

Delayed Motherhood and the Body Beautiful

There are some who say children rob you of your youth. Perhaps this belief is even influencing the trend of Western women putting off having kids till later in life. Though the delaying of motherhood is explained by demographers in various other ways, it could also betray a kind of pathology in women, persuading them to expend their youth before their children can.

That may sound like a bleak estimation of humankind. But isn't this mindset what people—men and women—advertently practice when they follow the popular logic “you’ve got to live a little before you settle down with a family?”

A [2015 report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#) revealed the average age an Australian woman has her first child is now 30, with more than one in ten women having their first child aged 35 or older. The number of women having their first child over the age of 30 has increased from 23 percent in 1991 to 43 percent in 2011. This is [just a variation on a theme](#) in Western countries: women are having fewer children and later in life.

Interestingly, the AIHW report stated that participants attributed this delay to a lack of a suitable partner rather than a prioritization of careers— which might seem the obvious explanation for modern women. Other things influence this demographic shift too. Many analysts still point to the global financial crisis of 2007-2008 as a key reason for decreasing birth rates.

Another factor is the pressure from environmentalists to reduce population, which some couples say is enough to dissuade them from having as many children as they would

otherwise want. The [Voluntary Human Extinction Movement](#) is one such organization seeking to make people think twice about having children.

But these factors aren't the whole story. The trend is ubiquitous in the West, and extends to places [like South Korea](#) where birth rates have reached an all-time low. Globally, the stakes are high and so is the urgency to find any and every explanation of this continuing phenomenon.

If researchers really want to see the big picture, the idea that children rob you of your youth should be investigated. As Western society continues to foster a cult of the body, women are going to feel less free to give over their bodies to the state of pregnancy.

Stretch marks, weight gain and a popped belly button are becoming more drastic identity infringements. And, to the degree her partner also subscribes to the body cult, a woman may fear that he will find her changed body less sexually desirable. This could jeopardize their relationship, she might think, ignoring the obvious implication – that this proves the relationship fundamentally superficial in the first place.

Of course, not everyone living in a Western country falls into this trap, but the cultural aspect of aspiring to bodily perfection is very likely to be playing its own part in the crisis of fertility, and demographers should pay it pay more attention.

Women who delay children for this specific reason are disadvantaging the children they eventually do have in a specific way.

Firstly, these children get to spend less time with their mothers than they otherwise could have, perhaps even decades worth of time. A woman who puts off having children till she's 30 or 40 deprives them of years' worth of her loving presence and her maternal guidance later in life.

Yes, life expectancy is on the rise too, so one could argue that this negates the effect of delayed motherhood. Even so, children will remember their mother primarily as a middle-aged or old woman, not one who in their living memory was once young, vivacious and vibrant.

I'm not an "age-ist". Some women have children later in life because of circumstances beyond their control. Some would have heartily preferred to have their children earlier, perhaps for the very reasons already discussed. For them, too, it must be painful to witness their female counterparts who freely choose not to have children when they otherwise could.

There's a saying, "children keep you young." Perhaps, after all, they themselves provide the fountain of youth people are so desperately searching for in jars and bottles, yoga and green tea, while avoiding the elderly for their rude reminder of human finitude.

Women will surely have deep regret if they do not factor youthfulness into their consideration of the most suitable moment to become a mother. We should at least ask ourselves: Do children *rob parents* of their youth, or do they keep mum and dad young? Are we prepared to *rob the children* of our youth, and our presence during a larger portion of their lives?

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