

Society continues to value mothers over women who do not have children, but at what cost?

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Credit: Marty from Manitou Springs, USA. Via Wikipedia.

How are women with no children faring in a society where being a mother, or not, continues to be used as a measure of a woman's worth?

This is the question Deakin University health and [social development](#) researchers are looking to answer with their latest study into the experiences of [women](#) with no children.

"Our 2014 study into the experiences of women aged 25—44 years who had no children, highlighted the stigmatisation, stereotyping and exclusion these women experience," said Deakin PhD student Beth Turnbull.

"We now want to know what happens to women beyond the reproductive years, so are extending the study to explore the experiences of women aged 45—64 years."

Women can have no children for a range of reasons, including freely choosing not to have children, wanting children but being unable to achieve a viable pregnancy, or being unable to have children due to external circumstances, such as having a partner who does not want children or not being in the right relationship.

While there has been a small, positive shift in attitudes towards women with no children in Australia as a result of more space, particularly through social media, for women to openly talk about not having children, Deakin health and social development researcher Dr Melissa Graham said their experiences are still often met with negative comments and criticism.

"We still have a long way to go in Australia before being a woman with no children is viewed publicly as an acceptable life path," Dr Graham said.

"Women with no children reported feeling stereotyped and judged by others, and that their reasons for having no children were often dismissed.

"Some women felt stereotyped as child-hating, career-focussed and selfish and others felt stereotyped as unhappy and desperate. Many felt judged as incomplete, while women who would not or could not ever have children felt judged as failed women. Interestingly, women in our study who had not yet had children, but planned to, experienced less stereotyping and stigmatisation.

"Our study also revealed that 33 per cent of women felt excluded from community participation, such as community events and spaces, and 21 per cent felt excluded from services, such health and medical services, due to having no children, with women who had no children due to external circumstances feeling the most excluded.

"While most of the women had university degrees and were in the upper middle or high income brackets, they reported having limited access to employment benefits and experiencing work-life conflict, such as being unable to take leave at Christmas, being refused carers leave, and being expected to work long hours, inconvenient shifts and weekends.

"However, some women also described actively building lives in which having no children was valued and affirmed, and having the freedom to contribute to society, including through volunteering, employment, helping family and friends and working with children."

The Deakin researchers are calling on women aged 45-64 years to add their voices to their latest study and share their [experiences](#), both good and bad, of life with no children.

"By contributing their stories to the study, women will be adding to what we know about life in Australian society for women with no [children](#), which could lead to the development of initiatives to enhance their connectedness and wellbeing," Dr Graham said.

More information: Women wanting to participate in the study can complete the online questionnaire at [www.surveymonkey.com/s/life-in... -64-with-no-children](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/life-in...-64-with-no-children) For more information email Beth Turnbull b.turnbull@deakin.edu.au

Provided by Deakin University

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