

JANUARY 2017

**SOCIAL EGG
FREEZING**

**ANWAR
ODURO-KWARTENG**



**DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES**

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MOTION:

**“SOCIAL EGG
FREEZING
EMPOWERS WOMEN”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Key terms

The Social Egg Freezing debate in context

Essential reading

Backgrounders

Organisations

In the news

KEY TERMS

[Biological clock](#)

[Egg freezing](#)

[Egg vitrification](#)

INTRODUCTION

1 of 6

NOTES

1
1
2
4
5
6
6

Female social egg freezing entered the news in October 2014, when Apple and Facebook announced that they would offer to pay for female employees to freeze their eggs and store them for later use, in a move which attracted a flurry of debate around the issue of female fertility choices in the 21st century [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Apple explained that their decision was aimed at empowering women to plan ahead, declaring that: “We continue to expand our benefits for women...We want to empower women at Apple to do the best work of their lives as they care for loved ones and raise their families” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In addition, this year a Japanese city confirmed they will cover the cost for female citizens to freeze their eggs as part of a three-year pilot project to tackle a declining population [Ref: [BBC News](#)], and with recent figures suggesting that the number of women in the UK opting to freeze and store their eggs has tripled in five years [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], discussion has centred on the ethics of the techniques associated with elective egg freezing. Amid headlines declaring that women should begin having children before they are thirty years old [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], this debate takes place within the context of the social and biological time pressures that women are under to conceive. For some proponents, social egg freezing is viewed as a boon for ambitious, career minded women who are not yet ready to have children, but may want to do so later in life. As one fertility expert remarks: “It is a new technology, and it creates options. And options are something every woman wants, and in this case, I think reasonably deserves.” [Ref: [Slate](#)] However, critics are less than convinced, with concerns about the price of the treatment, and efficacy of the technology which, many argue, offers women a false hope of conceiving later in life [Ref: [The Times](#)]. How should we view social egg freezing? Is it an empowering tool for women, giving them control of their reproductive futures? Or is it an expensive and inefficient technology, which fails to address the social aspects that affect female reproductive choices? Is social egg freezing a good thing?

What is egg freezing?

Otherwise known as ‘oocyte cryopreservation’, egg freezing is a method used to preserve reproductive potential in women [Ref: [Mayo Clinic](#)]. It is done by harvesting eggs from a woman’s ovaries, freezing them unfertilised, and storing them for later use [Ref: [Mayo Clinic](#)]. Until recent years, it was a procedure used primarily for women undergoing chemotherapy or radiotherapy for illnesses like cancer, treatments which can affect fertility. But the debate has now moved on to the more controversial topic of women with no medical issues opting to freeze their eggs as a fertility choice – in essence, attempting to put motherhood ‘on ice’ until they decide they are ready. The development from medical to social egg freezing has created unease for some, with critics such as columnist Rosemary Goring concerned about the potentially profound effects on how we view pregnancy and parenthood, because: “Preventing pregnancy is one thing; timetabling birth as if it were a train, is entirely another.” [Ref: [Herald](#)] Additionally, questions still remain about the effectiveness of the procedure, with one opinion piece in The Times declaring that: “The central fact about oocyte cryopreservation as egg freezing is technically known, is that it almost never leads to a successful birth.” [Ref: [The Times](#)] Figures from the Human fertilisation and embryology authority (HFEA), suggest that only 1.7% of patients eggs thawed between 2008 and 2013 in the UK led to births, at a cost of up to £10,000 per treatment [Ref: [The Times](#)]. But others contest these statistics, claiming they are out of date, do not take into account newer techniques, and fail to acknowledge positive results from other countries [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)].

A triumph for female reproductive choice?

At the forefront of the arguments in support of social egg freezing is the concept of choice. For fertility expert Chavi Eve Karkowsky, the advances being made in the field of egg freezing can only be positive for women, allowing them to take control of their future fertility choices [Ref: [Slate](#)]. She observes that there are social pressures, such as finding the right partner, which women may wish to postpone until they are ready: “And egg freezing puts the whole process on ice until they can find a way to have the family they really want, with the partner they really want.” [Ref: [Slate](#)] Potentially the technology could also mean that women could concentrate on their careers in their 20’s and 30’s, in the knowledge that they may be able to conceive later in life. In this way, the US military, like Facebook and Apple, is considering offering egg freezing for female recruits in the hope of increasing retention rates, as: “Women who reach ten years of service...‘their peak years for starting a family’, have a retention rate that is 30 percent lower than their male counterparts.” [Ref: [New York Times](#)] Furthermore, the idea of the ‘female biological clock’, and the potential of egg freezing to assuage the time pressure that women are under to have children by a certain age, is also something the technology’s advocates point to. “Having the freedom to kick the proverbial can down the road is a freedom nature doesn’t afford women” [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)] remarks commentator Aidan Madigan-Curtis, but egg freezing offers this possibility. As with all fertility treatments though, egg freezing is not a fool proof method of conceiving later in life, but its supporters point to the rapid improvements in the technology through the process of ‘vitrification’ which flash freezes the eggs, and which Dr Geeta Nargund suggests radically

THE SOCIAL EGG FREEZING DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

3 of 6

NOTES

improves the chances of successfully thawing and using the eggs when required [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]. Responding to claims from opponents that the procedure gives women false hope, she states that: “Scientific studies have shown that pregnancy rates and health outcomes following egg freezing are now comparable to those with IVF with fresh eggs.” [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)]

A technical solution to a social problem?

Critics of social egg freezing suggest that it may have potentially profound cultural consequences on wider societal norms and values. For one writer, egg freezing plays into a pervasive attitude that we can cheat nature, and subject it to our whims, arguing that: “You can’t help but wonder if social egg freezing is another brick in the wall of denial we are building around ourselves, against the approach of old age and what lies beyond.” [Ref: [Herald](#)] Moreover, whilst supporters claim that the reproductive choice that egg freezing offers women is positive, critics are concerned about the ramifications it may have. For instance, Christine Rosen observes that, “individual choices have broader consequences, and a society in which young women routinely freeze their eggs, could develop very different attitudes about children and the arc of a human life.” [Ref: [Wall Street Journal](#)] She concludes by saying that: “The danger lies not in a particular technology, but in how it might allow us to indulge our hubris and pretend that we and our families are not subject to the relentless march of time.” [Ref: [Wall Street Journal](#)] Similarly, columnist Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett expresses concern that egg freezing may end up obscuring the real social reasons why women may feel the need to delay parenthood – such as insecure career prospects, unaffordable childcare costs, and

skyrocketing property prices. She argues that: “It would do all women an injustice to neglect to challenge these barriers because of egg freezing technology’s seemingly miraculous allure.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Academic Linda Scott agrees, and claims that instead of investing in, “expensive, intrusive, unnatural” solutions to parenthood, we should be looking at improving workplace conditions such as maternity leave, which would mean that women would not be forced to defer motherhood [Ref: [World Economic Forum](#)] Considering these points, should we celebrate social egg freezing as a means to empower women, or should we be cautious in welcoming its advent?

ESSENTIAL READING

4 of 6

NOTES

FOR

[The success of the latest egg freezing technology dispels scaremongering headlines](#)

Dr Geeta Nargund *Huffington Post* 18 September 2015

[Why I froze my eggs](#)

Jillian Dunham *The Times* 30 May 2015

[In defence of egg freezing benefits](#)

Chavi Eve Karkovsky *Slate* 16 October 2014

[Why all women should freeze their eggs at 30](#)

Kathryn Knight *Daily Mail* 19 May 2013

AGAINST

[‘Social’ egg freezing is a hideous fertility gamble](#)

Viv Groskop *Guardian* 9 February 2016

[Oversold eggs](#)

The Times 12 September 2015

[The sobering facts about egg freezing that nobody’s talking about](#)

Pamela Mohoney Tsigdinos *Wired* 24 October 2014

[The ethics of egg freezing](#)

Christine Rosen *Wall Street Journal* 3 May 2013

IN DEPTH

[We need to talk about egg freezing](#)

Eva Wiseman *Guardian* 7 February 2016

[Fertility fog](#)

Amy Klein *Aeon* 6 January 2015

BACKGROUNDERS

5 of 6

NOTES

[Turning back the biological clock comes at a price](#)

Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett *Guardian* 25 July 2016

[Who should we believe when it comes to fertility?](#)

New Scientist 20 July 2016

[Subsidised egg freezing isn't the answer to Japan's birth rate](#)

Alex Petropanagos *New Scientist* 17 June 2016

[Teach girls of 12 to start a family in their late 20s, doctor says](#)

Daily Mail 16 June 2016

[The cold-hearted calculation when women choose to freeze their eggs](#)

Rosemary Goring *Herald* 14 June 2016

[New fertility options for female soldiers](#)

Natalie Lampert *Atlantic* 29 February 2016

[I took control of my biological clock at age 30](#)

Aidan Madigan-Curtis *Huffington Post* 11 January 2016

[Egg freezing is a tempting option: but can women be sure it's the right choice?](#)

Harriet Meyer *Guardian* 24 October 2015

[I had my eggs frozen. I wish someone had told me how difficult it was](#)

Eleanor Morgan *Guardian* 21 October 2015

[What it's like to freeze your eggs](#)

Alice Mann *Telegraph* 10 October 2015

[Egg freezing: can you really put babies on ice?](#)

Ruth Wood *Telegraph* 7 September 2015

[Everything we still don't know about freezing human eggs](#)

Simon Zhang *Wired* 12 August 2015

[Why freezing eggs is not the answer](#)

Linda Scott *World Economic Forum* 6 March 2015

[Egg freezing deserves serious consideration](#)

Dr Sonya Kashyap *Huffington Post* 21 December 2014

[Social egg freezing: empowering but not an insurance policy](#)

Gillian Lockwood *Guardian* 24 October 2014

[The true impetus behind egg-freezing](#)

Sally Satel *Forbes* 21 October 2014

[Should you freeze your eggs?](#)

Robin Marantz Henig *Slate* 30 September 2014

[Fertility: will we ever win the egg race?](#)

Laura Donnelly *Telegraph* 10 April 2011

[Freezing and storing eggs](#)

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority

IN THE NEWS

[Toddler aged two with cancer becomes youngest patient to have her eggs frozen](#)

Daily Mail 2 July 2016

[Women freeze their eggs because they are waiting for Mr right – not putting their careers first](#)

Daily Mail 17 June 2016

[Japanese city helps women freeze eggs to boost birth rate](#)

BBC News 16 June 2016

[Freezing eggs is no guarantee of a baby](#)

The Times 24 March 2016

[Number of women freezing their eggs triples in just five years](#)

Telegraph 23 March 2016

[Pentagon to offer to store eggs and sperm to retain young troops](#)

New York Times 3 February 2016

[Egg freezing: ‘We mustn’t give women false hopes’](#)

The Times 12 September 2015

[Delaying motherhood by freezing eggs could harm birth chances](#)

Telegraph 11 August 2015

[Senior NHS doctor tells women ‘have baby before 30’](#)

Telegraph 31 May 2015

[Egg freezing: the perfect 30th birthday gift for women](#)

Telegraph 27 October 2014

[Apple and Facebook offer to freeze eggs for female employees](#)

Guardian 15 October 2014

6 of 6

NOTES

ORGANISATIONS

[Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority](#)

ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS



FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**