

Women still face unfair pressure about having children

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If you're a woman in your 20s or 30s, particularly if you're in a long-term relationship, you've probably been asked when you're going to have children. In the UK and many other countries, there is a clear societal

expectation that women will eventually become mothers.

Many people feel pressured to [have children](#) by their own parents, who look forward to [having grandchildren](#). Parenthood as the default life trajectory is evident in films and television, and even in public health recommendations.

A draft report from the World Health Organization in 2021 caused an uproar when it suggested that all [women](#) of child-bearing age should avoid alcohol in case of [becoming pregnant](#).

These assumptions and pressures become more intense depending on age and timing. In England and Wales, [in 2021](#), the average age was 30.9 years for women and 33.7 years for men to become parents.

Compare this with the [2017 figures](#) of 28.8 years for women and 33.4 years for men. While age for all parents is increasing, it is now markedly higher for women to become mothers.

Women becoming mothers at an older age translates into other [social expectations](#). Mothers are [portrayed as selfish](#) for "choosing" older motherhood and supposedly risking the health of the baby due to increasing maternal age.

However, the evidence shows that delaying motherhood isn't as simple as that. Women become mothers in their [mid-30s](#) for a myriad of reasons, including establishing careers, not being in a suitable partnership or [not feeling ready](#).

And, while rates of teenage pregnancy have [declined](#) in recent years, there is still a stigma associated with having a baby "too young." This stigma is exacerbated if the mother is [working class](#).

The gender parenting gap

As we can see from the ONS figures, men are older when they have their first children. Men can continue to father children at a later age than women typically can get pregnant, but they arguably do not face the same social or [time pressure](#) as women to have children.

This gender gap continues into parenthood. If you pick up a parenting book, you'll probably notice that the text is written primarily for mothers. Even when there is a move to a gender equal "parent," much of the text still [refers to mothers](#) instead of [fathers](#) as the one predominantly responsible for caregiving. Meanwhile, [fathers](#) are seen as more [part-time](#), bumbling assistants or "babysitters."

Parenting is hard work, time-consuming and expensive, and many countries' working cultures are not set up to support parents. It is often the mothers who scale down their paid working hours to pick up more of the childcare [when the baby arrives](#).

As I've found in [my research](#), media about stay-at-home fathers depicts them as being forced into the role through economic pressure. This is a contrast to what these primary caregiving fathers have told me themselves, which is that they see parenting as an equal partnership.

There has been some progress in families towards equal parenting (including in gay and lesbian [partnerships](#)). But the idea of mothers as the primary caregivers persists, and means that women in their 20s and 30s still face undue pressure about whether (and when) to try for children.

Choosing to be childfree

Women and men should be able to choose their own path as to whether to become a parent or not. Obviously, ignoring [social pressure](#) is easier said than done.

There is some evidence that millennial and generation Z women are more commonly embracing being "[childfree by choice](#)". As the ONS figures show, half of all women do not have a child by [age 30](#).

Of course, this comes with its own social implications. As research by Rebecca Harrington [notes](#), women who decide to remain childfree are often stigmatized. They are seen to be going against the socially accepted "nurturing female" and the expectation that girls grow up to become mothers.

The [identity shifts](#) that happen when women become [mothers](#) can impact friendships, especially between parents and non-parents. Maintaining relationships with others can be difficult while managing the demands of caring for a young infant. For the friend without [children](#), the arrival of a baby is not [without its challenges](#).

For all its ills, social media is helping change the conversation. The option to be childfree is becoming more visible and even celebrated through campaigns such as [We Are Childfree](#). Seeing online communities of like-minded people with similar life trajectories can show you that becoming a parent isn't the only option, and reassure you that you are not alone in whatever path you choose.

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