

'Ready': UH prof. chronicles phenomenon of 'new later motherhood'

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For many women, the ticking of the proverbial “biological clock” is not as loud as the sound of the open road or the ceremonial song of “Pomp and Circumstance.” At least, not right away.

The number of women who have delayed first-time motherhood until their mid-30s or beyond has grown tenfold over the past 30 years, coining the moniker: “new later motherhood.” It’s the subject of a new book titled, “Ready: Why Women Are Embracing the New Later Motherhood” (Basic Books, 2008).

“The women I spoke with told me that they had their kids when they felt ready,” author Elizabeth Gregory, associate professor and director of the Women’s Studies Program at the University of Houston, said. “Most consistently, I heard that waiting offered them the chance to establish themselves, as individuals and in their work, to find the right partners...and to achieve a measure of financial stability. When they did have their kids, they felt ready to focus on their children’s development rather than their own.”

A later mom herself, Gregory says she isn’t advocating for women to wait to have children. Rather, she is presenting a snapshot of a current phenomenon, and citing reasons why some women make that choice. She spent two and a half years speaking to 113 new later moms who had their first child, by birth or adoption, after age 35. The women’s ages at first birth range from 35 to 56 and they come from various backgrounds and professions. They are married, divorced, single, straight, gay, moms

of one or of several kids. Most live in Houston and others come from cities across the nation.

Take Julie, for example (all the women who were interviewed are identified by pseudonyms to protect their privacy). A businesswoman who became a mom for the first time at age 39, she pursued an MBA before she married at 30, and together with her new husband pursued professional interests that included long hours and lots of traveling. When their first child came, Julie says she already knew herself.

“Get yourself an education, establish a career and then get a family,” Julie said. “I think you need it not just for financial and security reasons, but you need it to get to know yourself, and to appreciate yourself and know who you are and what you can do.”

New later motherhood can have its drawbacks, Gregory notes, as women who wait accept the possibility of fertility issues, lower energy levels, smaller families and less access to grandparents. But the overwhelming majority of the women Gregory spoke with viewed their later motherhood experience very positively. They cited an increased self-confidence based in experience, higher wages, and more stable marriages in which both partners participated actively in child rearing and in family decision making.

For many women, waiting allowed them to build valuable skill sets that provided clout when it came time to create new family schedules. “I’m one of maybe two people in the world actively employed (in what I do), so these guys aren’t going to tell me the door’s closed, to come back later,” said Leslie, a highly skilled professional who became a new later mom. “I’m not giving up anything when I spend time with (my child), and that was a big problem for my mother. She really felt her life was being sacrificed to spend time with me to be a mom.”

“Ready” includes a chapter on the realities of fertility, countering the emergency mood that the media have fostered of late. It looks also at alternative routes to family (like adoption and egg donation). In 2006, 610,000 women 35 or older gave birth (that’s one out of every seven American kids). About 4.4 percent of those births involved donor eggs.

Gregory notes that the phenomenon of new later motherhood shines the spotlight on employers and policies that are less than family friendly at a time when a growing number of families want better work/life balance. It is a challenge that, ultimately, may lead to change.

“When a large group of women do this (delay first-time motherhood) it changes society,” Gregory observed.

Source: University of Houston

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