



# ETHICS & MEDICS

A COMMENTARY OF THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER ON  
HEALTH CARE AND THE LIFE SCIENCES

DECEMBER 2023 + VOLUME 48, NUMBER 12

Also in this issue: "Peter Singer vs. St. John Paul II on Human Dignity" by Mark Bradford

## SEX DIFFERENTIAL REGARDING THE ETHICAL DILEMMA TO START A CAREER OR A FAMILY

Alfred Cioffi

In this brief essay, I propose that young women in general might have a tougher time than young men in figuring out the ethical dilemma of whether to postpone having a family for the sake of pursuing an academic degree of higher education and engaging in a profession as a young adult or to postpone pursuing college in order to raise a family at what is considered, overall, the optimal age range of fecundity for women.

I also propose that young women may be able to navigate this dilemma better if they understand the difference between a profession and a vocation earlier on and then begin a serious discernment into what God is calling them to as adults, either the consecrated religious life or Holy Matrimony. If they discern that God is calling them to marry, then, perhaps, they will do well to postpone going to college and starting a career until after they marry and after they have had their children.

Consider the following data and analysis, on which I make these recommendations.

### Data

Since the 1980s in the United States, the number of women going to college or university has increased relative to the number of men.<sup>1</sup> That trend has continued over the past four decades to the point that today there are about three women for every two men in American colleges and universities.<sup>2</sup> The average age range of those women today is from 18 to 24 years old.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the best age range for a man's or a woman's fecundity is in their early 20s.<sup>4</sup> It is well documented that, in contrast to men's fecundity, women's fecundity gradually decreases over time, strikingly so beginning around age 30, and even more rapidly beyond age 37.<sup>5</sup> The main reason for this is that, unlike with men, women are born with a set number of eggs in each ovary (around 1-2 million); by the time they reach puberty, they only have about 300,000 viable eggs remaining.<sup>6</sup> Of course, this reduced number is more than enough for the entire reproductive years of a woman (from menarche to menopause), during which time, strictly speaking, fewer than about 500 viable eggs are needed to maintain fertility for an entire four decades.<sup>7</sup> It is also known that those millions of eggs at birth are in an arrested stage of development and that they start maturing about a dozen years after birth.<sup>8</sup>

One main source of this dramatic decrease in viable eggs over time is aneuploidy, whereby chromosomes in old eggs tend to stick

together during the second meiotic division of the maturation process leading to the possibility of abnormal or nonviable eggs.<sup>9</sup> On average, by the time a woman reaches 40 years of age, about 50 percent of her eggs have a chance of being aneuploid.<sup>10</sup> Many of these abnormal eggs either fail to fertilize or fail to implant. Of those that do implant, many—perhaps as high as 50 percent in that high-risk age range—will carry genetic abnormalities.<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, then, aneuploidy is a major cause of infertility and pregnancy loss in women.<sup>12</sup> One of the most typical human aneuploidies is known as Down syndrome, or trisomy 21—so named because of a third chromosome number 21 in the zygote—with its broad range of physiological and psychological disabilities.<sup>13</sup>

None of the above can be said of men, since from puberty onward, men produce fresh sperm daily, essentially, until the day they die.<sup>14</sup> However, the literature also reports a gradual decline in sperm quality with age, typically beginning in the late thirties.<sup>15</sup>

### Analysis

The fact that more young women are engaged in higher education today than ever before is, in principle, a good thing. In practice, however, this also comes at a cost, and not just monetarily. One of those costs is that once these women have invested so many resources (for example, time, talent, and treasure) into obtaining their degrees, logically, they want to go into the workforce to begin practicing the career or profession for which they have studied.

From the data presented, it is obvious that the best procreative years for women coincide with the time when they usually go to college or university, if they decide to do so. However, many young women indeed are postponing pregnancy precisely due to the challenges of having children and going to college fulltime or embarking in a career fulltime simultaneously.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the ethical dilemma that arises for an increasing number of young women today is whether to postpone pursuing an academic degree to raise a family at the optimal age of fecundity or to postpone having a family for the sake of pursuing college and a profession as a young adult. If they postpone their family for the sake of an academic degree, then they risk all the negative consequences of trying to get pregnant and have children in their thirties or even forties. If, on the other hand, they delay getting into higher education for the sake of having their children at the optimal biological age, then they risk either not pursuing that degree anymore or perhaps having a tougher time studying at an older age and trying to balance that with other family, work, and social responsibilities.

This dilemma is not one that necessarily affects young men in the same way, given the natural procreative differential between the two sexes. Thus, young men in college—or otherwise—may not be fully aware of this ethical dilemma that presents itself in a most poignant way to women of their same age.