



## The feminist case for smaller families

More and more women are choosing to have smaller families.<sup>1</sup> Many are choosing to forego having children entirely. Such choices have been criticised in the past, but attitudes are changing as more people come to see the benefits of having smaller families or living a childfree life.

These benefits include that smaller families allow parents to invest more in their children, which can improve children's welfare and future prospects. Smaller families also reduce financial pressure on parents and free up leisure time, which can give parents a more relaxed lifestyle and more time to spend with their children. Moreover, having a smaller family is an environmentally sustainable choice, as population growth is a major contributor to environmental degradation and climate change.

There are also benefits to having smaller families from a feminist perspective. Having fewer children can, among other things, reduce maternal mortality, reduce female poverty and improve women's empowerment. This briefing will outline the feminist case for having smaller families.

### 1. Health

In the developing world, hundreds of women die or suffer serious injury every day from pregnancy or childbirth related complications.<sup>2</sup> Having smaller families would reduce this risk and allow more women to live healthier lives.

The health of girls is also positively affected by having smaller families, as mothers with fewer children can spend more time and resources on each child. That is why low fertility rates are often associated with lower mortality rates and better nutrition.<sup>3</sup>

### 2. Education and Work

Having smaller families allows women to spend less time pregnant or raising children, and this means that they have more free time, which can be used to complete secondary or further education and to work outside the home.



In developing countries, having smaller families also makes it more likely that parents will send their daughters to school. This is because, when household resources are strained, parents cannot always afford to send all their children to school. In many patriarchal societies, this often results in girls being kept at home to assist with domestic work.<sup>4</sup> If, however, parents have fewer children,

and thus more resources, they will be more likely to send their daughters to school.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, if a family has fewer children it will be less likely that they need daughters to stay at home to care for younger siblings.

Thus, having fewer children can help women and girls to achieve higher levels of education, and the more educated women are, the fewer children they have, as they become more aware of the benefits of having fewer children: benefits such as being able to pursue better career opportunities, having less financial pressure, and having more free time, which can be used to spend more time with the family they may already have.<sup>6</sup> This is why women who bear their first child at age 30 or older, and hence tend to have fewer children, have been found to be better off economically as well as in terms of well-being.<sup>7</sup>

Better education, paid work and greater participation in public life can increase women's status in society and put them on a more equal footing with men. This has significant implications for gender equality in society.



### 3. Gender equality

Many feminist theorists argue that the status of women as disadvantaged in relation to men in most, if not all, societies is sustained by the fact that domestic work, such as the raising of

children, is unpaid and not economically recognised by society, thus making women dependent on the earnings of men for their survival.<sup>8</sup>



By having fewer children, women are free to pursue education, to work and to participate in public life, thereby improving their status in society, earning a living and helping to break the bonds of dependence. This is why organizations like Marie Stopes International have found that even a small improvement in contraception access can have positive effects on gender equity, and why women's empowerment tends to be inversely correlated with fertility rates.<sup>9,10</sup>

### 4. Violence against women and girls (VAWG)

The positive effect of having smaller families on the status of women and girls in society, and on women's economic empowerment, plays an important role in the reduction of VAWG. By giving women the freedom to more easily enter the workforce and thus to earn a living, smaller families help women to have a greater possibility of exit from abusive relationships, and this can have positive effects on domestic violence.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Finance and poverty

Having large families can be a huge financial burden. For wealthier women, this can cause stress and put a strain on their quality of life and their ability to take care of any children they may already have. For poorer women, large families can mean living in poverty.

Moreover, women's empowerment in a given country as a result of having fewer children can have a large and positive effect on national poverty reduction. Improved human capital through better education and better health, combined with a larger market due to women working and earning money, can significantly bolster economic growth and help to reduce poverty.<sup>12</sup> This is particularly important for women as, according to the UN, they have a "heightened vulnerability to poverty", for various social and economic reasons, in comparison with men.<sup>13</sup>

## 6. Climate

Having fewer children is good for the environment because every additional person increases humanity's collective consumption, waste and carbon emissions. One study has found that an American who has one less child would save 9,441 tonnes of carbon.<sup>14</sup> This, too, can be considered a feminist issue, as women are disproportionately likely to suffer from the negative outcomes of climate change, such as storms, droughts and other severe weather patterns.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

There are many reasons from a feminist perspective to have smaller families. Reducing the number of children has far reaching consequences for women's health, education and finances, as well as helping to make society more gender equitable. By choosing to have smaller families, women can pursue better career opportunities, are likely to have more money and leisure time and can afford to invest more into the children that they may already have, as well as helping to protect the environment. For these reasons, the International Centre for Research on Women has found that the overall well-being of women and girls improves as the number of children they have falls.<sup>16</sup>



- 1 <http://www.icrw.org/taxonomy/term/134>
- 2 <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs348/en/>
- 3 <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/AS37/AS37.pdf>
- 4 [http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015\\_MDG\\_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20%28July%201%29.pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20%28July%201%29.pdf)
- 5 <http://planCanada.ca/Downloads/BIAAG/GirlReport/2012/BIAAG2012EnglishFullReport.pdf>
- 6 [http://www.icrw.org/sites/default/files/publications/ICRW\\_Fertility\\_Brief\\_040814.pdf](http://www.icrw.org/sites/default/files/publications/ICRW_Fertility_Brief_040814.pdf)
- 7 Hofferth, S. L. (1984). Long-term economic consequences for women of delayed childbearing and reduced family size. *Demography*, 21(2), 141-155.

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- 8 Federici, Silvia, "Wages Against Housework Publication", Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975
  - 9<https://mariestopes.org/sites/default/files/Time%20to%20Invest%20Summary.pdf>
  - 10<http://www.ucghj.universityofcalifornia.edu/docs/empowerment-and-fertility.pdf>
  - 11<http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Gender/Arango%20et%20al%202014.%20Interventions%20to%20Prevent%20or%20Reduce%20VAWG%20-%20A%20Systematic%20Review%20of%20Reviews.pdf>
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  - 15<http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/climate-change/climate-change-women-more-vulnerable-to-dangers-of-global-warming-than-men-say-leading-academics-a6717311.html>
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