

Later and Better? An Egg-Freezing Experiment on Delay, Priorities, and Partner Standards

Does perceiving an extended temporal horizon change women's trajectories? This project explores the impact of a technology that expands reproductive horizons on women's lives, focusing on how they might choose to reimagine their future with newly gained time.

Claudia Goldin demonstrated that the birth control pill increased the age at first marriage, the percentage of female students in certain professional careers in the US, as well as lowered divorce rates through improved match quality (Goldin & Lawrence, 2002). Whilst the benefits of postponing motherhood have been transformative for women's education and career selection, the choice to delay it further collides with a biological reality: age-related fertility decline (ARFD). Women's fertility declines significantly with age due to the reduction in the quality of their eggs. Biological motherhood is constrained by the fertile timespan of women, which restricts the potential for motherhood as women age. However, advances in reproductive technology, specifically human egg freezing, have introduced the option to extend this window by enabling women to delay motherhood beyond their reproductive age.

Some have labeled egg freezing as "our generation's Pill" and "the great equalizer" highlighting its potential to empower women in a world in which they have autonomy over many aspects of their lives except their biology (Bennett, 2014). While the contraceptive pill allowed women to prevent pregnancy when it conflicted with educational or career investment (Goldin & Lawrence, 2002), egg freezing promises to delay it without the fear of involuntary childlessness—particularly for women in their 30s, when investing in parenthood may compete with other life priorities.

Existing qualitative literature describes the sociodemographic profile of women¹ who voluntarily freeze their eggs (Inhorn, 2023) and focuses on their motivations to do so² (Baldwin, 2024; Baldwin et al., 2019; Brown & Patrick, 2018; Inhorn, 2023). Research shows that very few women eventually end up using their frozen eggs for conception (Alvarez et al., 2015) indicating that the main objective of this practice is reducing uncertainty and secure a sense of control over the future, in other words to 'bank time' (Waldby, 2015). In contrast, this study investigates the behavioral consequences of perceiving banked time. It explores how the perception of an extended reproductive horizon made possible by egg freezing, reshapes the ordering of goals, the timing of life events, and standards in partner and career choices.

¹ Mostly single women, high-earning professionals and in their late 30s (Inhorn, 2023).

² A sense of running out of time, the absence of a set of life conditions seen as crucial to become parents, not the right time for motherhood with stability and security, the lack of partner and fear to "panic partner", fear of future regret and blame, health-related issues affecting ability to conceive, career development, want to follow their preferred timeline.

The project employs a between-subjects randomized survey experiment to examine the behavioral consequences of egg freezing. The experimental design isolates the perceived effect of temporal extension while circumventing the self-selection biases characteristic of real-world users of egg freezing.

The study is conducted online with a sample of adult, childless women (between 26 to 34 years old), who want to become mothers at some point. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions in a two-arm randomized controlled trial (RCT). In the treatment condition, participants will first read a neutral explanation of age-related fertility decline and information about egg freezing. They will then be asked to imagine a hypothetical scenario in which they have the reassurance that their eggs are safely frozen. In the active control condition, participants will read a neutral description of a fertility check-up, which primes awareness of fertility without introducing a perception of time extension. Participants in the active control group will also be asked to imagine a hypothetical scenario in which they have undergone a fertility check-up recently.

This immersive, hypothetical design allows the study to isolate the behavioral consequences of entering an anticipatory position in which reproductive time is no longer a constraint. The benefits of an imagined scenario is that it eliminates the real-world barriers to egg freezing, such as medical risks and high economic costs, as well as self-selection into the technology, thereby enabling the examination of behavioral effects of perceived time extension itself. This design, whilst hypothetical in nature is not unrealistic: in the real world, egg freezing also functions as a form of insurance, women who have undergone the procedure are aware of its availability and potential, even if they never make use of the frozen eggs. The experiment thus captures a psychological state that closely mirrors the anticipatory orientation of actual users of the technology.

The study tests three hypotheses: first, that an expanded reproductive horizon leads to a reordering of life priorities, with greater emphasis placed on future-oriented goals (H1a). Second, that perceiving additional time induces deferral of relationship commitment and motherhood to later ages (H1b). Third, it increases selectivity in partner and career choices, reflected in higher reservation standards and a greater willingness to wait for an ideal match or career opportunity (H1c).

The pilot of the experiment will be conducted in December 2025, with the full study scheduled for early 2026. Preliminary findings will be presented at the European Population Conference.

References

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