

# A modern option — childless by choice

Pure selfishness or a courageous decision? Choosing not to have children is an option more people are taking, despite the tremendous pressures — biological and social — to reproduce. Weekend Magazine writer **BERWYN LEWIS**, author of a new book *No Children by Choice*, investigates the reasons men and women give for not becoming parents

THE days when two people fell in love, got married and then the babies came along are well and truly over. Since the advent of modern contraceptive methods, the choice has generally been when to have the babies. Now statistics show that an increasing number of people are making a far more important decision — whether to have children at all.

Despite the popular notion that reluctant parents are motivated by greed, selfishness and consumer gratification, most see it as a choice which challenges society's pro-natalist imperative and that takes immense courage and a sense of personal security.

The extent to which parenting priorities have changed is demonstrated by two surveys conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies:

Dr Peter McDonald, deputy director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, says the reasons for not having children have changed.

"Women's lives no longer revolve around childbearing and rearing as had been the case. There have been massive changes in the labour force participation rates for women over the post-war years. Once a very small proportion were employed in work outside the home. Now it is more than 50 per cent," he said.

For many women the choice is determined by an accretion of factors involving timing and trust in oneself, one's relationship with a partner and one's parenting ability which, when it is not appropriated by textbooks, can be an area of complete ignorance for those who have had little contact with children.

"Having a child, being a mother to another human being, is the most important choice you make or don't make. It's an immensely courageous decision not to have children. It can't be made lightly. It's a monster," said Robyn Davidson, author of the best-selling book *Tracks* and script-writer of the prize-winning ABC-TV drama *Mail Order Bride*.

"The idea of sharing a life with a man, with or without a child, is so fraught with problems, dangers and risks of falling into patterns. You start to live out an archetype rather than pushing ahead and pushing away at boundaries, trying to find new ways of being in the world. Trying to do that with a child, for me, would have been impossible," said Davidson.

For Eric Hansen, freelance journalist and travel writer from San Francisco, the parenting issue caused the breakup of a long-standing relationship.

"I was put on the line. I was presented with the choice of either having a child or discontinuing the relationship. I

didn't make up the rules. I had to agree or leave. I would have preferred to stay and not have a child but that was not satisfactory to my partner. We'd been living together for four years. Within a year of separating she had found someone else, married, become pregnant and had a child. I was devastated," said Hansen.

But is having children ever really a choice?

Contraception has liberated men and women from unwanted pregnancies and created more options for women but it seems nothing can change or undermine the passion to reproduce. For those who acknowledge that there is a choice there are no half answers. One is either a parent or one is not. For many it is not a matter of choice. Some pregnancies are unwanted while other people go to desperate lengths to overcome infertility.

According to Dr McDonald, statistics show a distinct move since the mid-1970s towards delaying the birth of the first child and an increase in the number of singles and couples opting for non-parenting as a permanent lifestyle.

## “Women's lives no longer revolve around childbearing and rearing”

The choice is complicated by the idea that people who choose not to have children must dislike them — just as it is assumed that all those who have them respect and cherish them.

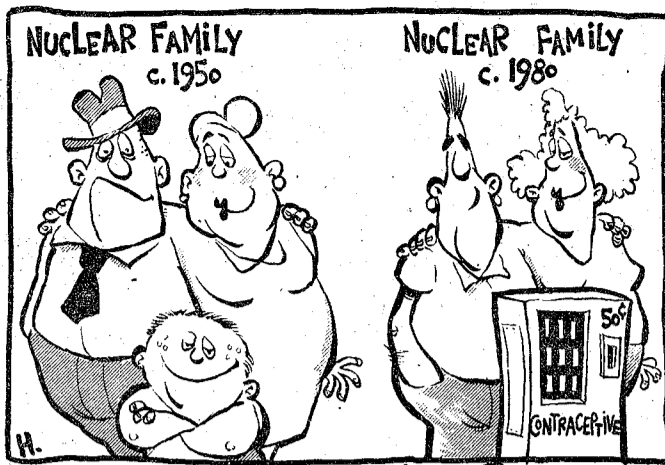
A disinclination, if not a downright aversion, to producing children leaves many women with a sense of guilt about their empty womb.

Said Barbara Hoyland, tutor and lecturer at the South Australian Institute of Technology, Adelaide: "At one stage I doubted whether I actually liked children and that seemed to me like a slightly embarrassing dark secret, a shameful thing. I found babies quite disgusting. I didn't want anything to do with them. I had the suspicion that there was something wrong with me. I felt guilty. Why can't I find it wonderful watching a one-year-old eating a soft-boiled egg?"

"Children's literature is absolutely monolithic in its portrayal of women. They are, by definition, mothers. The images are absolutely appalling. Mother with baby at ankle and one on the hip... This has fed my beliefs about not wanting to fit into that mothering stereotype.

"The suggestion that you're not a complete woman until you've reproduced makes me so angry! As if you're some kind of animated pod.

"I hate that family wilderness. I know enough women



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who are trapped with kids, a baby in arms, a toddler, a stroller, struggling to get on a bus with shopping. That miserable existence. Having no one to talk to in an abstract fashion. They're intelligent women! They're stultified!"

The 1983 Australian Family Research Conference paper presented by Dr McDonald demonstrated connections between post-school education and the choice to have or not to have children.

"Seventeen per cent of women with post-school education were childless by choice compared with 51 per cent who had university degrees," quoted McDonald. And there are, he pointed out, influences on this choice which span generations.

"Forty-two per cent of women with tertiary education fathers were childless by choice compared with 23 per cent whose fathers were not."

Wendy McCarthy, former executive officer of the Australian Federation of Family Planning Associations, agrees that "there are correlations between the education of girls and women and the number of children they have".

"For instance, in Egypt and Pakistan, with the increase in educational opportunities there is a definite decrease in the number of children," she said.

Does this mean that the impulse to be a parent can be rationalised by those with the benefit of a better education and increased options and that it is therefore class-related? How does one rationalise this highly charged question with its overlays of instinct,

mother in terms of affordable and accessible childcare, social isolation and, for many, particularly the single parent, poverty. The extent to which motherhood is regarded as low status is indicated by a study by the NSW Council of Social Services in 1985 which identified the group most vulnerable to poverty as single parents, 90 per cent of whom are mothers.

In non-industrialised societies, having children is still regarded as high status, an investment — providing labour and a form of insurance for ageing parents.

Mothers of Western children are usually required to forgo financial and personal independence (either temporarily or permanently) in observance of the credo that motherhood is its own reward, with a stacked investment in the emotional as opposed to the practical.

But if the emotional return is not sufficiently rewarding, why have children?

"Having a baby might be fascinating at times but it is not good company. Many women get resentful of their husbands, whose lives have changed very little. They feel disillusioned and acutely aware that they have made major sacrifices," said Dr Edith Weisberg, medical director, Family Planning Association of NSW.

"For many parents-to-be a prevailing sense of inadequacy is a deterrent," Dr Weisberg points out. "There is no such thing as perfect parenting. The standards change every few years. For my generation the programming, 'get married, have kids,' was almost enviable in its inevitability. We didn't go through all that agonising which has mostly been created by experts on what one should and shouldn't do."

Perfect parenting, as ordained by the experts, is an area as over-worked as the areas of real support for parents are overlooked.

Wendy McCarthy points out that "the parenting ethic as extolled by the media is mostly viewed as an 'individual, self-fulfilling whimsy' which neglects the fact that children and parents (no matter how much they love being at home with each other) need to get away from their private, social isolation and into the world of people.

"There is nothing built into the fabric of our society which rewards people for having children, that respects and looks after their needs whether they are transport, education or childcare services in the workplace, restaurants or entertainment centres," said McCarthy.

"Eighty five per cent of Australians are urbanised and yet there are so few community provisions for children. You are expected to have children on your own and make it all work within the four walls of your home. If you ask for help you're a failure. You're meant to privatise what is essentially a fundamental social and community function, the production of the next generation.

"Childcare is a political issue yet it's still primarily seen as the work of women. That's one of the reasons why so many women are choosing not to be mothers," said McCarthy.

NO CHILDREN BY CHOICE, by Berwyn Lewis, is published by Penguin, \$9.95.