

## CHILDLESS BY CHOICE: AN EMERGING TREND IN INDIAN FAMILY

**Dr. Vinita Lavania**

*Associate Professor*

*Department of Sociology*

*Govt. Girls College, Nathdwara*

*Email: tovinitalavania@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

*Every human being has an instinctive desire to become a parent and look after the offspring. Being a parent has many rewards and pleasures. Fecundity or the ability to produce children has a positive social value, especially in the traditional patriarchal Indian society. Procreation is socially desirable for religious and family reasons. Children ensure the continuation of the family lineage. Parenthood as a stage of life is characterized by the need to look after, to take care of, and to give both materially and in terms of affection. For a woman, it is also an expression of creativity and has both biological and psychological roots. But in changing India, an emerging trend in Indian families is being seen. Young, urban Indians are increasingly choosing not to have children, despite opposition from parents and in-laws, because they want to focus on work, travel and pursue their passions, and the stigma attached to the concept is slowly wearing off. This research paper is based on the Study of thirty voluntarily childless couples. The objectives of the study are to know about the basic reason behind the decision of not to have children, to know their economic, social and family background, and their Personal or past experiences with same-age group parents or to be parents or other family members. The study is carried out with the help of a structured interview schedule and through observation. The area of research covered Delhi NCR. It was found that a growing number of women are opting for lives without children. Having children is increasingly accepted as a personal choice and choosing not to have children is not necessarily seen as odd or deviant behavior.*

### **Keywords**

*Voluntarily Childlessness, Parenthood, Nuclear family, Extended family, Stigma, Fertile, self-fulfillment.*

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

**Received: 10.06.2023**

**Approved: 20.06.2023**

**Dr. Vinita Lavania,**

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EMERGING TREND IN INDIAN  
FAMILY*

*RJPSSs 2023, Vol. XLIX,  
No. 1, pp.08-13  
Article No.2*

Similarity Check: 0%

**Online available at:**

<https://anubooks.com/journal/research-journal-of-philosophy-amp-social-sciences>

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpsss.2023v49i01.02>

In India, marriage is an honored institution and the birth of a child is the climax of a happy union, the fulfillment of the cherished dream and desire of a married couple. Every human being has an instinctive desire to become a parent and look after the offspring. Being a parent has many rewards and pleasures. Parenthood as a stage of life is characterized by the need to look after, to take care of, and to give both materially and in terms of affection. For a woman, it is also an expression of creativity and has both biological and psychological roots. (Anand,1984).

Unfortunately in India, childlessness comes with the sad burden of social stigma which is particularly bitter in rural areas. In a culture that generally glorifies the institution of marriage and eventually motherhood, a childless woman is considered 'incomplete'. Often on television or in classic tales, childless women are portrayed in a negative light and majorly anti-family (Riessman, C. K.,2000) For most people, to live alone, even with a loving mate, is unthinkable.

Anurag Bishnoi, who runs a fertility and test tube baby center clinic in northern India, says, "*Women earn respect in India by fulfilling two responsibilities - bearing children and feeding the family*". There has been a 30-40% increase in couples aged above 45 seeking fertility treatment at his clinic since it began in 2000.

"The desire to have one's own child is paramount and overrides everything else despite the high risks associated with late births induced through fertility treatment," he says. Research strongly reveals disapproval from society towards childless women and grave consequences (Agrawal and Unisa ,2012)

But in changing India, an emerging trend in Indian families is being seen. Having children is increasingly accepted as a personal choice and choosing not to have children is not necessarily seen as odd or deviant behavior. Young, urban Indians are increasingly choosing not to have children, despite opposition from parents and in-laws, because they want to focus on work, travel and pursue their passions, and the stigma attached to the concept is slowly wearing off.

Shamsah Sonawalla, a consultant psychiatrist at Jaslok Hospital says. "*Time was, when not having a child was considered selfish, but not anymore. Couples have a lot to keep themselves busy and don't feel the need to 'fill the void' with a child. Also, now the 'self' is of prime importance. And not everybody wants to give up on that to have a little person to look after.*"

This research paper is based on the Study of thirty voluntarily childless couples. Childless couples refer to those couples who do not have children for various personal, biological, or conditional circumstances but Voluntarily childless couples are those who are fertile but bear no intentions of having children. (Kelly, M.2009).

Childlessness can be considered voluntary when a human being deliberately chooses not to have children. This type of childlessness is a choice and commitment to lead a life with the decision to not be a parent. Such Couples are identified by numerous terms such as intentionally childless, Voluntarily Childless or childless by choice. The objectives of the study are to know about the basic reason behind the decision of not to have children, to know their economic, social and family background, their Personal or past experiences, with same age group parents or to be parents or other family members. The study is carried out by using a structured interview schedule and through observation. All the conversations are recorded with the permission of the respondents. The area of research covered Delhi NCR which includes Gurugram, Faridabad, Ghaziabad and NOIDA .

Traditionally, motherhood is considered to be the most fulfilling aspect of a woman's life, but freedom, education and economic independence open up horizons for women to see that there are many more ways of finding meaning and purpose in life. Although a challenging process, childless women make efforts to strengthen themselves against stigma. The reasons for choosing not to have children, are many. Numerous arguments are known to play a role in structuring the decision to remain childless.

Some striking observations and responses are the eyeopeners in this study, Although Most of the voluntarily childless couples agree that there is still shame, stigma, awkwardness or silence around the issue of remaining childless, even then they have many good reasons to remain childless by choice.

The biggest advantage of remaining childless is freedom. Couples without children don't have to find babysitters or daycare. They are free to go out to dinner, dance or to the movies without worrying about the little ones.

An economically middle-class childless by-choice couple stated, "*Raising children is expensive. Childless couples are often better off financially than their counterparts. Having a child is a life-long responsibility and you have to put your child's needs before your own*". An other couples admit to not wanting to go through the pains of parenthood, from changing diapers to running around for school and college admission for the child's education.

One respondent belonging to a nuclear family, stated "*I want the freedom to work on myself. I want to learn new things, in my opinion, motherhood is like a form of bondage, in that there is so much responsibility, guilt and emotion that you are in danger of losing your logical self*". Couples feel that they are able to wake up at the *last possible second* in the mornings because they only have to get themselves ready for the day. "*We can take a trip to an adults-only places whenever we*

*plan. We can decide to go wherever we want with only the limitation of vacation time and funds to get there".* The same goes for a last moment trip to the movies or out on the town. One of the respondents stated, *"Right now I can decide to pack my bags and go away for the weekend, or unwind after a hard day's work with friends, without having to worry about school, homework or exams; without feeling guilty about doing what I want for myself."*

Some childless couples responded that Couples who don't have children have more time to devote to each other. This helps us get closer. When they watch the exhausting and demanding aspects of parenting their friends are going through, they decide just can't put themselves through that.

Even today, children are to be looked upon as a blessing, not an inconvenience and botheration. Children are a reward from God. On the other side, the socio-cultural milieu of India is undergoing change at a tremendous pace, leaving fundamental alterations in family structure. The counterargument used to be, that children would offer support in old age. As families become more nuclear and scatter far and wide, there is a growing realization that this cannot be a deciding factor to have a child. The whole issue, particularly in the last decade or so, has emerged may be because, Indian society moves towards nuclear families, where the decision to have children or not is made by the couple and not by the whole family. Everyone should have a reason to have a child. A child should not just 'happen' to you because that's the way you have known things to 'happen'. (Suchismita, D.2015)

In a report published by The Hindustan Times, family counselor Gauri Dange was quoted to say *"As we move towards a more individualistic society, with more nuclear families, the decision to have children is no longer made by the extended family, but by the couple. In the past few years, what it takes to raise a child has been defined, and there are enough women who just don't want to do it."* (Manimanjari S.2016)

Some of the couples argue that, *"We are lucky enough , No dirty diapers to change. No nighttime sickness to clean up"*. Some of them were driven by concerns about the ecology and cultural environment, put off by high levels of pollution, consumption, materialism and crime. They do not want to bring another human into this mess. another factor was the rising incidence of crimes against children. *"We can't imagine having to worry all the time that our children might not feel safe"*.

A growing number of women are opting for lives without children, despite opposition from parents and in-laws, because they want to focus on work, travel and pursuing their passions. A respondent feel *" lots of adults around me seemed terribly*

*unhappy with their spouses and their children. I heard so many complaints about loss of personal freedom and choices... I couldn't understand why people put themselves through such hell if they felt this way." I did marry, but I and my partner chose not to have children.* However, women in urban India are increasingly exercising the choice to not have a child. It was also found that a woman does not feel bad if she herself has not given birth to a child, which has made her an incomplete womanhood. and according to some of them, parenthood may be joyous, but it's also a big long-term responsibility. It is mostly the women instead of the husbands who have to bear the brunt of discontent from family members and friends(Indrani M.2015).

When asked to the respondents have any contrary feelings about their decision they accept it as a bitter truth. One of the respondents confessed that she sometimes feels insecure when asked about her views on growing old without children. She realizes the feeling of an unknown fear of lack of support and cares when older. Some Couples without kids often feel they are misfits among their friends who have children. They find it difficult to maintain relationships with each other. The community in general also has a tendency to look at childless couples as abnormal. As seen in a study of southern India childless couples express a sense of isolation from friends, family, neighbors, and acquaintances. Childless women, especially, believe that they are viewed negatively on various levels – selfish, abnormal, immature, self-indulgent, materialistic, unfortunate, unnatural, unhappily married, undesirable, individualistic, irresponsible, maladjusted, and child-haters. (Ram,B. 2012).

In the conversation some of the couples accepted that There is not that level of love and affection that only parents can feel for their children, also there is a fear that they will regret this decision one day. An emotional response was also reported, *"There are no pulls at my heartstrings when that first cry, that first word or that first step happen"*. According to a couple, *"The most obvious disadvantage of being childless is that you don't have a little one to love, raise and influence.* For some couples, this is a big part of living, and the thought of missing out is almost unbearable though it is better to bear it.

In developing countries like India, the idea childless by choice is a new concept and has barely been explored or talked about. Freedom from childcare responsibilities, the opportunity for self-fulfillment, spontaneous mobility, a more satisfactory marital relationship, career preferences, monetary advantages, freedom from the pains of parenthood and their past or present experience are the few reasons, behind the decision to not have a child. Although sometimes they feel fear about their decision yet also found child rearing a big long-term responsibility.

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