood.

Said Dr Christopher Chen, director of Gleneagles IVF Centre: 'Many women think they can resort to IVF to have children. They fail to realise that their chances of success through IVF also dip with their age. IVF is no longer a panacea.'

A woman under 35 years of age trying for a baby through IVF has a 48 per cent chance of success, compared with just 14 per cent for those over 40, said Dr Loh Seong Feei, head of the KK Women's and Children's Hospital's (KKH) department of reproductive medicine.

Battling Singapore's baby drought

THE growing number of mature mums is not unique to Singapore. It is a trend in First World countries globally.

In the United States, 14 per cent of the babies born in 2008 had mums aged 35 and older, up from 9 per cent in 1990, according to the Washington-based Pew Research Centre. The average age of first-time American mums was 25 in 2006, compared with 24 in 1990. And 54 per cent of American mothers who had babies in 2006 had 'at least some college education', up from 41 per cent in 1990.

In England and Wales, the number of babies born to women aged 40 and older in 2009 was almost three times more than the 1989 figure.

Still, this trend of women delaying motherhood no doubt worries the Singapore Government, given Singapore's great baby drought, as older women tend to have fewer or no children.

Last year, Singapore's TFR sank to a historic low of 1.15, despite the influx of immigrants of child-bearing age in recent years. For a nation to replace itself, a TFR of 2.1 is needed.

And over the years, various leaders have urged couples to start having babies early, instead of putting it off. Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean described Singaporean couples' mentality most aptly when he said last year: 'I think we are a perfection-obsessed society. And we forget, in seeking and waiting for perfection for our children, we end up not having any.'

In August 2008, the Government did more than just talk. It started subsidising assisted reproduction technology treatments such as IVF at public hospitals, to help more women conceive after marrying late.

But to boost the dismal birth rate, experts say, Singapore also has to help increasingly well-educated women holding well-paid jobs juggle both work and family.

The relentless rat race, long working hours and the lack of flexible working arrangements are reasons why Singapore's TFR is lower than that of other developed nations, Prof McDonald said.

Dr Yap suggested policymakers could address the 'real or perceived' opportunity cost of having children on a woman's career, by showcasing statistics, for example, that indicate women with children may not necessarily be worse off in their careers than childless women.

Companies can also do their part by offering more flexibility in work arrangements, she said. She added: 'When women see that work and having children need not be conflicting and there are minimal opportunity costs involved, they may be keener to have children or have them earlier.'

Ultimately, experts say births are better late than never, as every contribution helps boost Singapore's flagging TFR.

Older mothers also tend to have more money, greater career autonomy, more maturity and other emotional resources to raise their children, who generally have better educational outcomes.

Mrs Tan said of having children at an older age: 'I have had enough fun. Motherhood does restrict you and you can't meet your friends for dinner and get drunk, for example.

'But I have been there and done that already. If I had a kid at 25, I would probably miss that.

'At this stage of my life, I'm really, really happy to have kids. I have had a full career and I have no more ambitions to prove myself. I can focus all my attention on my children.'

But late starter Madam Toh does regret not heeding advice given by family and friends to have her children earlier. Now, she urges her friends to start procreating earlier.

'If I could turn back the clock, I would have had children earlier. I realise that when Rheia is 10, I would be 50 already, and that's when all the illnesses come knocking on your door,' she said.

'What if something happens to us? She is still so young.'