

Causes of low birth rates



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Childless or Childfree?

Actress Katherine Hepburn said, “ If motherhood doesn’t interest you then don’t do it!” She didn’t, along with opera singer Maria Callas, Queen Elizabeth I, and Oscar winning actress Helen Mirren , recently portraying Queen Elizabeth II.

Melissa Dear, of the Family Planning Association, was recently quoted as saying that the falling birth rate was partly a reflection of the failure to provide women with adequate support. That may be so, but perhaps it is simpler than that. Perhaps more women want to have fun rather than have a baby. Not that babies can’t be fun some of the time, but really, what would you choose: worrying about ear infections, and wondering how to replace the front tyres on the car when you need to buy a miniature pair of winter boots which cost more than the ones you saw in your own size at Clarkes; or wondering about what to wear to your dinner party and where to go on holiday this year?

In the past women reaching their thirties with no sign of a child would automatically be at the receiving end of thick streams of sympathy for their plight. After all, don’t all women have a deep maternal drive, this instinct, this burning desire to procreate? To experience for the best part of a year, haemorrhoids, backache and the raging hormones of pregnancy followed by the undeniably painful effort required to pass an infant the size of a melon through an opening better suited to something four inches in diameter. Then there’s the post pregnancy weight gain, possible occasional urine

incontinence that means avoiding sneezing or coughing in public, and in private, your love life goes down the pan.

Population forecasts suggest that of those women who are of childbearing age now, one in five may never have children. Some proportion of that will be due to infertility, but there will also be those women who make the choice not to have children. Some people might think this is an abnormal decision based on an immature worldview. There will still be the knowing nods and, “You’ll change your mind later!” “You are not truly a woman until you have given birth to a child.”

Dr C Hakim, senior research fellow at the LSE said that researchers had been unable to account for the growing number of childfree women, finding no parallel with infertility statistics. Her research showed that there are rising numbers of women choosing not to have children. The childless woman is not necessarily bewailing her fate.

Dr Hakim points out that around 10% of women reach the age of 45 with no children. She says: ‘The whole idea of the childfree lifestyle is beginning to be recognised by the media. Private feelings are being legitimised and people are beginning to feel that they are not being deviant in some way.’

That “deviant” behaviour was addressed in a Radio 4 Woman’s Hour Phone-In, with women discussing problems in the workplace as childfree employees. You might think that it’s the mothers that have all the problems, considering they are the ones who have to work flexi hours, coming in late after the school run and having to rush off at the end of the school day. They are tied to school holidays, and are at the mercy of childminders in term

time. However, the childfree women phoning in were generally quite resentful of the fact that they could not take advantage of later mornings as they had to cover the time the mums were not there.

Victoria, a nurse, said, " I have covered for maternity leave, Christmas and all the other times that working mothers assumed was their right to be at home. I don't get any tax relief or benefits for not having children, and I would like a little recognition now and then."

20% of the adult female population in Britain are childfree, and Sarah from Leatherhead felt that she was treated as " a less useful citizen, despite holding down a demanding job" because she had no children. She said she was made to feel inferior and less important than the women with children, despite the fact that she often worked longer hours and seldom took time off.

Why would childfree women would want to go on holiday in the summer with all those child-filled families? Surely the whole point is not to be around children? Apparently not. Childfree women do not necessarily dislike children; it is simply parenthood they are rejecting, and being a parent certainly is linked with disrupted lives and financial insecurity.

Those women who do decide to have children are having them later. In 2005 the average age at which women had their first child was 27. 3 years, with the highest rate of fertility being in their early 30s. Despite the rise in teenage pregnancies which alters the average, bringing it down, this is still a rise of almost 4 years since the 1970s. Clearly women are choosing to stay

childfree for longer, concentrating on careers or travel, or just organising their lives before giving up their independence.

Even then, it's not all plain sailing! Julia Roberts, 39, actress and mother of 2-year-old twins reportedly said " I didn't realise that I would get no sleep at all. I am so sleep deprived I can't even stand, I have to sit down all the time."

Could it be that some women who have children are ever so slightly jealous of their carefree childfree sisters?

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