

Ready, at last

The trend for late motherhood is catching on.

Stories by PATSY KAM

A COUPLE of decades ago, if a woman got married in her late 20s, she'd have been considered "over the hill". And if she was well into her 30s, she'd be lucky if any man would consider her at all, much less have a child at that age, as her "shelf-life" was considered "past expiry date"!

However, there has since been a change in mindset as more and more women choose to start their families later in life due to career and lifestyle choices. The trend for late motherhood is led by well-known figures such as Cherie Blair, Susan Sarandon and Madonna.



Caring sister: B.H. Lim's children, six-year-old Catherine Cheah and 25-day-old Nicholas. Says Lim, 'Now that we're older, we can plan for the children emotionally and financially.' – Photo by NORAFIFI EHSAN / The Star 10 years ago.

In Britain, there are now more first-time mothers in the 30 to 34 age group than in the 25 to 29 age group, and a 50% increase in mothers aged over 40 compared with 10 years ago. The average age of women giving birth in Australia was 30.7 years in 2005, and births to women over 35 have more than doubled over the past 25 years.

Embracing motherhood is a very personal, life-changing decision. While there's no "right" time to have a baby, a woman between 20 and 35 years old is physically in her prime.

In fact, a woman over 30 having her first baby used to be described as an "elderly primigravida" (i.e. advanced maternal age, first pregnancy).

Younger mothers may be physically fitter and have more energy to cope with the challenges of motherhood. On the other hand, there are advantages to being an older parent. Women who choose motherhood in their 30s say they feel more settled, after having had career opportunities, and are therefore more willing to make the necessary sacrifices.

Former air stewardess Karen Loong-Thomas, 38, admits that she would not have been prepared for motherhood

“I probably wouldn’t have been willing to give up my social life,” says Loong-Thomas, who now runs her own gym. Her erratic flying schedules and lifestyle then weren’t conducive to conceiving, and she admits she wasn’t interested in having kids earlier.

“During the first six years of marriage, we didn’t try because of my career. Then, I started getting ‘clucky’ in my late 20s. We tried for a while before consulting a gynaecologist,” adds Loong-Thomas, who’s been married for 10 years.

“We wasted precious time as we weren’t trying seriously. Then, I found out I had endometriosis and after tackling that problem, the doctor prescribed fertility pills.

“The pregnancy went relatively smoothly but I enjoyed myself only after the sixth month. I had a lot of anxieties earlier, and changing gynaecologist helped to make me feel more confident and safe. The first month after baby arrived was a real shock, though!”

Her daughter, Cahaya Rain Thomas, is now five months old. Being the doting mother, Loong-Thomas is now more than willing to take a step back in business and career to give more attention to her child.

“We’re financially more stable and I don’t feel disadvantaged having a baby at my age. If I had waited till I was 40, it might have been harder physically. As it is, I don’t think I’m too old now. I keep myself fit so I can keep up with my daughter as she grows,” says Loong-Thomas.



Apple of her eye: Former air stewardess Karen Loong-Thomas, 38, dotes on her five-month-old daughter, Cahaya Rain. Loong-Thomas admits that she would not have been prepared for motherhood 10 years ago. – Photo by SIA HONG KIAU / The Star

Being more mature also means the older woman is better able to cope with the emotional and financial aspects of motherhood. At this age too, a woman has more confidence and knows what she wants.

Material manager B.H. Lim, 40, who works for an agro-chemical company, just had her third child. Her first is six years old while her second one died a few hours after birth.

Naturally, she harbours worries about the future and the education of her children but Lim feels she's better prepared this time round.

"I got married late, and we waited before starting a family. Now that we're older, we can plan for the children emotionally and financially," says Lim.

Lim didn't have amniocentesis but, instead, opted for a nuchal scan and blood test to check for Down Syndrome.

"For my second child, the doctor detected problems at 20 weeks. So he monitored the development of this baby closely and did a lot more 3D ultrasound scans."

Since most women earn more at 35 than they did at 25, there may be a sizeable drop in income if they plan to be a stay-at-home parent. The break in career, or even dividing energies between work and family, can prevent a woman from reaching the career pinnacle she once aimed for.

"At this point of my life, I value family life. It's always at the back of my mind whether I should stop working so that I don't miss out on my children's childhood. I wouldn't have considered it if I was younger. My priorities are different now. I'm also more patient and tolerant," adds Lim.

On the psychological front, older mothers have less fear of helplessness and loss of control than younger women. However, after developing a comfortable routine to life and having achieved a certain independence and freedom in their relationship and career, the responsibility of caring for a baby can be quite a shock to the system.

Bank officer Marianne Kumar got married four years ago and now, at 40, is the mother of a four-month-old boy.

"My lifestyle has changed: No late Saturday nights out or spending time with the gals during the week after work and no more waking up late during weekends. Whenever I'm home, I devote most of my time to the baby. I don't want to lose out on his development by parting from him unnecessarily," she says.

"Juggling time has become an art in itself and is very challenging. I find myself constantly multi-tasking and am now more organised as I set my priorities straight."

She feels that age shouldn't deter a woman from becoming a parent as maturity and stronger earning power contribute positively to the rearing of a child.

“The only concern I had was the age difference between my child's and mine, and whether I would be around long enough to see him through his 20s at least. The toughest part is to be physically fit to handle the rigours of motherhood. Finding the time to keep fit has become a luxury, particularly when you have a demanding job and a baby at home,” continues Marianne.

Sometimes, women also find themselves becoming “younger” in their outlook.

“I've unconsciously become more upbeat and positive about life. This could be due to the fact that I am grateful for being able to have a baby at 40. And yes, I may consider having another child – the more the merrier!”