

THE BIG LIE

MOTHERHOOD,
FEMINISM,
AND THE REALITY
OF THE
BIOLOGICAL
CLOCK

Tanya Selvaratnam



THE BIG LIE:

MOTHERHOOD, FEMINISM,
AND THE REALITY OF
THE BIOLOGICAL CLOCK



By Tanya Selvaratnam

A Complimentary Toolkit

For more information and to order the book,
please visit www.thebigliebook.com.

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CONTENTS

Quotes and Facts	p. 4
Fertility Charts	p. 7
Conversation Starters	p. 10
Discussion Topics	p. 11
Action Items for the Future	p. 12
Advice for Women of Different Reproductive Ages	p. 13
Resources	p. 14

QUOTES & FACTS

1. In 1970, 1 in 100 births were to women thirty-five and over. In 2006, it was one in twelve.
2. Infertility consultant Mindy Berkson said, “Thirty years ago, women typically had completed their families by age thirty. The Baby Boomer generation was the first generation that proactively tapped the workforce, explored advanced educations and married much later in life. All of these factors contributed to delayed childbearing. Delayed childbearing ultimately drove up the rate of infertility and boosted a tremendous industry. With the increased industry demand came improved technologies, more options and advanced treatments. Now is the time for the educational message to catch up with the industry and history.”
3. The number of eggs at our first menstrual cycle is around 300,000 to 400,000. By age thirty, we’re down to between 39,000 and 52,000 (13 percent of the eggs we had at puberty). By age forty, we’re down to between 9,000 and 12,000 (3 percent of the eggs we had at puberty)—and not all of those eggs are viable.
4. The number of women ages forty to forty-four who remain childless has doubled in a generation: in 1976, it was one in ten; by 2006, it was one in five.
5. Dr. Carole Kowalczyk, director of the Michigan Center for Fertility and Women’s Health, said she urges women “to be respectful of their fertility and their goals in life. Time limits fertility because eggs age. . . . If family is important, factor it into your career path. Put that equation in there.”
6. At the age of fifteen, a woman has a 40 to 50 percent chance of conceiving naturally per cycle, but after age thirty-five, she has a 15 to 20 percent chance; and by the time she’s forty-five, she has a 3 to 5 percent chance.
7. Approximately one out of three women will have an abortion before the age of forty-five.

1. Amanda Gardner, “U.S. Women Delaying Motherhood, Report Shows,” HealthDay, August 13 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/Healthday/story?id=8312506&page=1#.T4xm6ulST80>.
2. Mindy Berkson, in interview with the author, May 1, 2012.
3. Jennifer D’Angelo Friedman, “What Happens to a Woman’s Fertility after 40,” SELF, September 8, 2011, <http://www.self.com/blogs/flash/2011/09/what-happens-to-your-fertility.html>.
4. Janet Kornblum, “More women 40-44 remaining childless,” USA Today, http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2008-08-18-fertility_N.htm (retrieved 02/18/12).
5. Carole Kowalczyk, MD, “Understanding Fertility,” Women in Business, 2012.
6. EMD Serono Inc., “In the Know: Fertility IQ 2011 Survey: Fertility Knowledge Among US Women Aged 25-35: Insights from a New Generation,” October 2011.
7. “1 in 3 Campaign,” Advocates for Youth, <http://www.1in3campaign.org/>.

8. As much as 25 percent of all clinically recognized pregnancies end in miscarriage.
9. Miscarriage rates soar as women age—from about 15 percent in women aged twenty-five to thirty, to about 40 percent in women over forty.
10. The majority of IVF cycles fail (as high as 77 percent of cycles performed worldwide). As Miriam Zoll, author of *Cracked Open: Liberty, Fertility and the Pursuit of High-Tech Babies*, has written: “To learn later, after painful personal experience, that the vast majority of reproductive technologies do not, in fact, result in live births is a double tragedy. Not only are we coping with the loss of a deep primal desire to birth offspring, we must also come to terms with the fact that we built our entire ‘women-can-finally-have-it-all’ adult life on an illusion.”
11. Dr. Pasquale Patrizio, the clinical practice director of the Yale Fertility Center, said, “The growing popularity of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) has given women the false impression and wrong sense of security that female fertility may be manipulated at any stage of life, an erroneous assumption that can result in irreversible future infertility and disillusionment.”
12. Journalist Sarah Elizabeth Richards, in an op-ed for the New York Times, explained, “In our fertility-obsessed society, women can’t escape the message that it’s harder to get pregnant after 35. And yet, it’s not a conversation patients are having with the doctors they talk to about their most intimate issues—their OB-GYNs—unless they bring up the topic first. OB-GYNs routinely ask patients during their annual exams about their sexual histories and need for contraception, but often missing from the list is, ‘Do you plan to have a family?’”
13. Elizabeth Gregory wrote in her 2007 book *Ready: Why Women Are Embracing the New Later Motherhood*, “Today, both sides of the fertility spectrum get skewed in the media and the common lore. People seem to think simultaneously that nobody can get pregnant after 35 and that everybody can.”
14. According to a 2010 *Self* magazine survey, 61 percent of infertility patients hid their struggles, even from friends and family.

8. “Miscarriage,” American Pregnancy Association, <http://americanpregnancy.org/pregnancycomplications/miscarriage.html>.

9. Lisa Miller, “Parents of a Certain Age,” New York, September 25, 2011, <http://nymag.com/news/features/mothers-over-50-2011-10/>.

10. Miriam Zoll and Pamela Tsigdinos, “Selling the Fantasy of Fertility,” New York Times, September 11, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/selling-the-fantasy-of-fertility.html?emc=eta1&_r=0.

11. Pasquale Patrizio, MD, in interview with the author, May 1, 2012.

12. Sarah Elizabeth Richards, “We Need to Talk about Our Eggs,” New York Times, October 22, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/23/opinion/we-need-to-talk-about-our-eggs.html>.

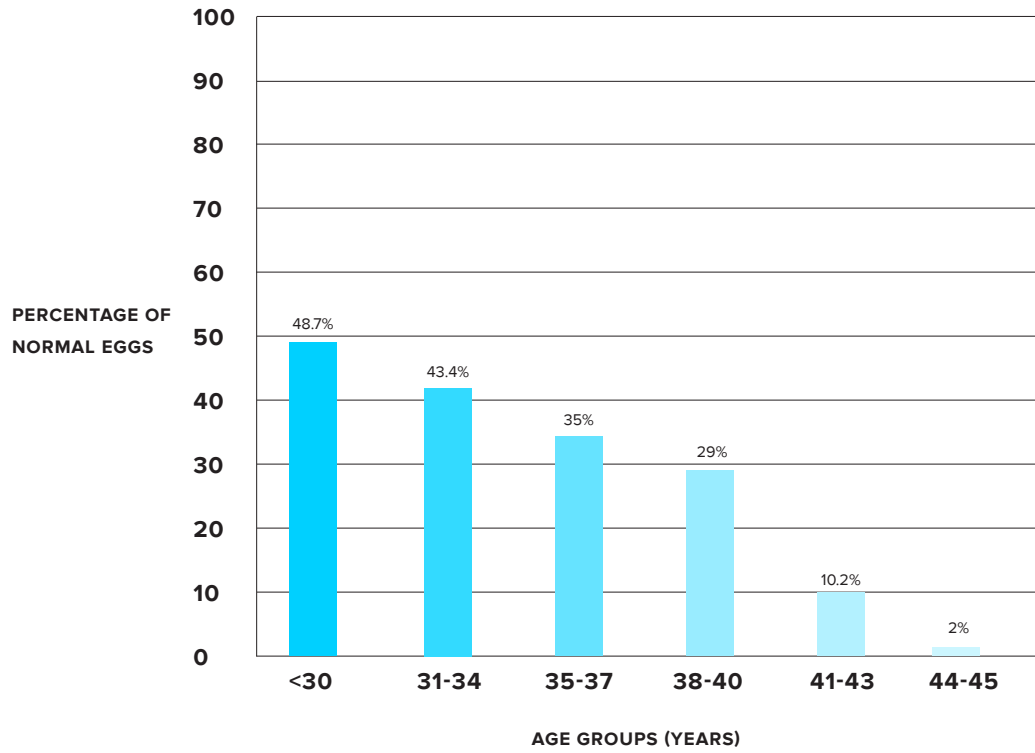
13. Elizabeth Gregory, *Ready: Why Women Are Embracing the New Later Motherhood* (New York: Perseus Books, 2007), p. 174.

14. Jennifer Wolff Perrine, “This Woman Has a Secret,” *SELF*, <http://www.self.com/health/2010/08/breaking-the-silence-on-infertility/>.

15. Barbara Collura, executive director of RESOLVE, the national infertility association, said that generally people, including some of her own volunteers, are unwilling to share their story. As a result, she argued, “because we have so little patient advocacy, we have so little progress.”
16. Only fifteen states in the United States have mandated insurance coverage for some level of infertility treatment.
17. Dr. Patrizio of Yale University said that with enough pressure from constituencies and enough people voicing their desires for change, reform has to come. He argued that some forms of infertility have to be viewed as a disease and that treatments are not elective procedures but medical necessities. He said, “Considering infertility as a non-disease is bogus.”
18. As Debora L. Spar, president of Barnard College, wrote, “Making a world that is better for women also demands that women work together. In its earliest incarnation, feminism was about communal action and goals; about giving women the power to shape not only their reproductive lives, but also their destinies and that of the world around them. Over the decades, though, this collective goal has been lost, replaced by the individual struggles that now compel most women.”
19. Jennifer Braunschweiger, deputy editor of *More* magazine, has written about alleviating the burdens on both stay-at-home and working mothers: “All of us should get out there and agitate for whatever political and corporate solutions we believe in; families shouldn’t have to figure this out alone. But until then, let’s find in ourselves some sympathy for other people’s circumstances.”

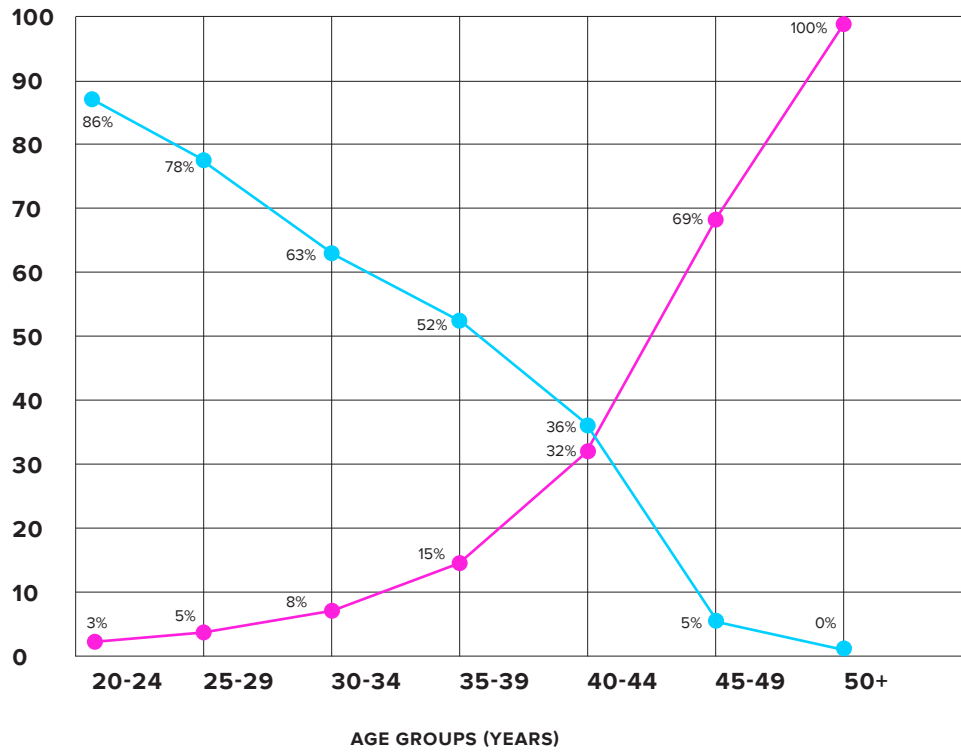
15. Jennifer Wolff Perrine, “This Woman Has a Secret,” *SELF*, <http://www.self.com/health/2010/08/breaking-the-silence-on-infertility/>.
16. Patrizio, interview.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Debora L. Spar, “Why Women Should Stop Trying to Be Perfect,” *Daily Beast*, September 24, 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/09/23/why-women-should-stop-trying-to-be-perfect.html>.
19. Jennifer Braunschweiger, “Why the Mommy Wars Rage On,” *More*, April 2013, <http://www.more.com/reinvention-money/careers/why-mommy-wars-rage-0>.

THE EFFECT OF AGE ON FERTILITY



Source: Southern California Center for Reproductive Medicine
You can check out the Center's infographic on age and fertility at
<http://www.socalfertility.com/age-and-fertility-infographic>

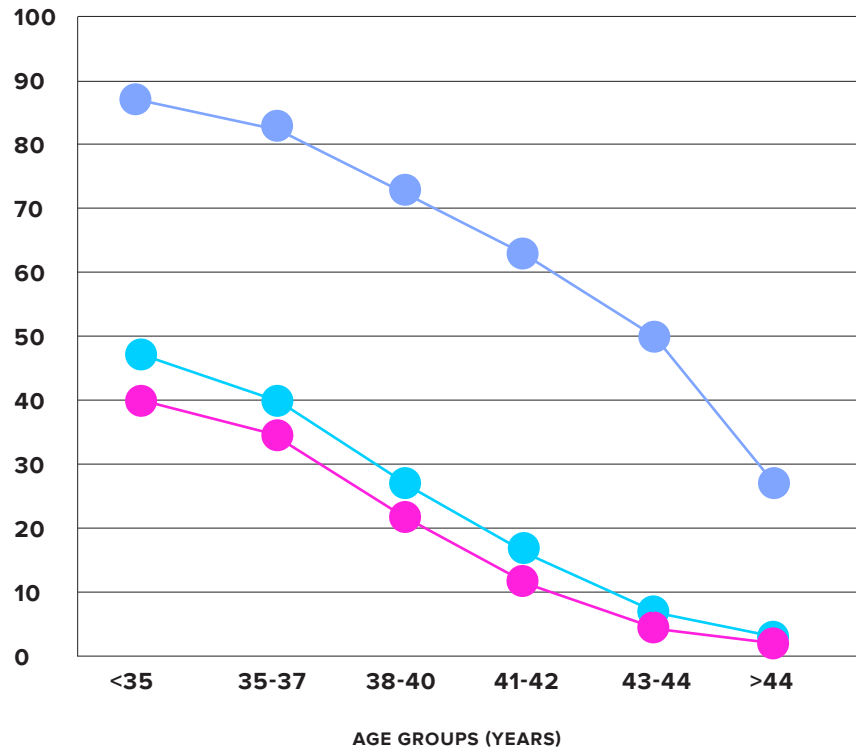
PREGNANCY RATES OVER THE COURSE OF ONE YEAR



- Likelihood of getting pregnant
- Likelihood of infertility

Source: *Management of the Infertile Woman* by Helen A. Carcio &
The Infertility Sourcebook by M. Sara Rosenthal

ART SUCCESS RATES USING FRESH EMBRYOS FROM NON-DONOR EGGS



- Percentage of pregnancies resulting in live births
- Percentage of transfers resulting in live births
- Percentage of cycles resulting in live births

Source: Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2011

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Here are suggestions for how to open up the discussion about fertility with various people in your community.

QUESTIONS FOR YOURSELF How did you react to the quotes and statistics presented in this toolkit? Do they reflect what you already knew about your fertility or what you have heard or seen in the media? Why do you think you reacted the way you did?

ASK YOUR FRIENDS Do you plan to have children? What steps are you taking to protect your fertility? What kinds of roadblocks are you encountering on that journey? How have you been able to circumvent them?

ASK YOUR PARTNERS Do you see yourself becoming a parent? If so, when? How important is having a biological child to you? How far would you go (in terms of finances, time, and energy) to make that goal happen? What parenting approaches do you prefer?

ASK YOUR PARENTS What was your experience in the process of getting pregnant? Is there anything you wish you had known earlier about fertility and childbearing?

ASK YOUR DOCTORS What does my fertility timeline look like? If I'm interested in having biological children, what are my options?

DISCUSSION TOPICS

Here are questions you can adapt for your book clubs, discussion groups, classes, and more to help you explore the big lie of motherhood, feminism, and the biological clock further.

What was the best piece of advice you were given when you began navigating your career and family goals? What advice do you wish you had been given?

What changes do you think can (and should) be made to public policy in the United States to make it easier for men and women to raise families while being an active part of the workplace?

Who do you think should be the primary source of fertility information for women? Teachers, doctors, books, online resources, family members, or peers?

What scientific studies would you like to see done in the field of fertility? What sociological and statistical data would be most beneficial to the conversation?

How do assisted reproductive technologies (IVF, egg freezing, etc.) change our social dynamics? Are these new social dynamics in keeping with cultural and moral norms or do they shape them? What are the hazards and benefits of reproductive technologies, and where do you stand on these issues?

What role does the media play with regard to our understanding of fertility, motherhood, and assisted reproductive technologies? What role should the media play?

What do you think about the conflict between parenthood and career, as seen with the controversy around Anne-Marie Slaughter's *Atlantic* essay "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" and Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In*?

How can we have an intelligent, balanced discussion about women who focus primarily on careers and those who prioritize family (and whether that dichotomy even exists) without alienating a large segment of the population? Is there a middle ground in this discussion? How can we have this conversation in a way that supports women in general rather than creating subsets of women to face off against each other?

Do you feel that feminism contributed to the bind for women with regard to succeeding at both developing careers and building families? Do you think feminism can help shape a way forward? If so, what does that way forward look like and how can we get there?

How do you think people should begin to advocate for a better future with regard to the pursuit of careers and parenthood? What tangible steps can be made right now—in our governments, businesses, doctor's offices, communities, and households?

ACTION ITEMS FOR THE FUTURE

These ideas and more are explained in further detail in Chapter 11 of The Big Lie.

1. **SHARE YOUR STORIES** Sharing your experiences helps take the shame and isolation out of infertility, provide a fuller understanding of the realities of fertility, and create a community of women and men who have struggled with similar issues.
2. **KNOW YOUR FERTILITY** Knowledge is power. Learn as much as you can about the biology and technology surrounding fertility so you can make timely, proactive, and informed decisions about what's best for you. There are many resources at the end of this toolkit for you to start with.
3. **FREE YOURSELF FROM CONVENTION** There is no right path, but a path or multiple paths that are right for you. Don't be limited by the way things "should" be—figure out what you want and take steps towards making that happen, regardless of whether or not your vision fits into a traditional template.
4. **STRATEGIZE FOR YOUR GOALS** If a combination of children and career is part of your vision, be mindful about your choices to improve the likelihood of integrating parenthood and career. Some workplaces (and countries) are more family-friendly than others, and it is worth doing the research to clarify what kind of balance you'd like and taking conscious steps toward that goal.
5. **DON'T BE AFRAID OF FEMINISM** A woman's freedom to make her own choices does not inherently conflict with the biological reality of her fertility. A system that creates that conflict is a broken one, and we need feminism to continue the fight to make the system fairer for everyone.
6. **ADVOCATE FOR A BETTER FUTURE** The United States is behind many other countries in terms of insurance coverage for infertility, cost of IVF and similar treatments, family-friendly employment policies, and women in leadership positions. We need to take steps to advocate for improved education, insurance coverage, and work/life policy reform for the next generation. RESOLVE, the national infertility association, has great tools and suggestions for advocacy. You can visit its website at [http:// www.resolve.org](http://www.resolve.org) and sign a pledge committing to help further education and awareness.

ADVICE FOR WOMEN OF DIFFERENT AGES

This advice and more are outlined in further detail in Chapter 11 of The Big Lie.

1. IF YOU ARE UP TO TWENTY-ONE YEARS OLD:

Find out the fertility basics. Talk to your doctor or an independent reproductive endocrinologist and check out websites for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health, Guttmacher Institute, Planned Parenthood, and RESOLVE, to name a few.

Think about your goals: Do you want to be a mother? Do you want to have a career? What does an ideal balance look like for you, and what steps do you need to take to achieve it?

2. IF YOU ARE BETWEEN THE AGES OF TWENTY-ONE AND THIRTY YEARS OLD:

Consider a fertility workup to get a better idea of your personal biological timeline and any underlying issues.

If you'd like to have children with a partner, be open to a partner who will be a good parent. Before making serious commitments to a partner, think and talk about your respective reproductive goals and parenting approaches.

Make sure you have good health insurance, and be aware of the policies surrounding coverage for fertility treatments and maternal health where you live and work.

If you'd like to have children but not in the near future, you might want to research and learn more about fertility preservation options (such as egg and embryo freezing). Success rates for women age 30 are roughly 20% and only 9% for women aged 40.

3. IF YOU ARE THIRTY YEARS OLD AND ABOVE:

If you are having trouble getting pregnant or have had a miscarriage, see a specialist sooner than your Ob/Gyn might advise. Remember that your ob/gyn is not necessarily a fertility specialist.

If you are dealing with infertility, educate yourself on the technology available (and the financial costs). You can find information on the National Institutes of Health or Centers for Disease Control and Prevention websites

If you have not had a biological child by age forty despite pursuing treatment, start considering other options for becoming a mother (egg donation, surrogacy, adoption).

If you are above forty-four years old, unless you previously froze your eggs, think about pursuing the other options for becoming a mother. And be proud to do so!

RESOURCES

The complete list of resources can be found in The Big Lie.

ADOPTION

NORTH AMERICAN COUNCIL FOR ADOPTABLE CHILDREN

<http://www.nacac.org>

Founded in 1974 by adoptive parents, NACAC provides advocacy, education, foster care, adoption support, and leadership development in the United States and Canada.

JOINT COUNCIL ON INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

<http://www.jointcouncil.org>

Through an international coalition of over 260 child welfare organizations, the Joint Council helps orphaned and vulnerable children find permanent and safe families, and provides information for parents on international adoption.

FEMINISM

FEMINIST.COM

<http://www.feminist.com>

Feminist.com is an umbrella resource for anything related to feminism. It features links to women-friendly sites and hosts women-owned businesses as well as organizations that can't yet afford or manage their own sites. It is also home to "Ask Amy," where you can get answers from third-wave feminist author Amy Richards.

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN

<http://www.now.org>

NOW advocates for political and social equality for women and is the largest organization of feminist activists in the United States.

FERTILITY & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR REPRODUCTIVE MEDICINE (ASRM)

<http://www.asrm.org>

The ASRM is a nationally and internationally recognized leader in providing information, education, advocacy, and standards in the field of reproductive medicine. It has published *Fertility and Sterility*, a peer-reviewed medical journal in obstetrics and gynecology since 1950, and its website has a wealth of scientific research and data. You can download the ASRM's Age and Fertility booklet at: http://www.reproductivefacts.org/age_and_fertility_booklet/.

PLANNED PARENTHOOD

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

The nation's most widespread provider of reproductive health care, Planned Parenthood offers high-quality, affordable healthcare, sex education, and reproductive health information to women, men, and young people worldwide. Its website offers educational tools for teens, parents, and health professionals.

FERTILITY TREATMENT FINANCING

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON INFERTILITY INFORMATION DISSEMINATION, INC. (INCIID)

<http://www.inciid.org>

INCIID (pronounced "inside") is a nonprofit organization that helps individuals and couples explore their family-building options. The site has links to support about diagnosis, treatment, prevention, adoption, and childfree lifestyles.

RESOLVE

http://www.resolve.org/family-building-options/insurance_coverage

RESOLVE is an excellent resource for data on health insurance coverage state by state in the United States, and also has information on employer coverage, the ins and outs of health insurance, and pending federal legislation on the topic.

FERTILITY TREATMENTS

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

<http://www.cdc.gov/art>

The CDC has comprehensive data on ARTs over the last fifteen years. The website has invaluable research for finding data on success rates at specific clinics and for age demographics.

THE BOSTON WOMEN'S HEALTH BOOK COLLECTIVE

<http://www.ourbodiesourselves.org>

This website is the hub for the nonprofit Boston Women's Health Book Collective, which published *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The collective promotes accurate, evidence-based information on girls' and women's reproductive health and sexuality, and its website has many community and scientific resources.

MOTHERHOOD AND PARENTING

EVERY MOTHER COUNTS

<http://www.everymothercounts.org>

Every Mother Counts is a campaign to end preventable deaths caused by pregnancy and childbirth around the world. They inform, engage, and mobilize new audiences to take action to improve the health and well-being of girls and women worldwide.

NATIONAL ADVOCATES FOR PREGNANT WOMEN (NAPW)

<http://www.advocatesforpregnantwomen.org>

Active players in the political scene, NAPW works to secure the human and civil rights, health, and welfare of all women (and focuses on pregnant and parenting women).

And lastly, here are a few books I found inspiring while I was doing research for The Big Lie. I think these could be especially helpful if you are considering how to balance having children or not with your long-term career goals, but in general, they are excellent reads:

1. Fey, Tina. *Bossypants*. New York: Reagan Arthur Books, 2011.
Moran, Caitlin. *How to Be a Woman*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2011.
2. Moran, Caitlin. *How to Be a Woman*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2011.
3. Orenstein, Peggy. *Flux: Women on Sex, Work, Love, Kids, & Life in a Half-Changed World*. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.
4. Richards, Amy. *Opting In: Having a Child without Losing Yourself*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
5. Sandberg, Sheryl. *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
6. Sotomayor, Sonia. *My Beloved World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
7. Spar, Debora L. *Wonder Women: Sex, Power, and the Quest for Perfection*. New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2013.
8. Zoll, Miriam. *Cracked Open: Liberty, Fertility and the Pursuit of High-Tech Babies*. New York: Interlink Pub Group, 2013.

I hope this toolkit helps with your own awareness-building and in your discussions with others. Please spread the word and share the information with your friends.

I will continue to update and expand the toolkit, so please feel free to send your feedback to tanya@thebigliebook.com.

And please check out news and events:
www.thebigliebook.com.

Thank you for reading!

—Tanya Selvaratnam, author of *The Big Lie: Motherhood, Feminism, and the Reality of the Biological Clock*