

# THE INFLUENCE OF CHILDLISSNESS ON FEMALE EMPOWERMENT

**Sarah Doornenbal**

Family structure and gender roles have been dramatically transformed in recent history. In particular, women, have become more empowered as they have withdrawn from the traditional housewife role. Raising children and keeping house is no longer the only option for ambitious, independent females. Particularly in western culture, men no longer dominate society or individual households as they did in the past. In addition, the workforce is changing, and while women seek to empower themselves through different means, some have done so by focusing on their careers rather than on motherhood. These factors may be contributing to a growing trend in childlessness over the recent years. In my research, I plan to study the influence of female empowerment and changing gender roles on childlessness. I project that there will be a clear connection between the two phenomena of female empowerment and childlessness.

Sociologists have been challenged by the question: Why do some individuals choose to have children, while others do not? Growing up, getting married, and having a few rug-rats may seem like the ideal American dream. This dream, however, does not apply to all. Since the pool of the voluntarily childless has grown over the years, it is necessary to study the roots of childlessness to better understand this topic.

Female identity has been wrapped up in motherhood for centuries. This role designation has led to a very unfortunate misperception of women who are not mothers. It suggests that something is absent in the female's life—that they are lacking in some way. The very term "childless" implies that one is missing something essential—something that is the norm (May 182). Such

beliefs can be traced back to mythology and folklore. Women were often childless because they were barren or unmarried, and thus pitied. In some cases, the childless woman was viewed as evil and self-serving, and often played the role of the protagonist. Classical tales affirm similar beliefs. Women without children were portrayed in a deficient or negative light, and cast aside as simply unwilling or unable to fulfill their maternal role (Ireland 7).

This ideological prejudice persisted through the 20th century. If a woman was without children, it was assumed she was either infertile or unfit to reproduce. But with the transition in gender roles, along with growing awareness of female rights, attitudes towards childless women have changed. Movements such as women's suffrage, abortion rights, and improvements in contraception now made childlessness a choice. As a result, women without children were no longer presumed to be infertile or unhealthy. However, their childless state, and women's decision to maintain it, were still met with great criticism from the majority.

During the post-war years and the consequent baby boom, traditional ideology again defined the typical roles of the female and the family. Childlessness was nearly extinct; there was no public affirmation of a life without children (Mary 185). Though women had been encouraged to work during the war, once the time of need had ended, women returned to their proper place - in the home. As the Cold War commenced, it became not only the true role of the female but a patriotic duty to be a mother. However, during the 60s and 70s new ideologies emerged, and a rebellion against traditional domesticity began.

A new wave of feminism occurred during the 1960s, playing a vital role in the childless movement. Unlike the first group of feminists, who championed women's rights through motherhood, this new wave of feminists focused on alternatives to motherhood (Ireland 3). Advocates of the childless lifestyle began to advance the theory that motherhood and romance were incompatible. Furthermore, many women began to experience self-fulfillment in their careers, and view children as simply providing distractions and hindrances from work goals. In the past, to be sexual a woman's only choice was to become a mother. And thus, as romance died with the children's arrival, to become a mother was to become nonsexual (May 5). Abortion and birth control, however, had provided new options. A sexual revolution was taking place, in which feminists of the 60s challenged the postwar belief that motherhood was the only true fulfillment of womanhood. Ellen Peck, in *Baby Trap*, argued that a childless lifestyle was the key to keeping a marriage filled with excitement and sensual adventures. Peck also boldly suggested that children were a deterrent to a marriage's survival, rather than an incitement (Ireland 189), with the implication that fatherhood and infidelity may be directly related.

Some feminists took a very aggressive stance against motherhood. And though a childless lifestyle was becoming more acceptable, activists like Gael Greene, who wrote *A Vote Against Motherhood*, were deemed heretics. The National Organization of Non-Parents, established in 1972, had an environmental focus, but also served lifestyle issues. Eight years later, the organization decided to soften their message, altering their title to the National Alliance for Optional Parenthood. Taking their lead from the NAOP, most childless proponents have made a similar transition—promoting the acceptance and freedom of choice, rather than advocating one particular lifestyle over another.

The childless movement, however, cannot simply be attributed to feminism. So many factors are involved in this growing trend that it is virtually impossible to pinpoint one definitive cause. Several other philosophies have influenced the childless couples' choice not only in this nation but throughout the world. Along with contraceptive improvements and the right to reproductive choice, environmentalism and zero-population growth also played their part. Gay and lesbian rights have also contributed, as well as a growing commitment to public life and careers and the pursuit of personal pleasures. It is a whole new outlook on freedom and self-fulfillment, then, that has caused some couples to remain childless. Ultimately, voluntary childlessness is seen as the main contributing factor for the lower birthrate (May 183).

Since the 90s, voluntary childlessness has become more common. In fact, the quintessential woman is no longer described as the devoted housewife and mother who provides for her husband and children in the home. Although some prefer to continue tradition, and honor the postwar ideology of domesticity, others would describe the ideal woman as happily married, with a good job, and childfree.

"Childfree" is a new term that is becoming popular amongst childless women and couples. This term is an explicit recognition that young people do not want to be viewed as lacking some necessary component in life. Instead, with only their partner in mind rather than an entire family, they should be free to live as they wish and pursue their own goals. Some traditionalists still view this choice as self-indulgent and neurotic. Childfree individuals and couples have often expressed a sense of isolation. Though childlessness is a growing trend, postwar versions of the family and domesticity are still popular, and childless people find themselves in the minority. But just like their more traditional peers, childfree

couples have dreams of marital bliss and domestic stability. They simply feel these goals can be achieved without children (May 185).

A transition in gender roles has also contributed to childlessness. In the past, male domination over the female played a key role in reproduction. Women were dependent on males for survival, and they had little opportunity to support themselves financially or pursue their own goals. Wives were forced to succumb to their husband's wishes, and fertility was often a sign of fitness in the male. Due to the uncertainty of paternity prior to paternity testing, conceiving several children was generally preferred (Aarssen 1769). Thus childbearing, housework, and family ruled the lifestyle of the female. Gradually, women have gained more independence from men, and the choice to remain childless has simply been one result of this new freedom.

In an effort to predict future mating trends, L. W. Aarssen of Queen's University in Canada uses the terms "sex drive", "parenting drive", and "legacy drive" to explain the reasons people have children. While the first two terms may seem rather self-explanatory, the legacy drive involves traits that promote a desire to leave something of oneself for the future. The legacy drive can result from the anxiety that is caused by our awareness of our mortality, and can be fulfilled either through gene transmission or meme transmission (Aarssen 1773).

A meme is any unit of cultural information, and can be transmitted through activities such as education, work, religion, wealth, travel, achievement, or hobbies. These activities compete with the time, energy, and resources required for parenthood. Meme transmission promotes personal legacy, and therefore satisfies our intrinsic legacy drive while avoiding the alternative option, gene transmission. While some choose to fulfill a sense of legacy by producing offspring, others may choose to seek a legacy through other

means. Now that more women are given the opportunity to pursue their own goals and careers, meme transmission may be a direct cause of childlessness.

Having provided an understanding of the historical background of childlessness, I now focus on the census data and research literature which supported my analysis. Statistics clearly show that fewer people are having children in the US. In the census data, I searched for declining birth rates in addition to statistics that reflected women's roles in the home and the workforce. In 2004, the proportion of childless women between 15 and 44 was 44.6%, up from 35% in 1976 (Downs).

To study the growth of female empowerment and its relation to childlessness, I investigated US census data over the past 150 years. Women's roles as mothers, wives, and participants in the work force have changed dramatically, which can be demonstrated through these statistics. To ensure that a trend in childlessness does in fact exist, I began my statistical investigation by focusing on birth rates throughout the United States. This research yielded good results. Though the population is steadily increasing, births are not, with immigration increasingly accounting for population growth. Between 1880 and 2000, the birth rate has consistently declined from 41.16 to 14.90 (Carter 1-35). These data clearly support the claim that fewer people are having children.

One study investigated this topic thoroughly, focusing on American women at the age of 44 over the past thirty years. This age group is significant because it is less likely that women will have several more children after age 44. In 1976, only 10.2% of these women were childless, while approximately 20.1% of these women had five children or more (The remaining 69.7% had either one child, two children, or three children.) By year 2000, the numbers had changed. Nineteen percent of these women

were childless, while only 3.3% had five children or more. The largest category of mothers (35%) had two children (Downs). It is important to remember there may be numerous reasons for this transition. Though some of these women may be childless voluntarily, others may not.

I further studied census data in researching statistics involving a change in women's relation to the work force. A shift in the division of labor from agricultural work to clerical and service occupations is evident. Clerical, sales, and service jobs have increased from a 4.9% share of the labor force in 1870 to a 38.4% share in 1990 (Carter 2-5). This opportunity for office work made women's entry into the work force possible. As of 1982, women made up 63.3% of the total labor force. The most drastic transition can be seen in married women with a spouse present – 50% of them worked in 1980, compared to only 14.7% in 1940 (Shortridge 23). As well as other causes such as economic need, this may have resulted from dissatisfaction with the traditional housewife role.

These numbers directly relate to a woman's choice to have children. The *Statistical Handbook on Women in America* offers fascinating data on childless women. These statistics include details on women with careers and an education. Among the 25- to 34-year-old age group, unmarried women, women who participate in the work force, and women with higher education are more likely to be childless. For example, in 1994, only 13.6% of women without a high school diploma remained childless. In contrast, 62.3% of women with graduate degrees are childless (Taeuber 33). And despite the public perception that not that many women pursue higher education, it is important to note that in 1990, the number of women enrolled in college surpassed the number of men by 1.6 million (Taeuber 296).

It has also been noted that the childless population is strictly limited to the white

upper-class (May 192). Childlessness is less common in Black and Hispanic groups, as well as in low socio-economic-status groups. Higher incomes and higher education, however, take prevalence over race in this matter. For example, Black women with a college education and higher incomes have similar childless rates as white women with similar circumstances. Thus, the racial differences begin to fade when class is considered. Also, childless individuals and couples tend to have full time jobs, liberal and feminist beliefs, as well as religious skepticism (May 192). Clearly, cultural and philosophical beliefs do affect the childless choice, though income and education also play a role.

Although these factors may not be the only ones involved in the childless trend, it is interesting to note their relation to child-bearing. Women have certainly attained more equality over the past century as they have developed more independence from men. Statistics clearly indicate that women now have more work and life opportunities than they did in the past and can pursue their own interests while fulfilling their careers.

Statistics are also useful by displaying trends and transitions throughout history. But the reasons—the personal convictions which lead to people's choices—cannot simply be defined by historical trends. Statistics provide numbers, but at times can lack explanations for these numbers. The challenge is for the researcher to make conclusions regarding the reasoning behind these statistics.

Records make clear that the transitioning female role is probably a factor which has led to childlessness. Childlessness, nevertheless, is a trend that has developed over centuries. It may be difficult to determine which factors play the most vital roles among the different factors involved. This topic is a very complex and personal one. To fully understand this research topic, one must travel into the hearts of minds of others. The reasoning behind a childless choice may be a sensitive and

intimate one. I am curious to see whether research methods such as surveys and interviews will better grasp the reality of this topic.

I am interested in all factors related to childlessness: to intensively study childlessness, I wish to investigate as many related factors as possible. Though the changing female role will be my main focus and the center of my thesis, I hope to consider other influences while conducting my research. As a result, my conclusions will not simply be limited to the effectiveness of female empowerment on childlessness. I may discover that this is only a small factor in comparison to other factors. In fact, I may even realize that female empowerment is not a cause of childlessness at all—I may learn that the growing childless trend is rather simply another factor that has led to female empowerment.

Of the many ways to consider this issue, I will struggle to narrow the focus of my topic, while at the same time attempting to be as thorough as possible. My research project is still a work in progress, and the scope of my research has been limited by time and resources. I plan to study this topic further by conducting my own original research through surveys and personal interviews. These instruments will study attitudes towards childlessness, female empowerment, and women's roles, in an attempt to attain insight on the validity of my hypothesis.

I plan to combine open-ended and close-ended survey methods, benefiting from the different advantages of both types of survey. I

will initially conduct open-ended surveys to gain a broad understanding of the childless choice, as well as current attitudes towards the female role. With these data gathered, I will distribute a close-ended survey, further investigating the causes of voluntary childlessness. This standardized data will be recorded and interpreted more easily. And lastly, I will conduct open-ended interviews to supplement my surveys. These interviews will be smaller in number, but more detailed in their investigation.

Though the childless population may be in the minority, this group is growing. At some point in our lives, we are all faced with the decision to have children: this topic relates to everyone. This study also investigates the tremendous consequences of female empowerment, which affect us all. Other contributory factors to childlessness, such as abortion rights, improvements in birth control, or transitions in the labor force have relevance to our lives, as well as the important issue of infertility. Although my topic does not involve involuntary childlessness, such individuals will still be included in certain statistics. Infertility is another important factor that cannot be ignored.

It is clear that a childless lifestyle is becoming less unusual. Nevertheless, childless individuals and couples are still suffering from a sense of isolation. By providing insight into this phenomenon, research studies such as this one may help the childless population find a voice and the rest of the world better understand and accept their decision.

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