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# **I Forgot to Have Children!**

## ***Untangling Links Between Feminism, Careers and Voluntary Childlessness***

This article examines the ways in which voluntarily childless women are represented in contemporary public discourse and sets these representations alongside the voices of thirty-five voluntarily childless women interviewed as part of a larger project on reproductive decision-making in the context of Australia's falling birthrate. Through the findings presented here we seek to challenge a key stereotype: the image of voluntarily childless women as selfish career-driven feminists who prioritize work, are actively anti-mothering, and live unfulfilled lives. The findings presented directly challenge popular perceptions of a simple causal link between feminism, careers and childlessness.

### **Professional women on a “birth strike”?**

Childless women represent an enigma within cultures that hold to the idea of natural imperative in women to reproduce. The failure of some women to conform to this conventional model of femininity renders them objects of curiosity and targets of increasing scrutiny as western industrialized societies attempt to account for the actions and motivations of what is now acknowledged to be a growing proportion of women. Since 2000, there has been increasing media panic concerning Australia's falling birthrate and aging population.<sup>1</sup> Daily newspapers practised in carrying articles elaborating the negative impact of family responsibilities on women's career development and earning power, the near-impossibility of successfully balancing work and family life, or new findings on the potential harm caused to children by childcare, shifted focus to concentrate on the increasing reluctance of some women to reproduce (see, for example, Wynhausen, 2000; Karrelas, 2002. See also Bone, 2001; Maris, 2002; Kelly, 2002; Gallus, 2002). Our analysis of this coverage—drawn from Australia's major newspapers and from some of the

country's most influential and widely syndicated columnists and commentators—reveals that dispassionate images of women who have chosen childlessness are extremely rare and stories that validate their decisions virtually nonexistent. Instead, voluntarily childless women are commonly depicted as investing in education, careers, self-development and/or consumerism at the expense of their all-too-brief window of reproductive opportunity: something it is implied they will later come to regret. In September 2001 the *Weekend Australian* newspaper opened a week-long focus on “Work and Family: The Crunch” with a lead article on the “The Birth Strike.” The sketch that occupied the entire front page depicted a female executive wearing a dark, exaggeratedly man-tailored suit jacket, her arms folded in a gesture of defiance or refusal. On the desk to her right sat a baby in a paper tray labelled “out,” alerting readers to the reproductive choices at stake in the supplement's coverage.

As this image suggests, in popular discourse women are represented as either career-focused or family-focused and seldom as willing or able to manage both careers and motherhood successfully. “The growing importance of women's careers,” Laurie Taylor and Matthew Taylor (2001) intone in *The Good Weekend*, “may mean that having children is regarded as a practical option only for those with such low expectations that they assume they have no career to ruin, or those so well-off they can afford a surrogate family to run things while mother and father are away at work” (50). Childless women are routinely portrayed as cold, selfish and immature or as hapless and lovelorn “career girls,” after the style of Bridget Jones:<sup>2</sup> confused, unfulfilled and neurotically lamenting their failure to “get it all together” with respect to partnering and motherhood. Either way, they are located in opposition to the archetype of the mother, the ideal toward which all “real” women should apparently strive.

Significantly, in popular discourse voluntarily childless women are depicted as exclusively middle-class, well-educated women: high-achievers who have worked hard at developing successful careers. Feminism's fatal role in the production of this new generation of childless career women is also a key feature in the contemporary media discourse. Jane Bartlett (1994) has argued that through its contribution to a broad rethinking of gender roles and to campaigns for safe contraception, “feminism has played a momentous part in a child-free woman's decision-making” (116). But in media coverage, these empowering aspects of the feminist legacy are displaced by solely negative attributions. In 2002 conservative newspaper columnist Janet Albrechtsen (2002) charged so-called “jackboot feminism” to be chiefly responsible for what she called “Australia's Great Fertility Mystery” (11). Feminism—an ill-defined, all-powerful and amorphous entity—is represented by Albrechtsen as “the real culprit” for having fostered in its followers “anti-baby” and “anti-marriage” values, “excessive individualism,” “hedonistic self-gratification,” and an appetite for abortion and no-fault divorce (11). Feminism is also characterized as having “failed” women by deluding them into over-investing in careers when they should have been heeding their biological clocks. One of the more high

profile dramatizations of this claim was provided in 2002 by ABC television presenter Virginia Haussegger in a revelatory autobiographical article published in *The Age* newspaper under the headline, “The Sins of Our Feminist Mothers”:

For those of us who listened to our feminist foremothers’ encouragement, waved the purple scarves at their rallies, for those of us who took all that on board and forged ahead, crashed through barriers and carved out good, successful and even some brilliant careers, we’re now left—many of us at least—as premature “empty nesters.”

We’re alone, childless, many of us partnerless or drifting along in “permanent temporariness,” as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman so aptly put it to describe the somewhat ambiguous, uncommitted type of relationship that seems to dominate among childless professional couples in their 30s and 40s.

The point is that while encouraging women in the ’70s and ’80s to reach for the sky, none of our purple-clad feminist mothers thought to tell us the truth about the biological clock.

I am childless and I am angry—angry that I was so foolish to take the word of my feminist mothers as gospel. Angry that I was daft enough to believe female fulfillment came with a leather briefcase.

It was wrong. It was crap. (11)

Feminism, it seems, in offering women the means to stop fearing their fertility had then duped them into squandering it, very unwittingly.<sup>3</sup> In the same vein, those who have reproduced abundantly are characterised—or choose to characterise themselves—as having turned their backs on the so-called “feminist mantra.” Columnist Angela Shanahan (2001) claimed that in having nine children, “I deliberately rejected the feminism of my generation” (15). However, as Kay Schaffer (1998) points out, “in popular discourse, ‘feminism’ is a scare word, a word that has been used to evoke (although no dictionary would say so) the 1970s stereotype of bra burning, man hating lesbians who made up the boiler-maker suit brigade...” (322).

Schaffer (1998) also notes that in popular discourse feminists are not seen as “real” women, because it is assumed that feminists do not want to be mothers and only mothers (or women who want children) are seen as “real women.” It is this interpretation of feminism that is conveyed by Albrechtsen (2002), Haussegger (2002) and Shanahan (2001) above and deployed by Michael Duffy (2002) who says,

So where did the myth of miserable mothers come from? It began with feminists such as Germaine Greer back in the 1960s and 1970s, out to destroy male dominance of society ... today a woman can achieve just about anything she wants to. But why did the myth persist even

when this victory had been won? It was because of the guilt and self-interest of some feminists. Many are well-educated and successful career women who do not want to be full-time mums for more than a few years, or in some cases a few months. (31)

### **Work and family**

Given the obvious anxiety over the link between careers and childlessness, it is not surprising that commentators such as British sociologist Catherine Hakim (2002) and popular American author Sylvia Ann Hewlett (2002) have been taken up so readily by the Australian media in this debate (see, for example, Hakim, 2002).<sup>4</sup> Hakim (2000) has argued that some women prefer to be home-centered, others to be work-centered, and a larger number of women chose an “adaptive” lifestyle where they combined both family and employment. In her schema, women who combine both family and employment by working part-time are said to more family-focused. Most controversially, Hakim claims that in spite of the wider opportunities and different lifestyles that many women have access to in western industrialized societies, the majority still prefer part-time over full-time employment, and mothering and domestic work over pursuing a career. Hakim’s arguments have been subject to severe criticism by other scholars (Ginn et al., 1996; McRae, 2003a, 2003b; Saugeres, 2003) not least because this kind of argumentation both assumes and reinforces the naturalization of mothering and the idea of careers and motherhood as incompatible. Nevertheless, the simplicity of Hakim’s arguments has made them very popular with the media and politicians. For example, Jennifer Buckingham (2003) in *The Courier Mail* uses Hakim’s research to claim

Those [women] who do not have any [babies] at all are predominantly women who are focused on their careers and are voluntarily childless ... it is important to remember that working mothers do not value their jobs and children equally. They lie closer to the family-centred than the work-centred women. (17)

What is conveyed here is that women should want to have children, they should prioritise mothering over their employment, and that they cannot hope for both careers and babies.

Sylvia Ann Hewlett (2002) in *Baby Hunger*, her widely publicized popular account of childless women, also drives a wedge between mothers and women seeking careers and deploys a discourse of accident, failure and mismanagement to account for otherwise successful women’s childless status. Helen Trinca (2002) in the *Australian Financial Review* reports Hewlett saying in an interview,

“It turns out that very few of these women felt it had been a choice,”

she says. “Most felt that children had been squeezed out of their lives. It had been a creeping non-choice and it involved a lot of pain. (52) (See also Manne, 2002: 8.)

Hewlett (2002) classifies women into “predators” and “nurturers,” arguing that the cold, aggressive career women (the “predators”) not only remain childless, but partner-less too. According to Hewlett, this is because men, including the highly successful ones who work with these “predators,” want “real” women, that is “nurturers” who are happy to stay at home, have babies and look after both men and babies. The message here is that women cannot be really equal to men and have careers like men because it conflicts with their biological need to have children. Being employed, but more particularly having a powerful successful role in the workplace, is construed as unnatural for women. High-powered jobs are still seen as a male preserve and the characteristics that are seen to be necessary for somebody to succeed in the workplace—being aggressive, competitive, ruthless, individualistic, ambitious—remain defined as masculine qualities. The implication is that women who try to fit into this competitive and aggressive world either actively suppress or accidentally lose their femininity (of which wanting and having children is seen as a central part) and become like men.

As we have seen, the widespread and persistent feminist backlash in popular discourse serves to reinforce and legitimate hegemonic gender ideologies through the naturalization of gender differences and mothering. These cultural representations further assume the radical incompatibility of paid work and motherhood, fuelling perceptions of a direct causal link between women’s advancement in the paid labour market and rising rates of voluntary childlessness. As will be shown next, the majority of women in our study do not view themselves as successful career women and do not talk about their choice of childlessness in terms of working/mothering tension.

### *Me? A successful career? A feminist?*

The 35 voluntarily childless women discussed here were recruited from diverse class, race and ethnic backgrounds and from five locations across the Australian state of Victoria covering inner metropolitan, outer metropolitan and regional areas. They ranged in age from 21 to 52. Each of them had either made a firm decision not to have children or had not finalized their decision in the context of their other life goals. Tietjens Meyers (2001), in her study of fertility decisions in the U.S., has identified two main groups among the women who are voluntarily childless: the “early articulators” and the “postponers” (736). The women in our research shared some of the characteristics of these two groupings. Ten out of the 35 childless women interviewed in our study could be classified as “early articulators.” This means that they knew from an early age that they did not want children. In common with other research findings (see Faux, 1984; Veevers, 1980), these “early articulators” did not feel

that they had actually made an active choice; they had just never imagined themselves as having children. The remaining women interviewed can be broadly classified as “postponers.” The majority of them had always imagined or assumed that they would have children, but were currently unable to reconcile motherhood with their other life aims and values. Jane Bartlett suggests that rather than making a firm and final decision *not* to have a child, women such as these may be more accurately characterised as never having made the decision to have one (99).

The first striking finding was that only three out of the thirty-five women interviewed described themselves as career women, while a further two talked about their own businesses as being at the center of their lives. Four out of these five are early articulators. For example, Abigail,<sup>5</sup> 32, from the regional town of Bendigo, says:

*I'm a career person and not interested in having kids, I don't want to stay at home and be a mother, I've always had career aspirations and direction and the other thing is I'm yet to find a bloke suitable, maybe my standards are too high....*

Abigail, an early articulator, would seem to come close to the stereotypical partnerless and childless career woman represented in popular discourses. However, her decision not to have children was not the direct result of her desire for a career. All the early articulators and some of the postponers locate the basis for their lack of desire to have children to how they experienced growing up in their families. Abigail talked about how her parents' divorce when she was four and seeing her mother raising children on her own were big influences on her lack of a desire for children. In addition, she had medical problems that she believes were passed on to her by her mother and does not wish to pass these on to anyone else.

Like Abigail, Rita, 29, from inner metropolitan Maribyrnong, early on articulated her desire not to have children (“even as a child”). She lived in a heterosexual partnered relationship, held a higher degree, and was working full-time in the community sector. The only child of European migrant parents, she too spoke of the influence of her family and how her future had always been imagined for her in terms of education and a career: “It was just always that whole concept of, you know, Rita is born and she's going to university, she's going to have a career.” Rita was one of the few interviewees to mention feminism, but notably it was in the context of her mother's particular choices and aspirations, rather than her own:

*I mean, she grew up in the '60s and there were certainly a lot of changes with regards to feminism, but I think it was a lifestyle choice for her as well. I don't think she was every really particularly maternal herself. She worked full time and she really enjoyed working and her career was really impor-*

*tant to her ... there was never that concept that mothering is something that is, you know, central to one's existence...*

Of the remaining women interviewed some said that they were not very interested in having careers or simply did not think about their employment as a career. For instance, Elisabeth, from inner metropolitan Port Philip, 38, partnered and a “postponer,” said

*Not that I'm you know, incredibly ambitious or career oriented. I enjoy my job and I've just at work been given a new opportunity which I really, really am enjoying and I wouldn't like to be giving it up soon.*

It has been argued that the concept of “career” is both masculinist and middle-class. Firstly, because this term only refers to paid work as an individual pursuit separate from family responsibilities, women tend to distance themselves from the concept of career (see Hattery, 2001; Garey, 1999). Secondly, women from working-class backgrounds rarely view themselves as having a career (see Skeggs, 1997). Contrary to media discourses, as our research shows, not only highly educated middle-class women in executive jobs decide to remain childless. Indeed, several of the childless women we interviewed were from working-class backgrounds, and even though most of the women had achieved some form of post-secondary education, few of them held very high-powered jobs. For instance, Gwen, 39, an early articulator, from Port Philip, said,

*it wasn't a career thing ... to be honest I think coming from the kind of family that I did I didn't have any expectations of working or a job or a career or anything. Like, mum didn't work and my aunts didn't work. And 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[versity] or anything.*

Even though the pursuit of a career was not a key factor for most of the voluntarily childless women interviewed, the vast majority of them had other goals and aspirations that they viewed as incompatible with having children. For these women, freedom, independence, flexibility, not having to be responsible for somebody else, embarking on a journey of self-discovery, and looking for fulfillment by pursuing either work or non-work activities were very important. Generally, they viewed having children as a potentially major disruption in their lives and irreconcilable with the lifestyles that they were used to and wished to preserve. For instance, Xena, 26 and married, from regional Gippsland, worked as a teacher but did not see herself as having a career,

*I guess you hear a lot of people with children sort of saying they're tied down*

*with financial things and also the fact that it's hard to get away for weekends and just the fact that it's hard to have time for yourself. I'm the type of person who needs a lot of time by myself and a bit of personal space and yeah I just do not see that happening if you have children.... Just because they are very demanding and the fact that they just take up so much time and I don't cope well with not much sleep and ... I know when I get sick or really tired I find it hard to look after myself and I think well it would be impossible for me to try and look after someone else.*

It is likely that Xena's words and other similar statements would be interpreted in the type of media coverage reviewed in this article as proof that women who are voluntarily childless are selfish, immature and afraid to take on responsibilities. Indeed, all the women interviewed were very aware of the potential for society at large to view them as selfish and immature and they were critical of this. Vera, 34, an early articulator from Bendigo, said,

*I'm sure they all think I'm a selfish cow but I say look, you know, I have other priorities in life, I don't believe that I would make a good mother....*

However, some could not help also feeling that they *were* selfish and immature, because of the ideology they had internalised that dictated adult women should have children and structure their lives around their children. For example,

*I can't see a child fitting into things that I want to do, and that sounds really selfish. (Sally, 22, partnered, early articulator, Maribyrnong)*

*I've lived independently for so long I've also become very selfish ... and I think I'd find it hard to be that responsible for another person. (Melissa, 31, single, postponer, Port Philip)*

Our interviewees were also aware that voluntarily childless women are often represented as being cold and uncaring, as conveyed by Rosselyn and Tara from Port Philip, who answered the question of why they did not want children by simultaneously chorusing, "Because I am a heartless bitch." As noted earlier, voluntarily childless women when represented as "career women" are seen to lose their "caring" and "nurturing" instincts through having to take on masculine characteristics to succeed in the workplace. However, the women interviewed did not necessarily enact these dualisms. For instance, Louise, 32, from outer metropolitan Casey, who is a self-employed as a marketing and PR consultant talked about how she was "nurturing her baby business." A significant number of others talked about environmental concerns using a similar language of care.

The idea, prominent in media representations, that childless women must have failed to partner successfully and that this can account for their childless

state, is also challenged by our interviewees. Of the 35 women interviewed, 19 were currently partnered and, of the 16 who weren't, a number had previously been in long-term defacto or married relationships where the opportunity for children was at least present. While some of the unpartnered women expressed the idea that locating a suitable partner might lead them to have children, those who were already partnered clearly did not view children as a necessary or inevitable next stage in that relationship. Indeed, they worried that having children would in fact interfere with the quality of their relationship with their partners. Rita, mentioned earlier, talked about it this way:

*I mean, my partner and I are really happy and we really enjoy the time that we have with one another and we have lots of things in common and, you know, it just seems that when you have a child it not only impacts on your life and your career, but also your relationship with your partner so that, you know, you possibly can't devote as much time that you would like to one another, that you have this other focus, which can be positive. But you know, can also detract from your own relationship and we're quite happy going along the way that we are. I just don't feel like we need this other being in our family for it to be a family.*

## Conclusion

The findings presented here challenge the popular perception that rising rates of voluntary childlessness are the direct result of a feminist-inspired commitment among middle-class professional women to the pursuit of high-powered, high-paying careers. The women interviewed here bore little resemblance to the images of power-suited professionals promulgated in the media, coming as they did from a diverse range of class, educational and employment backgrounds. While many found fulfillment in paid employment, these women did not frame their childless status in terms of the work/mothering tension so central to popular analyses discussed here. These findings are significant in that they point to the need to interrogate explanatory frameworks that divide women into a series of hierarchically arranged feminine types—mothers and non-mothers; women who seek careers or paid employment and women who don't—and assume that their aspirations and motivations are uniform, transparent and predictable. Indeed, 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; in particular, frameworks capable of producing more complex accounts of those choosing childlessness and frameworks that do not reproduce the notion of paid work and mothering as radically incompatible. In doing so we will hopefully open up and open out what are too frequently offered to us in these discussions as seemingly closed categories of experience—e.g. womanhood, paid work, mothering—in order to make space for new ways of structuring and represent-

ing the meanings of voluntary childlessness.

<sup>1</sup>Like most other western industrial societies, Australia's birth rate has been steadily declining and has now fallen to around 1.7, below replacement level of 2.1 children per woman (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003).

<sup>2</sup>A reference to the book *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1997) by Helen Fielding and the popular film adaptations starring Renée Zellweger. The eponymous heroine struggles throughout with her "singleton" status.

<sup>3</sup>Haussegger was countered in the press by Wendy McCarthy—one of the generation of feminist "false prophets" named by Haussegger and a former executive director of Family Planning Australia. Wendy McCarthy (2002) observed that while second-wave feminism may have placed emphasis on women's need to control their fertility, their message was simply that women could plan their families: "we didn't say to have none" (3).

<sup>4</sup>Of Hakim's publications, we refer here in particular to *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2000).

<sup>5</sup>To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout this article.

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