

# Should I have children? Why society's idealization of motherhood benefits no one

January 5 2024, by Pragya Agarwal

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Mothers—and non-mothers. Our language creates the falsehood that being with a child is a norm. Words like "childless" or "childfree" firmly place the person without a child as the one lacking. Women who decide

not to have children are marked as outsiders by our social and cultural norms.

And the expectation is not just that [women](#) will be mothers—it is that they will be the right kind of mother.

Women commonly search for the perfect time to be pregnant, delaying pregnancy decisions. This might seem like autonomy, but it is often a consequence of the vast gender inequality still existing in our society. Women lack the privilege and support to have children at "less convenient" times.

This is because no matter what we want to believe, women do not have the same status as men. They carry more mental and emotional labor at home, working longer hours than men who are fathers.

And although there has been a [significant rise](#) in the number of single parents in the UK, there are still many barriers—social and practical—to going solo. As poet and essayist Adrienne Rich wrote in her work *Of Woman Born*:

"The 'childless woman' and the 'mother' are a false polarity, which has served the institutions both of motherhood and heterosexuality."

The idealization of motherhood undermines all women, irrespective of their own choices, as I write in my book [\(M\)otherhood: On the choices of being a woman](#).

The reasons people do not want to have children may be culturally, socially, environmentally and financially motivated. These can be individual choices—or people might be childfree not by choice.

I continue to wonder if, even in this era of unprecedented freedom and

choice, women are really free to understand their own reproductive options or have the autonomy to shape these decisions.

## Decisions and regret

Often, discussions about having a child are shaped in terms of regret. What if you regret it and it is too late? What if you change your mind and it is too late?

Studies on regretting having children [focus on mothers](#). It is not considered out of the ordinary for a man to not want children, to be child-free. Women's fertility choices are [continuously scrutinized](#), while we don't often [discuss biological clocks](#) for men too.

In 2023, [researchers from Michigan State University](#) found that one in five adults in the state, or about 1.7 million people, didn't want to have children. This was followed up with another study, [published later in 2023](#), which looked more deeply at people who are childfree by choice. Turns out they're pretty happy with their decisions.

On the other hand, studies have shown that people who have children are more likely to regret this choice. In 2021, a [survey by YouGov](#) of over 1,200 British parents found that 8% say they currently regret having children. And [a 2016 YouGov study in Germany](#) of over 2,000 people found that 19% of mothers and 20% of fathers said if they could decide again, they would not want to have children.

There may be many reasons for these regrets, but a [lack of childcare options](#), and [lack of support](#) are likely to be significant. We don't have a village any more. We are trying to do it all, ourselves, alone.

I keep wondering why society still puts so much pressure on people, especially women, to have children—why it tells them that their primary,

most important goal in life is to be a mother, but then quickly labels them a bad mother, an inattentive mother, a neglectful mother.

The [reproductive justice](#) movement aims to change this. It asserts the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, to have children or not have children, and to parent the [children](#) we have in safe communities. It brings focus to marginalized communities, those who are most harmed due to barriers in [reproductive health](#), and those who are also most at risk of sexual and reproductive violence.

Reproductive inequalities also affect those whose lives are outside the binary framework. We cannot discuss autonomy without considering the intersectional aspects of its effects on trans, non-binary, agender and gender non-conforming people.

A [choice](#) can sometimes be an illusion. While we might believe that we are perfectly autonomous and free to make our decisions at will, we are never free of our societal and cultural context.

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