



## Asserting family-size choice

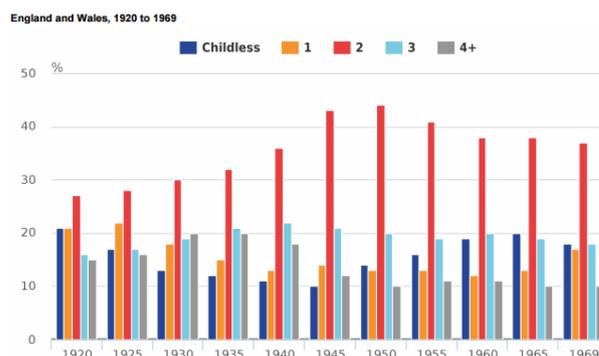
An increasing number of people are choosing to have smaller families, while many others decide to forego having children entirely. While the choice to remain childless remains subject to a lot of criticism, the topic of voluntary childlessness is increasingly up for debate.

In March 2016, a 30-year-old woman from London was granted the right to be sterilised following a four-year battle with the National Health Service (NHS).<sup>1</sup> Holly Brockwell’s long-fought victory was widely discussed in the media and she received numerous negative comments.

In this briefing, it will be argued that the negative reactions surrounding smaller families, especially childlessness, are irrational. The briefing will defend the right to choose one’s family size in various ways. First, acknowledged human rights allow people to choose their preferred family size. Second, possible regret is not a viable argument against childlessness. Third, the obligation to act responsibly often leads to the conclusion that childlessness or a small family are better choices. Consequently, any stigma surrounding small families and childlessness should be overcome.

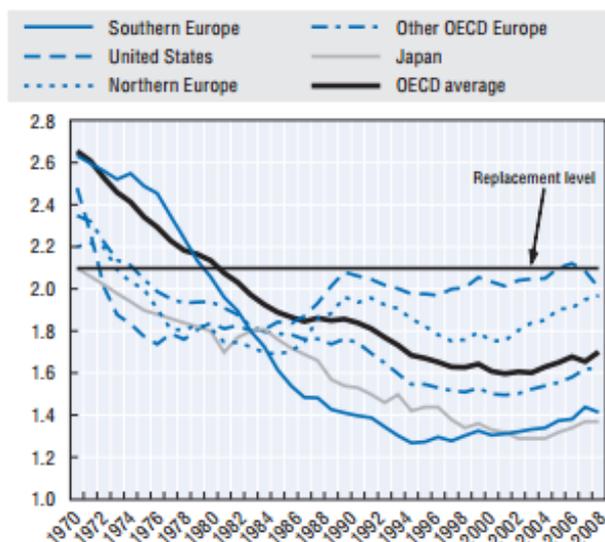
## Family size trends

Childlessness is on the rise. In England and Wales only one in nine women born in 1942 remained childless, but for women born in 1969 this had increased to one in five.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, average completed family size fell from 2.42 children per person for women born in 1935, to 1.91 for women born in 1969.<sup>3</sup> While childless women are included in these data, the graph shows that the proportion of families with one and two children increased for women born in 1969 compared to 1935, but that the proportion of families with three, four or more children have fallen in the same time period.



Source: ONS

This trend is not unique; fertility rates have declined throughout the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in the past couple of decades.<sup>4</sup> Postponement of childbirth, availability of contraceptives, higher education level and different priorities — buying a house, or focussing on a career, for example — are seen as causes for this development.<sup>5</sup>



Source: OECD

## Human rights

While smaller families and childlessness are increasingly common, the choice to forego having children is often criticised.<sup>6</sup> In spite of this, acknowledged human rights assert that women and men have the right to choose whether they want to have children, and if they do, how many.

Human rights are rights held by all people by virtue of their humanity. The concept has its roots in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century European thought, and is thus subjective, because not every culture accepts the same truths. However, the idea has been actively used in global politics since the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the then 56 members of the United Nations (UN) in 1948.<sup>8</sup> Following the adoption of the declaration, more than 20 additional treaties describing human rights have been ratified by the UN General Assembly, and most countries have signed the UDHR since.<sup>9</sup>

## Reproductive rights

Reproductive rights appeared for the first time in an official UN document in the 1966 Declaration on Population.<sup>10</sup> Ever since then, reproductive rights have been reformulated and elaborated. Today, it is accepted that reproductive rights are grounded in other human rights that are recognised in national laws and international human rights documents.

The current understanding of reproductive rights was established during the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo. The agreement that resulted from the ICPD has since been signed by 179 UN members.<sup>11</sup> The elaboration of the reproductive rights it contains could be split into six parts — four rights and two obligations:<sup>12</sup>

1. The right to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of children
2. The right to have the information to decide freely and responsibly
3. The right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health
4. The right to make decisions free of discrimination, coercion and violence
5. The obligation to take into account the needs of living and future children
6. The obligation to act responsibly towards the community

While some of the six sub-clauses can be interpreted in different ways, none explicitly denies individuals the choice to remain childless or to have small families. The meaning of ‘deciding responsibly’ is not clear-cut. Yet, attempts to define a responsible decision often appear to favour the choice to remain childless or have a small family.



## The right to bodily integrity

While no clause in the UDHR mentions the right to bodily integrity explicitly, articles 3, 4 and 5 refer to it implicitly.<sup>13</sup> The rights to liberty and security are expressed in article 3, for example.<sup>14</sup>

Various European charters, including the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, refer to the right directly.<sup>15</sup> The right to bodily integrity can be explained as the right to live without being physically harmed or harassed by others, and the right of self-determination of individuals over their own bodies.<sup>16</sup>

The right to bodily integrity is most commonly used to protect people against (sexual) assault — and unwanted pregnancy, in the case of women. No one has the right to force themselves onto another. Yet, arguably, self-determination can also be related to medical procedures. Coerced sterilization can rightfully be condemned on grounds that it denies an individual bodily self-determination, but denying voluntary sterilization can be criticized in the same way.

When the right to self-determination is accepted as part of the right to bodily integrity, it is accepted that no one but the person in question can determine whether a medical choice is right for them or not. Others may be consulted, but ultimately the choice is made by the person in

question. While medical procedures provided at public expense may have financial constraints, any argument interfering with the right to self-determination over one's own body denies the human right to bodily integrity.

## Regret

A fear of possible future regret was one of the reasons the NHS initially gave for refusing the sterilization of Holly Brockwell. She was deemed too young to make such a serious choice, as she might change her mind at some point following the procedure — a problem, given that it is irreversible.<sup>17</sup> While such reasoning could be interpreted as protective and in the interest of the patient, it can also be called condescending.

No one, after all, questions whether adult expectant parents could possibly come to regret the birth of their children. People may very well regret *not* having children, but if the regret results from their own choices, this is arguably preferable to external constraint. Similarly, it is no secret that there are parents who do regret having children.<sup>18</sup> In both cases a serious, irreversible choice has been made, and it makes no sense to judge the two cases differently.

## Acting responsibly

Increasingly, many people choose to have small families or to remain childless because they either do not believe they can offer a child a good life, or feel that children would not improve their own quality of life.

## Offering children a good life

Poverty is a big problem around the world. Not only is it more difficult for big families to escape

poverty, but also research conducted in the Philippines suggests that big families today face even greater poverty than they would have in the past. While the incidence of poverty for nine-member households fell from 59.9 to 57.3 per cent between 1985 and 2000, the incidence of poverty for four-member households fell from 36.4 to 23.8 per cent in the same time period. This means that the difference in poverty incidence widened.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, opting for a small family or a childless life would seem a responsible choice, while having many children would not.

Traditionally, large families have also been associated with poverty in the developed world. Nowadays, however, big families are increasingly associated with the rich. If you can afford to raise many children, you must be wealthy. Figures show that a significant rise of big families is visible among the top 1 to 1.5 per cent richest Americans, while the poorest families do not tend to have larger families than average.<sup>20</sup> The cost of raising a child in the UK until the age of 21 is estimated to be £231,843 in 2016 — more than the value of an average semi-detached house.<sup>21</sup> In London, the average costs of raising a child are even higher, at £253,638.<sup>22</sup> It is uncontroversial to say that children are a big expense.

The choice of having a child thus has severe economic consequences for parents. Not everyone may feel equipped to deal with that, and many may wish to adopt a lifestyle with a lower economic cost. An individual who refrains from having children when there are insufficient means to raise them acts very responsibly. From a national perspective, society should encourage citizens to consider whether or not they have the funds to raise a child. It has been predicted that, by 2020, 4.3 million children in the UK will be living in relative poverty.<sup>23</sup>

### *Child poverty*

Growing up in poverty is devastating for children. Not only does it affect their mental and physical health in the long term, it also affects their school results adversely.<sup>24,25</sup> As a result, children from deprived backgrounds are more likely to end up unemployed.<sup>26</sup>



Society also suffers as a result of this, because it is costly when adults cannot meet their full potential due to childhood poverty. In 2008, it was estimated that child poverty cost the UK government at least £25 billion a year.<sup>27</sup> The anticipated growth of child poverty will increase the financial burden on the Treasury still further. Of the children currently living in poverty in the UK, 35 per cent live in families with three or more children.<sup>28</sup> Child poverty is significantly more common in big families, which suggests that smaller families should be encouraged when aiming for the elimination of child poverty.

Extensive reflection before having children should thus be respected and promoted.

### Selfishness argument

One of the negative stereotypes with which childless individuals have been confronted is the claim that their choice is 'selfish'. It can, however, be more selfish to have children than not to have them. Choosing to have a child so that you have someone to love you, or someone to care for you in old age, could, for example, be labelled selfish.<sup>29</sup>

Someone can arguably only be called selfish when their actions benefit themselves but affect another adversely. When one chooses to remain childless, there is no victim who suffers from that choice. The potential child exists only as a future possibility, after all.<sup>30</sup> On top of that, there are plenty of individuals without children who could never be described as selfish. Many religious orders practise celibacy, for example, and in spite of their childlessness, people joining those orders are generally considered selfless.

Parents who choose to have only one child are also frequently criticised. Singletons supposedly miss out, and therefore it is said to be selfish to have only one child.<sup>31</sup> One can, however, question whether an only child is harmed as a result of its parent's choice. It is true that singletons do not have siblings, but there are so many other platforms where children can meet peers today. The existence of schools, school clubs, community clubs and playgrounds, as well as online fora, mean that socialising does not have to be restricted to the confines of the child's home. Similarly, the argument that an only child is more likely to be spoiled seems to rely more on parental choices than on the number of children those parents raise.<sup>32</sup> Studies also show that

children with one or no siblings perform better in education than children with multiple siblings.<sup>33</sup> This implies that choosing to have one child does not warrant the label of being selfish. Parents can make selfish choices when raising a child, but they can do so, or not, regardless of the number of children they choose to raise.



### Health

After a childhood during which she cared for a mentally ill mother, renowned feminist Gloria Steinem decided not to have children.<sup>34</sup> She is far from being the first person to choose to forego having children following a traumatic youth. Others may be reluctant to bear offspring due to personal health difficulties. Awareness of a condition that might be passed on to a child, and potentially burden it for life, might inspire that view.<sup>35</sup> The choice to remain childless, in this case, is based on concern for the well-being of the potential child, and could therefore be described as inherently unselfish.

Exposure to parental problems can be significantly traumatising for a child. Vulnerable children are at a greater risk of suffering from severe developmental problems and are more likely to become a victim of abuse and neglect.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, such children — once adult — might fear to burden a future child with their own

struggles, and deem that unfair to the potential child. The wish to protect a child from one's own fate, the desire not to expose children to one's own unresolved traumas, and the wish not to raise a child in a dysfunctional family, could also be described as far from selfish.<sup>37</sup>



### Overpopulation

Environmental and sustainability concerns are another reason for people to refrain from having children. Each additional life has a big impact on the environment. Actress and humanitarian Ashley Judd has commented:

*"I figured it was selfish for us to pour our resources into making our 'own' babies when those very resources and energy could not only help children already here, but through advocacy and service transform the world into a place where no child ever needs to be born into poverty and abuse again."<sup>38</sup>*

Global population size has grown rapidly from 2.5 billion in the 1950s to 7.4 billion in 2016.<sup>39,40</sup> This number is predicted to rise to 9 billion by 2050, with the majority of the increase expected to be in developing nations.<sup>41</sup> Population growth is accompanied by growing levels of accumulated waste, pollution, energy demands and resource scarcity.<sup>42,43,44</sup> All of these are not only devastating

for humans; they also damage our environment. The Earth is increasingly depleted, natural amenities are destroyed and wildlife is threatened with extinction.<sup>45</sup> Given these facts, it appears that caring for already-existing orphans rather than adding to the total population size is far from selfish. It improves the lives of children who did not choose to be parentless, and reduces the strain on the environment; thus it is not only unselfish, but also a sustainable choice.

### Interest and commitment

Parenting is time-consuming, and some people feel that they would not be able to prioritise their children sufficiently, or simply are not particularly motivated to bring up children. Oprah Winfrey has always stated that she desires to prioritise her career over everything else.<sup>46</sup> Dame Helen Mirren has openly expressed that motherhood is not of great interest to her.<sup>47</sup> Their lack of children does not detract from perceptions of them as highly successful individuals.

Whilst some may find such personal considerations selfish, it could be argued that they are not. There are many ways in which one can contribute meaningfully to the world. Many artists, politicians, thinkers and otherwise successful individuals throughout history were childless. Their significant contributions to society cannot be overlooked.<sup>48</sup>

When adults have children in spite of not wanting them, it is probable that the child is affected adversely by their ambivalent attitude. Similarly, parents with very time-consuming careers might not have enough time to devote to raising children. Comedian Chelsea Handler has stated that she does not want to have a child because she knows that the child would have to be raised by a nanny, due to the demands of her career.<sup>49</sup> It

can be argued that it would be selfish to have children when you cannot prioritise them. Consequently, acknowledging that your lifestyle is incompatible with parenthood would be a responsible choice.



## Conclusion

The trend to have small families, or to remain childless, is increasingly popular. In this briefing, it has been demonstrated that people making these choices are being very responsible, even though the contrary view is often argued for. The right to assert one's preferred family size is protected by acknowledged human rights, even though this is not always made explicit. Reproductive rights include obligations as well as rights; when

obligations are taken into consideration, it becomes obvious that choosing a smaller family, or remaining childless, are often the more responsible choice.

While those who choose to forego having children are often called selfish, no choice can truly be selfish when no one suffers directly from that choice. No actual child is involved when an adult chooses to stay childless. Most adults who choose voluntarily to remain childless do so after extensive reflection on their lives and on the state of the environment around them. Bearing in mind the fact that population growth has devastating consequences for the quality and sustainable existence of the environment, it cannot be argued that the choice to have a small family or to forego having children entirely is selfish. It should, rather, be commended.

Thus, rather than criticising childless individuals, or opposing the trend of small families, people should open their minds to the fact that life fulfilment does not depend on parenthood. The successes of many famous childless individuals, and the significance of their contributions to society, illustrate that perfectly.

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<sup>16</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. (n.d.). Retrieved May 13, 2016, from <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>

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