

Helping Women with their Fertility should be part of the Agenda for Gender Equality

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Gender equality is fundamental to any progressive society. Equality debates generally focus on equal pay and job opportunities. However, I feel that we must go further and address women's biological needs as part of the campaign for social and health equality agenda.

For women to thrive, society needs to ensure that they have the true freedom to make the choices that they want to make. When it comes to choosing motherhood (or not), the reality of the human biology is that a woman's reproductive clock ticks much quicker than a man's. There is a sharp decline in loss of eggs in a woman's ovaries and her fertility after the age of 38 (Faddy and Gosden, 1995).

Politicians and sociologists make a case for gender equality based on job opportunities, equal pay and access to better childcare. We must continue to fight for these as basic rights for women. However, I feel strongly that fertility issues are often overlooked. We need to help women to have children with public funding when they are ready for a family. In the UK, the new NICE guidelines have taken the commendable step to raise the recommended age limit for fertility treatment up to 42, but in reality treatment remains a "Postcode Lottery", because in many areas the guidelines are ignored. If a woman chooses to delay motherhood, for example in order to progress her career, we should be supporting her decision, not telling her she's on her own. And for those younger women who are unsure where the future may take them, we should be helping them to preserve their fertility by using the latest vitrification technology for egg freezing (Cobo et al., 2013).

In my view, this is a gender equality issue and requires a radical policy re-think. I have heard and seen many campaigns recently telling women to have children when they are young. Such campaigns will not resonate with many women in 2014. Women who delay motherhood may have done so because they are in successful careers and having a child would adversely affect their progress or they have no stable partner or income or both. In others, sometimes they are just not sure whether they want children, but don't want to rule it out.

We need to be pro-active about early education to prevent infertility and protect fertility. We need to work closely with local governments and the voluntary sector to achieve this. For those who are ready to have children, we should provide effective, fair and accessible fertility care including IVF. For those who are not ready to have children, we should consider investing in egg freezing for fertility preservation for the future. Of course, we should continue fighting against discrimination in employment, improving maternity benefits and paying for childcare. But ensuring women's fertility is protected should be central to gender equality in our society.

References

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