

# MOTHERHOOD AND SOCIETY

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**Abstract:**

*Birth is considered an essential event in life. Still, nowadays it seems that more and more women give up their most female feature: that of giving birth. In this paper we aim at dealing with contemporary society from this perspective, see the implications of such a decision, and the factors that lead women to doing so.*

**Keywords:** *motherhood, family, baby, society, economy*

Throughout the centuries, everyone agrees there are three main events in everyone's life. Anthropologically, they are birth, death and marriage, thus making us aware of the fact that human birth occupies a focal place in any individual's life, it belongs to the essence of life. Birth is a focus of social rules and strategies that define and reinforce the classifications of male and female.

At first I would like to take a look at the anthropological aspect of the matter of women having children, and second, to see the economic implications and possible reasons why this happens.

A new contemporary direction is increasingly pervading our current society. It is about giving up the gift of nature, or the most essentially female features of all. Women have second thoughts before giving birth. Actual figures tell us that one woman in five has voluntarily given up having babies.

"Whatever other distinctions there are between male and female, these categories are primarily differentiated by their sexual complementarity in the procreation of the human species. This is so obvious that it would seem unworthy of examination, but in anthropology we have come to realise that what is most taken for granted may well be highly problematic." (Callaway 1993: 147)

That is why we ask ourselves the question, what is it the typical function of women? Traditionally, women have always been *mothers*, so their most essential function is to give birth. In opposition, men lack this symmetry, but contrary to mothers, they are perceived as fathers. Despite the conventional male-female dichotomy, where man has always been envisaged as the right or superior side, in birth no one can deny woman's superior part. Women bear the children, give birth, most often stay home taking care of the baby, educate the children, while men's function can be the bringing up, education, and other responsibilities that do not create such a profound physical connection with the child.

The functions of males and females are obviously different, and therefore they occur in contrasting spaces taking up different periods of time. Anthropologists agree that women's space is nature, while the male space is culture. Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out that proportionately more of the woman's body space, for a longer period in her life, is taken up with reproduction (de Beauvoir 1972: 96). The cultural side of men has been motivated by their capacity to remodel the face of the earth by creating new instruments, inventing, shaping the future. So, men 'transcend life' through their creative acts, while women 'recreate' it through the procreative powers of their bodies.

So, all evidence reveals that giving birth is, or traditionally should count as the most important female function, the one that involves most of woman's time. Woman's role has been shaped as defined through motherhood, which has been the first characteristic of women. This equal between women and their wish of becoming mothers has started to blur. Contemporary society offers us worldwide women who are not at all eager to taste the delights of mothering.

Not so much time ago, "childlessness in women was a curse, a condition aspired to only by a handful of nuns, saints and female monarchs who feared the dilution of power attendant on marriage and the physical processes of pregnancy. [...] In this context the proposition that, given the choice, some women would prefer *not* to have children, was virtually unthinkable. [...] Women who couldn't conceive were pitied and showered with advice, emphasizing both their private sense of failure and the primacy of motherhood as a woman's destiny. Their plight was social as well as personal." (Smith 1998: 80)

This perception remained consistent for a vast period of time. In this context, the modern idea that women who could have children, and did not want to, came as a shock for many people, and still, is unthinkable for a large amount. It appears that the first hesitating voices on the topic surfaced around the 1960s. Then, a new and reinvigorated women's movement began to look at issues about women's sexuality and reproduction in a new and radical light. Of course, we cannot omit the two basic elements associated with childlessness: the oral contraceptive pill and women's working possibility, and implicitly the idea of building up a career. With the arrival of the oral contraceptive pill both the birth rate declined in civilized Western countries and the proportion of women living out their reproductive years without ever giving birth began to rise rapidly.

For most of us the fact that an adult healthy woman capable of bearing a baby refuses the option appears frightening. That is why when an individual woman says she doesn't want to become a mother, she encounters a range of hostile reactions ranging from disbelief to condescension, from accusations of solipsism to assaults on her femininity. Moreover, popular approach blames even more such a woman for the simple fact that she refuses a natural gift. Having children comes as a *must* when other women who desire womanhood are submitted to various treatments in order to be able to conceive. Furthermore, fertile women not wishing to have children are sent to all sorts of medical and fertility treatments just because regular, traditional human thought cannot comprehend such an idea. But, childlessness should be acceptable as long as it is voluntary.

Contemporary magazines and newspapers envisage this idea with obvious indignation and irony. What happens if women have stopped exercising their essential characteristic? The most typical feminine feature gets more and more blurred, thus softening the asymmetry between women and men. Since being a woman was synonymous with having children, and being a man did not have such a fundamental meaning, actual issues make us aware of the fact that the only underlying trait of women decreases constantly. Anthropology and general thought overrate the human male over the human female; the patriarchal community we are part of praises everything which is male: mind, gender, body, over the female. The logical question that arises could be thus: What do women get in exchange for losing their basic and distinctive hallmark? Starting from this hypothesis, there is a paradox in the feminist facet of the theory. More precisely, it could be interpreted this way: giving up motherhood, women get in exchange their independence under all its forms. Independence is here translated by financial, female emancipation, the desire and possibility of personal achievements. Man continues to remain the *inventor* of the future, while woman has to assume the role of professionally inferior in most situations and *less* mother than before.

As all trade, this one is also a story of gain and loss in the same time. The gain consists in woman's possibility of advanced education, increased credibility in major functions (although there are still very few women in key positions worldwide, but I shall not insist on this aspect), while the loss is measured in the diminishing number of inhabitants. The paradox grows and seems to be like a vicious circle. Education and the contraceptive pill were meant to ease women's lives; they had to offer women possibilities, options. Instead, their effect was opposite. Women could not enjoy very much progress and technological advances. Feminists would say that men did that *on purpose* in order to maintain their primordial position. Ironically speaking, the barter between education and children kept the situation even. Women have stopped having babies to obtain freedom, and the much yearned freedom is wasted in education. There are no winners in my speculation.

I think there are two major things regarding the option of not having children. The first one is that women do not have any legal obligation in this sense. According to the general belief, maternity's lack is a proof of selfishness. Women who do not want to bear children are classified as mean and egocentric. But should a woman become a mother just for the sake of society? It is nonetheless true that the number of black people on our planet has faced a huge breakthrough, but is this a reason enough to get yourself a life-lasting responsibility if your brain reacts negatively to the matter? Or, not to mention more down-to-earth motives, like women who aspire to have a healthy couple life, without cries, diapers, non slept nights, but with all the comfort of a happy and pleasurable life.

Second, despite the fact that blaming someone always comes at hand, things are not the same when blaming a childless woman. The decision not to have children is one of the most difficult a woman could make. Wanting or not children is a fathomless decision which could affect all her subsequent existence, together with her partner's one. That is why a woman who is absolutely certain that she wouldn't like to be a mother has taken into consideration all the dreaded aspects other mothers encounter. In order to get to this conclusion, it usually takes a lot of soul-searching, self-knowledge or introspection, but at least a woman able to declare against all obstacles her immovable decision should be watched with respect.

To demonstrate that in the third millennium women find interest in other things that mothering are these figures taken from Smith's paper: "A front-page article in the *Guardian* in June 1996(...) warned that 'the birth rate is already below the level necessary to replenish the population' and quoted a statistician at the Office for National Statistics (ONS) who said: 'It is a problem. We are likely to have a population more heavily weighted towards the elderly.' The ONS predicted in 1996 that Britain's population would begin to fall in 2025 for the first time since the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century, unintentionally characterising voluntary childlessness as a threat to humanity on the scale of a medieval plague." (Smith 1998: 83)

This is no doubt an alarming notice, but this cannot make women change their mind. In the whole Western world, but not only, the number of women who avoid maternity is increasing; it is estimated that a quarter of young women who live in the developed countries will never give birth. All statistics sound very discouraging about population.

The economic implications of childlessness face important changes in society. Newspapers and magazines dealing with economic issues face frustration when talking about decrease in birth rates.

In the U.S. for example, the crisis brought about a dramatic lowering in the number of new-born babies. There are alarming data statistics from 2011: "the general fertility rate (63.2 per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44) was the lowest ever recorded; the

birth rate for teenagers ages 15 to 19 declined; birth rates for women ages 20 to 24 hit a record low; and rates for Hispanic and non-Hispanic black women dipped. Some birth rates remained unchanged, like those of women in their late 40s. Only women ages 35 to 39 and 40 to 44 are more likely to have babies now than in the past.” (Sanburn) Naturally, it could be due to the general crisis which affected large numbers of the population. It seems that since the crash the Americans decided they could not afford having babies. Therefore, the constant number of women over thirty having children implies their financial stability and the basis of a career.

In Europe the situation is nonetheless better. The Forbes writes about Europe’s decline, but, although it seems difficult to believe, it highlights the negative situation as being a result of the low birth rate. “The so-called Club Med Countries– Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain–have not developed strong economies to compensate for their fading demographics outside pockets of relative prosperity such as Milan.” (Kotkin) The negative implications the drop in demography brings about are obvious: there will be around enough people either retired or in school for every person working. Moreover, the article mentions the absence of citizens–to–come as cause for another possible catastrophic recession.

Germany, one of the leading countries in Europe, faces the same issue: the lowest birthrate ever. “Demographics and family policy experts are divided over the reasons for the apparent reluctance to have children, as well as the ways to tackle the situation. What they generally agree on is that Germany’s demographic future looks gloomy. With many more Germans dying than being born for 40 years, the obvious results will be a shrinking workforce, lower growth and a struggle to pay for a rapidly ageing population.” (Connolly)

Motherhood is definitely a serious problem eventually involving all of us. It is a coin with two facets. If some time ago, people agreed that women have to have children in order to keep in balance demography, nowadays in many cultures it is no longer a surprise women’s lack of having children.

“Many people think that the right to have children is a fundamental personal freedom. Others believe that the collective rights of present and future generations to a clean, healthy environment and adequate food, shelter, and clothing supersede individual rights.”(Chiras 2013: 163) The scientist Philip Handler for example, speaking about the future of humanity, showed preoccupation about the great number of inhabitants our planet has. Population growth has certainly drawbacks like: more pollution, more resource use and more environmental disturbance. In his book, *Biology and the Future of Man*, Handler pleads in favour of a sustainable planet from all points of view: “I cannot believe that the principal objective of humanity is to establish how many human beings the planet can just barely sustain. But I can imagine a remarkable world in which a limited population can live in abundance, free to explore the full extent of man’s imagination and spirit.” (Handler 1970: 64)

On the one hand we have insufficient resources on the planet, according to some scientists (Handler), while, on the other hand, the decrease of demography has severe economic effects. In this blurred period, women decide to think twice before having children as a result of the financial implications besides the physical side effects children imply (pregnancy, unslept nights, etc).

Nowadays, many women long to embrace a career. In many countries, the childcare system is not clearly defined. Social scientists want a far broader approach that views the family as a whole and tries to create stronger links between the workplace and family. Since school aged children leave school at 12 in most of the countries, working women (not to mention career -women) are deep into working hours.

The impact of working mothers is far-reaching. Some women are capable of competing men in the professional area on completely equal terms. This is no doubt good news for women, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we shouldn't neglect the role of males in bringing up the children. Though not very common practice, responsible men keep getting more and more concerned in their infants' development. There are cases when the man goes on paternity leave to take care of the baby if the mother is on the runaway of a successful career. Many men would never agree with such an idea, but sometimes the couple has to focus on both the emotional and financial penchants of the parent profession.

Mothers with careers can be an issue of debate. Raising a child is such a challenging thing, that in itself it is already a career, besides, dedicating precious time to your job implies less time spent with your child, but this is already the subject of baby-sitting.

The choice of having or not children is a personal and crucial one, it is a life-changing decision which enables women to find peace and comfort in the children's education or allows them to direct and live out her hobbies and passions. No doubt, childlessness in women will have a strong demographical impact on the planet, but everyone's existence is based on responsibilities we *voluntarily want* to bear.

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