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FEATURES

How millennials learned to dread motherhood

To our generation, being a mom looks thankless, exhausting, and lonely. Can we change the story?

By Rachel M. Cohen | @rmc031 | rachel.cohen@voxmedia.com | Dec 4, 2023, 6:00am EST

Illustrations by Eleanor Davis for Vox



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Rachel M. Cohen is a senior reporter for Vox covering social policy. She focuses on housing, schools, labor, criminal justice, and abortion rights, and has been reporting on these issues for more than a decade.

I had been seeing my boyfriend for about a year, and though things were going well, we never talked about our feelings on having children. I'm aware of the dating advice that says you're supposed to broach that topic early on, but I didn't know what I wanted, and I didn't feel ready to talk about that fact.

That is, until *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, and I could no longer pretend that *Roe's* gutting didn't have real implications for us, or at least for me. So one night in the summer of 2022, I finally asked him where his head was at.

He looked surprised, considering the question. "I think I've always wanted to be a father," he said slowly, adding, "That doesn't mean it's a deal breaker, though."

It was as diplomatic an answer as I could have hoped for — clear, honest, and with no ultimatum attached. Still, I felt nervous and even a bit lonely, because I am not someone who has dreamed of being a mother; I've never particularly liked babysitting or even being around little kids.

I'm not alone in struggling with the prospect of motherhood. Birthrates in America **have declined** across **racial and ethnic groups** over the past 15 years, decreases driven not only by people having fewer children but also by those waiting to have any children at all, many deeply torn about the idea. The animated **Fencesitter Reddit** stirs daily with prospective parents stressed over what they really want. One of the **most viral TikTok videos** last year, with millions of views and some 800,000 likes, is known simply as "**The List**," featuring hundreds of reasons to not have children. (Reasons included: urinary tract infections during and after pregnancy, back pain, nosebleeds, and #89, "could be the most miserable experience of your life.")

Uncertainty is normal. Becoming a parent is a life-changing decision, after all. But this moment is unlike any women have faced before. Today, the question of whether to have kids generates anxiety far more intense than your garden-variety ambivalence. For too many, it inspires dread.

I know some women who have decided to forgo motherhood altogether — not out of an empowered certainty that they want to remain child-free, but because the alternative seems impossibly daunting. Others are **still choosing** motherhood, but with profound apprehension that it will require them to sacrifice everything that brings them pleasure.

Meanwhile, the very idea of becoming a parent has grown more politically fraught. Republican politicians are doubling down on explicit endorsements of childbearing, the kind that Democrats increasingly see as at odds with reproductive freedom and valuing families of all kinds.

On top of this, there is the well-documented aversion many millennials **feel about making any sort of commitment**, so conditioned are we to leave our personal and professional options open. One need not squint to see the connections to having kids — it's the ultimate pledge, more enduring even than many marriages.

Does this pressure to stay nimble and untethered explain millennial mom dread? It certainly offers some insight. Yet clearly,

Why I reported this story

I'm Rachel Cohen, and I have been covering policy issues around **women, families, and the economy** for the past decade, though lately the topics have grown more personal for me, as a young millennial weighing my own choices.

For the past 12 months, I've been interviewing historians, sociologists, journalists, cultural critics, activists, and parents about the changing discourse on American motherhood and what those changes mean for prospective parents.

something more is going on. How to explain why, in **survey after survey**, it is women with the most financial resources, and the highest levels of education, who report the most stress and unhappiness with motherhood? We hear often that the US is the **least family-friendly country** in the industrialized world, but American women who describe the most dissatisfaction are also those most likely to work in jobs that *do* offer maternity leave, paid sick days, and remote-work flexibility. They're most likely to have decent health insurance and the least likely to be raising a child on their own. Understanding what's driving these feelings might be key to changing it — for me and millions of others.



As I let the conversation with my boyfriend simmer, I imagined raising a child together and felt surprised by how nice the thought felt. Though I still worried that I lacked a maternal instinct, I was overcome with a warm certainty that my partner would make a great dad. Starting a family also seemed intriguing amid the post-pandemic recognition that a devotion to work is definitely not what our short lives are all about.

It didn't take long for my fuzzy feelings to fade. My boyfriend may have been excited, but we all know men have less to lose. For at least the last decade, women my age have absorbed cultural messaging that motherhood is thankless and depleting, straining careers, health, and friendships, and destroying sex lives. Today, it's genuinely difficult to find mainstream portrayals of moms who are not stressed to the brink, depressed, isolated, or increasingly resentful.

In 2014, the heroine of Jenny Offill's novel *Department of Speculation* drew praise for presenting "**an unflinching**" and "**more honest**" portrait of modern motherhood, while author Sheila Heti made waves in 2018 with her bestselling *Motherhood*, narrated by a 36-year-old woman who fixates on the boredom and unhappiness of moms around her. "I feel like a draft dodger from the army in which so many of my friends are serving," Heti's protagonist muses.

Such portrayals, often written by and about well-off, straight white women, are now more commonplace. When Taffy Brodesser-Akner's 2019 novel *Fleishman Is in Trouble* was made into a popular Hulu miniseries, critics noted **the deep resonance** women felt for the show's two leading moms. ("*Fleishman Is in Trouble* Knows Motherhood Is a Drag," read one **New York** magazine headline.) Meanwhile, Olivia Colman received an Oscar nomination for her performance in the 2021 film *Lost Daughter*, playing a professor who abandons her kids when

the weight of motherhood overwhelms her. (Vulture later dubbed that year “**the year of sad moms at the movies.**”)

Or survey recent titles of mainstream nonfiction on the topic: ***Mom Rage: The Everyday Crisis of Modern Motherhood***; ***Screaming on the Inside: The Unsustainability of American Motherhood***; ***Ordinary Insanity: Fear and the Silent Crisis of Motherhood in America***; ***All the Rage: Mothers, Fathers, and the Myth of Equal Partnership***. (These are also almost always written by white, middle-class authors.) And then there are the anxiety-inducing news stories, like “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” (2012), “The Costs of Motherhood Are Rising, and Catching Women Off Guard” (2018), “Mothers All Over Are Losing It” (2021), and, of course, “These Mothers Were Exhausted, So They Met on a Field to Scream” (2022).

Should we stumble across moms on Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok who *do* seem to be enjoying the experience of child-rearing, we’re taught to be very, very suspicious. Assume they’re “**pitchwomen.**” Assume they’re ridiculously wealthy. Assume, as Times columnist Jessica Grose put it, that they’re mostly peddling “**pernicious expectations.**”

Like so many women, I fervently consume this content, wanting both to set realistic expectations for myself and to learn in solidarity with those who are already moms.

College-educated millennial women considering motherhood — and a growing number from Gen Z too — are now so well-versed in the statistics of modern maternal inequity that we can recite them as if we’d already experienced them ourselves. We can speak authoritatively about the burden of “**the mental load**” in heterosexual relationships, the chilling **costs of child care**, the staggering **maternal mortality rates** for Black women. We can tell you that women spend twice as much time as men on average doing household chores after kids enter the picture, that marriages with kids tend to suffer. We’re so informed, frankly, that we find ourselves feeling less like empowered adults than like grimacing fortune-tellers peering into a crystal ball.

Previous generations “did not experience the same vocal outward world that we’re living in today where everybody is telling you it’s almost crazy for you to have children,” said Sherisa de Groot, founder of **Raising Mothers**, a literary group focused on parents of color. “That it’s selfish for you to have children. That it’s almost, like, a morally wrong thing to do at this point, because look at the hell basket we’re living in.”

In her book ***Mother Brain***, journalist Chelsea Conaboy describes experts who long concealed challenging information from pregnant people and new moms to “protect” them. In some ways, we’re in the midst of a backlash to an earlier period that was *too* saccharine, *too* paternalistic.

It’s not like we want to go back to the days when motherhood was sanitized, when the public heard virtually nothing about postpartum depression or **motherhood penalties** at work. Or when women bore challenges in silence, never having the support that comes from bonding over shared struggle. Still, it is hard to shake the feeling that all these “honest and unflinching” portrayals are driving people like me away from having kids at all. Is it even possible anymore to find perspectives that are both credible and bright?



This year, I stumbled across a **New York Times headline** that fit squarely into the “grim motherhood” genre: “How Parenting Today Is Different, and Harder.” Using a **new national Pew survey**, the article reported that two-thirds of parents say parenting is harder than they expected, including one-third of mothers who say it’s a lot harder.

But when I went to see **the new Pew survey** for myself, it told a story fairly distinct from the one in the Times. Eighty percent of respondents actually described parenting as enjoyable all or most of the time, while 82 percent said it was rewarding all or most of the time. Low-income parents, and those who are Black or Hispanic, were most likely to rate it highly, but happiness crossed all racial and economic lines. Despite ubiquitous depictions of moms on the verge of collapse, only a third said parenting was stressful all or most of the time. The data was a far cry from a miserable portrait.

The more I scoured elsewhere, the more I discovered positive reasoning in favor of starting a family — stories that are just as important for prospective parents to have as they consider their options. This more shrouded information is fascinating, because millennial mom dread stems in part from feeling like things won’t work out.

Research, like the Pew survey, can be framed in markedly different ways. For example, in 2021, **researchers concluded** that over time, the mental health of mothers drops below that of women who don’t have children. That’s a dispiriting finding, but the same study *also* concluded that both mothers and non-mothers overall “show evidence of good mental health.” Studies comparing happiness of parents and non-parents also **yield wildly different**

results, because how we think about life satisfaction and daily well-being varies. Parenting during Covid-19 was extremely tough, for example, but it's also true that mothers reported **more satisfaction** with their lives during the pandemic than childless women of the same age.

As Jennifer Senior notes in her book *All Joy and No Fun*, “the idea that children give us structure, purpose, and stronger bonds to the world around us doesn't always show up in social science data” because of how researchers craft questions. Senior cites one example: Many studies find single mothers, who typically have custody of their kids, are less happy than single fathers, but when one sociologist started asking about overall life purpose and meaning rather than just daily mood, parents with custody reported less depression than parents without.

Or take the division of household labor, often cited as a leading source for mom rage. Women partnered with men manage a disproportionate share of housework and child care on average, but averages can mask that social change *is* happening. The best surveys we have today show that **roughly 20 percent** of American parents report being in genuinely egalitarian partnerships, and a majority of young people report strong **egalitarian preferences** around dividing work and family duties.

“I think of it as the ‘path of most resistance,’” sociologist Kathleen Gerson told me, in that it takes two people actively committed to equal partnerships, since our society is not designed to easily support them. Equitable arrangements are not a given, but they're possible, and trending upward as hundreds of thousands of couples say they're successfully forging one right now.

There's also emerging neuroscience that suggests that the angst I felt about lacking a “maternal instinct” is **largely pseudoscientific sexism**, a fiction that helps fuel discrimination against same-sex couples, cements the idea that men are secondary to a child's development, and makes women who can't conceive naturally feel inferior.

Parenting, neuroscientists say and our culture is often slow to echo, is a mix of skills and behaviors that can be learned and trained like any other. Look no further than children raised by single fathers, adoptive parents, gay male parents, and transgender parents. As Conaboy writes in her book, “Studies of fathers, including nonbiological fathers in same-sex couples, have found that the brains of men who are regularly engaged in caring for their children change in ways that are strikingly similar to gestational mothers.” That's encouraging for those of us concerned that we might have been born without some essential mom gene. Good parenting is possible for anyone who's willing to learn.

The positive messages young women hear today about starting families come almost exclusively from the right. Democrats haven't abandoned pro-family messages wholesale, but the rhetoric they use to muster support for family policies nearly always emphasizes crisis and precarity, not strength, stability, or happiness. “The way to get people to care, to get people to have the most attention, is to frame things as ‘people will die,’ or ‘this is an emergency,’” one progressive lawmaker from Minnesota told me. “You can't just say it would improve people's lives.”

Moreover, in response to attacks on abortion rights, most progressive politicians, writers, and activists stress the real risks of pregnancy and the toll of parenting that no one should be forced to experience against their will, rather than any upsides to having children. This makes sense, but the result is that for many, the very act of becoming pregnant sounds harrowing, and giving birth less a choice than a potential punishment.

Cultural conservatives have been banging their own drum, though with a vastly different message: that the sexual revolution was a mistake, that non-religious people aren't happier in modern society, that women aren't actually faring better with all this romantic and professional choice.

*WE KNOW THE VALUE OF
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The time before birth control, before liberalized divorce laws, before women could pursue work outside the home, is not one most women are nostalgic for. But we *are* trying to figure out the ingredients to a meaningful life. We know the value of independence and also long for a bit more interdependence.

Enter “tradwives” — short for “traditional wives” — a trend that picked up steam over the last half-decade, mostly on TikTok and Instagram, which depicts young moms expressing joy and contentment in caring for kids, a husband, and a house. Tradwives, who are mostly though not exclusively white, extol the safety of their contained worlds and portray liberal, professionally driven women as pitiful and lost. Of note are their almost leftist-sounding critiques of work and hustle culture. As Zoe Hu **writes in Dissent**, “The twist that makes tradlife a phenomenon of our times is that it also includes earnest criticisms of life under capitalism.”

It's not difficult to reject the tradwife, with her insistence that female dependency is the ideal social arrangement. Still, there's something nice about these women's rather untortured commitment to the people they love. It's refreshing to see people *enjoying* caring for their family — even if, yes, we ought to remain vigilant about ulterior motives.

If the seeming winsomeness of “tradwives” offers appeal, so do its cousin trends on social media elevating ideas of self-care and the rejection of chaos and ambition: people “quiet quitting” their jobs, taking “hot girl walks” and living a “**soft life**.” Many of these videos share the cozy aesthetic of the tradlife, only without the kids, the husband, and the religious doctrine.

This isn't the first time women have sought to reevaluate our society's **obsession with work**. In the early 2000s, **sparked by a buzzy New York Times essay**, heaps of cultural attention went toward analyzing white-collar women “opting out” of the workforce to raise kids. In 2004, **Time magazine described** professional and managerial women “less willing to play the juggler's game” and “more willing to sacrifice paychecks and prestige for time with their family.” In 2005, the editor of Cosmopolitan **told Maureen Dowd that** “Women now don't want to be in the grind. The baby boomers made the grind seem unappealing.”

That polarizing conversation fueled the decade's debates over feminism and parenting, but when the Great Recession hit, and millions encountered new bouts of financial insecurity, most women who'd left their jobs years earlier to raise kids **found far more difficulty** rejoining the workforce than they anticipated. Some could only find part-time jobs, or roles that paid far less than they previously earned.

As the recovery inched forward, young millennials like me were reminded relentlessly of the harms, such as lower wages and higher health costs, that accompany **spells of long-term unemployment**. The specter of another financial collapse still looms today over people considering parenthood, so conscious we are of how costly starting a family may be. While many of us share a weariness of **hustle culture**, and while skepticism of the rise-and-grind mentality is arguably even more pronounced post-pandemic, actually pulling back from the labor market seems outlandish and impractical.

What tradlife and these self-care trends seem to offer though, is something of a balm to the nagging questions that vex young women. We see people looking peaceful, happy, and satisfied in their beautifully curated, tidy lives. Watching these videos, we can contemplate the ease of such frictionless fantasies, that life would be better with no stressful commitments, or, in the case of tradwives, that throwing children into the mix of life won't make things more challenging.

The fantasy is appealing because "it *is* harder today to have kids," Barbara Risman, a sociologist and one of the country's leading experts on gender inequality, told me. "It's not in people's heads. With **student loans**, the cost of **child care** and housing payments ... this is really the first generation who go to public schools and still end up massively in debt."

So here we are, fumbling around, trying to figure out what's next, what to do with all this *information* we have. And all this disillusionment. And all these warnings and cautionary tales.



A sampling of what we know: We know that mothers spend nearly twice as much time **on daily child care activities** as moms did 60 years ago, even though moms are far more likely now to be working outside the home. We know that this ratcheting up of "intensive" parenting is most acute **among highly educated** women, and it's these moms who are most likely to feel shame and anxiety about whether they're doing a good job.

But there's a lot that's positive, too. For example, most parenting choices you make **are not very high-stakes at all**. It's **not a huge deal** whether you breastfeed your child if you live in an area with decent water quality. **Large-scale longitudinal research** has found that **quality of time** spent with children matters vastly more than quantity of time.

When I started asking women about their experiences as mothers, I was startled by the number who sheepishly admitted, and only after being pressed, that they had pretty equitable arrangements with their partners, and even loved being moms, but were unlikely to say any of that publicly. Doing so could seem insensitive to those whose experiences were not as positive, or those in more frustrating relationships. Some also worried that betraying too much enthusiasm for child-rearing could ossify essentialist tropes or detract from larger feminist goals.

But that conscientiousness — and occasional pessimism — is giving motherhood short shrift. “The pendulum on motherhood swung, and that was a necessary corrective to all these sugar-coated unrealistic fantasies, but we have gone too far,” Leslie Bennetts, a veteran journalist and author of 2007’s *The Feminine Mistake*, told me. In the book, Bennetts, now 74, observed that the mainstream media had long “harped endlessly on the downside” of juggling motherhood and work and rarely explored the rewards. This remains true 15 years later. “My entire friend group, we all raised great kids, but we’re not writing that because we don’t want to be insufferable,” she told me. “If we say anything about it, people hate you, and I understand that. There are cultural taboos against talking too much about it, and huge penalties for women bragging about anything.”

In other words, if joyful motherhood or equitable parenting is seen as a rare accomplishment these days, then, like many other small and large achievements, women learn to keep it to themselves.

Amplifying the voices of mothers of color — particularly those steeped in communities where raising kids has long been understood as a more collective, and even **defiant**, act — could help change these dynamics. Having children has “helped to speed in the richness of my life,” de Groot, of *Raising Mothers*, told me. “Even if I’m not walking on money, I don’t need to be rich to feel rich... I believe in using a more radical approach, saying, ‘Yes, it’s hard, but it’s also beautiful.’”

There’s no question, too, that universal child care, paid sick leave, and paid parental leave would reduce the strain parents in the United States feel. But it’s clear that the culture fueling mom dread would not disappear simply by establishing better social assistance programs. Our culture’s valorization of busyness, of productivity, of optimizing, would still be here.

Ann Burnett, a professor at North Dakota State University, has spent her career studying communication, and particularly how women talk about time. Studying what families highlight in their annual holiday cards, Burnett noticed how conveying how busy one’s life was had become something of a badge of honor.

Rejecting this frenetic competition could come with social consequences, Burnett said. “I think if you hear a mom who says, ‘Well, I’m not stressed and life is good,’ that in general people say ‘Oh, my god, what is the matter with her?’” she told me. “You kind of have to march to your own drum and not be attentive to that.”

It’s not always possible to change how we act, but it’s worth trying to do, to remember we still have agency in this world. In *The Feminine Mistake*, Bennetts asks a fellow journalist, Anna Quindlen, how she handles the guilt of managing her career with raising three children; Quindlen responds that she “doesn’t do guilt.” Bennetts’s reaction has stuck deeply with me since. “It didn’t occur to me back then,” she wrote, “that the refusal to feel guilt was a trait that could be cultivated, like patience or good manners or kindness.”

We can’t grasp the quiet dread young women feel about becoming moms without talking about the difficult and contradictory expectations women face. Having a child is a gendered expectation in its own right, but it comes on top of a web of pressures that already feel quite overwhelming for most women to manage in their 20s and 30s. When sociologist Barbara Risman **published the first in-depth study** of how millennials experience gender, she found they were being pulled in many demanding directions, charged with becoming career-focused and independent, thin and beautiful, warm and humble all at once.

It's not lost on me that my time thinking about motherhood anxiety has overlapped with the most aggressive attacks on abortion and transgender rights this country has ever seen. I've come to understand, surely belatedly but nevertheless more clearly, how interrelated these issues are, how *committed* some people remain in disciplining gender — and how the strength required to reject certain pressures of modern motherhood comes from the same wellspring as those rejecting the gender binary altogether.

The fact is, we can't address the struggles of moms without tackling the outmoded but still powerful beliefs that men and women should not share in parenting equally, that women are better suited to raising children. Those ideas are rooted in the same thinking that motivated reversing *Roe v. Wade*, and that fuels efforts to deny gender-nonconforming people health care — the belief that such social inequality is *natural* and *right*.

Feminists **have made these connections before**, but they could stand to be reiterated today. I was struck reading sociologist **Caitlyn Collins's work** that found that in Sweden, having an egalitarian relationship is central to the culture's conception of good motherhood. "It was important to women that their kids felt equally connected to and reliant upon both parents," Collins observed, noting that the parenting strategies deployed by Swedish mothers partnered with men looked similar to **those used by gay and lesbian parents** in the US.

Negotiating equity can be really hard. For those raising children in heterosexual relationships, it can be easier in many ways to blame the state for failing to provide certain support than it is to hold your only partner to account.

One of the first major books to explore the topic of motherhood anxiety was Judith Warner's ***Perfect Madness***, published in 2005. Though Warner acknowledged that fathers who skirted domestic duties contributed to maternal stress, she **dismissed the idea** that getting men to do more was plausible, calling it "too late" and "largely a lost cause" for those in her Gen X cohort.

The **late philosopher** Linda Hirshman noted that despite Warner's frank portrayals of difficult home lives for many mothers, all Warner really recommended were policies like flexible work options. "Why should the patriarchal workplace be bulldozed and the patriarchal family left untouched?" Hirshman asked in her **2006 book *Get to Work***.

Some worry that encouraging women to bargain fairer arrangements with men amounts to undue pressure and even misplaced blame, especially since most women arrive in weaker economic positions. The concern is understandable, but we can't ignore that it's domestic inequality between partners — or the perception of it — that drives much of a mother's emotional and romantic dissatisfaction, according to research.

Couples who believe things are fair with respect to housework **feel happier** and **have more sex**. Their marriages **are more satisfying**. And, fair or not, it just doesn't seem possible to really confront millennial mom dread without confronting these tricky interpersonal dynamics.

Just months before her death at 79, Hirshman told me she sees too many young women who believe their heterosexual marriages can be "power-free zones" that do not require ongoing bargaining. "That's completely unrealistic and delusional," Hirshman said. "Freedom is something women need to enforce every day."

WE CAN'T ADDRESS THE STRUGGLES OF MOMS WITHOUT TACKLING THE POWERFUL BELIEFS THAT MEN AND WOMEN SHOULD NOT SHARE IN PARENTING EQUALLY

Sometimes ceding control of parenting or housework can be difficult for moms, even as they're overwhelmed and want more help. Like men, many women have internalized ideas that they're the ones most qualified in the domestic arena. In *All Joy and No Fun*, Senior encourages women to learn from the good fathers around them, who have the advantage of parenting with fewer expectations. "Good fathers tend to judge themselves less harshly, bring less anguished perfectionism to parenting their children...and...more aggressively protect their free time," Senior writes. "None of this means they love their children any less than their wives do. None of this means they care any less about their children's fates."

Bennetts, the author of *The Feminine Mistake*, told me the challenge is years of brainwashing. "We pay lip service to women's empowerment but what we don't tell them is, 'Fuck the rules, you don't have to obey the rules,'" she said. "We need to tell more women to throw the standards out the window."

Might there be social penalties to embracing "good enough" parenting, to rejecting some aspects of socially encouraged stress? Probably. Burnett, the North Dakota State University researcher, thinks it's likely. And the nature of those penalties can differ depending on your race and class status, with low-income and nonwhite parents having to worry **far more about Child Protective Services** than side-eyed glares in the carpool line.



This piece is not an effort to proselytize having kids, something I, too, am still figuring out. That's a deeply personal decision. This is, rather, a case for optimism.

More **moms themselves** have been **recognizing** that there is **a need for a course correction**, that there are risks to painting parenting with too broad and bleak a brush. And many smart, creative people have been **thinking more deeply about practical ways to make motherhood** easier, to weaken its sticky, suffocating pressures. It's not always easy to see, but things *are* changing, and can change further. We're not glossing over anything by making that clear. In February, **The Cut declared** America finally in its "messy-house era" with even Marie Kondo (now a mother of three) having **abandoned her standard** for a meticulous home. In April, writer Rayne Fisher-Quann **reflected on demands** she's felt to self-optimize to the point where "controlled, placated solitude" became the only way to find peace. "Being alone is hard, to be sure, but it's also deceptively easy — it requires nothing of us," she writes. "People, on the other hand, challenge us. They infuse our life with stakes."

This gets at something else important. Amid efforts to reject untenable parenting expectations, we should resist pressure to reject the vital work that is nurturing other people. "It is an honor to care" for one's family and community, writer Angela Garbes declared in her **2022 book *Essential Labor***. We can recognize that for millions of women, raising children has been a central source of identity and meaning, and we can name this without fear that it will somehow unravel decades of feminist progress, or that we'll risk empowering "tradwives" for saying what countless people experience as wonderful and true. Seeking out a **wider range of voices, from people of all races, cultures, and economic strata**, will help ensure that we understand the real diversity of motherhood experiences people share.

Crucially, none of these ideas change the need to pass more family-friendly policies in the United States, but we can advocate for them **from a more gender-neutral lens** and do so without worrying that discussing what's good about parenting, what's enjoyable, fun, manageable, and even improving, will somehow hurt the cause.

We should have the courage to reject the all-encompassing crisis frame — which frankly isn't working, anyway. We can't expect to fully eliminate dread **or even regret** over having children. Rather, this is a gentle reminder that people can thrive doing the hard stuff, and we can build each other up without fear that we'll sabotage prospects for bolder change. That's a world that brings me hope. That's a world I don't dread.

Q&A

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— **tocontinuethestory** 1 hour ago

As a millennial woman, I struggle with what seems like an innate invisibility; Most accomplishments, a B.S., maxing out Americorps hours, Peace Corps Service, a successful small business, converting an 19th Century cottage to net-zero, among others, rarely elicits an acknowledgement beyond a congratulatory hug, or hand shake, depending on the person. Even the idea that motherhood brings a certain unavoidable visibility is nauseating, given the utter lack of effort it would require me (specifically, without any fertility issues) to actually produce a child or two. And to have that visibility supplant the genuine effort of past work, makes my 32 years of life feel very, very, very small.... Instead of growing into what would be the meaningful work of motherhood, the portrayal I most often see reflected in TV/Movies, cultural & political narratives, etc., I feel, I would be subsumed by depression and meaninglessness, with my new one dimensional, visibility. On top of that, there is very, very little culture portrayal or positive political lip-service paid to my 'immediate family' structure: I'm white, but queer and polyamorous, with two girlfriends; each of whom is trans.

One was clear when we got together that they didn't want children, with any "oops" babies made practically impossible by the degree of their dysphoria. The other is hungry to be a mother, even as she's been rendered sterile by transition. She craves not only the exact visibility and "validation of womanhood" I have actively avoided, but the closeness of the big Mormon family-life she had before actualizing herself.

Seven of my close female friends and family members have had, or are having, their first babies in the last 15 months (many of whom swore they never wanted children), so this topic has become perennial. And, it hurts to hear her parrot "I can adopt at any age", while we both quietly know the likelihood of her being able to adopt in an increasingly transphobic world, where, simultaneously, domestic birth rates continue to fall, and, necessarily, strict rules for international adoption are imposed.

Personally, I believe every woman should be supported in having the family size she desires, whether that's zero or a dozen. In my view of the world, there is no societal or environmental apocalypse or pre-conceived political notion that translates to the necessity of more or fewer people on Earth being better. This belief, in the context of my life currently, has awoken a rumination on the delineation of my experience in carrying a child, including the social norms/fears I'd happily brush aside in order to conceive that child, and having to actively participate in parenting, as a mother. What could be are distinct experiences, that culturally we wind together in the continuance of the deterministic, nuclear family narrative, is in fact, not mutually inclusive. Any child I carry will have a mother that loves them with more happiness and joy than a heart can hold; that mother just won't be me. Any child I carry will have a mother that loves them with more happiness and joy than a heart can hold; that mother just won't be me. Even the fear of an increasingly dangerous and precarious prenatal healthcare system, falls behind the determination I feel to unite the woman I love, with a child our world would try to keep from her; a determination I do not feel when prompted by any extra familial or existential desires.

Shortly before going away to college in my teens, my father confessed to me that he was glad none of his three children were gay, because "[life would just be so much harder]." Of course, being straight, what he fails to see is that being queer is the freedom to negotiate your life on your own terms, and that the "much harder" part is oppression of the expectations of everyone around you, the people unwilling to negotiate what they see as "the natural order" of... anything really. But, what I think would make it less hard, and what I long to hear, are narratives, where children of queer families, however they come to be, awaken hope of a tolerant future; One that can outgrow the renaissance of nuclear family essentialism and enlightened biological determinisms.

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— **TheGreyBrewer** 3 hours ago

So basically, we shouldn't moralize parenthood. Having children (or not) is a deeply personal decision, and no one should be made to feel bad about that decision, whichever way they fall on it. I personally find the "tradwife" trend distasteful, in that it tends to reinforce the conservative cluster of class, heteronormativity, and whiteness that so often fosters bad ideas in certain groups of people. But even women who embrace the "tradwife" label are entitled to approach parenthood however they want. I think it's important to continue to voice concerns about the challenges associated with parenting, and not just paint it with the other broad brush, where parenting is all joy, all the time, and if you choose not to experience it, you're broken and selfish. Having children is as selfish a decision as not having children. And I've seen just as much regret from parents as I have from childless people. As one of the latter myself, I would like to not be made to feel like I'm not a complete person just because I made the decision to not have kids. I'm glad you found so much wonder and meaning in parenthood. I find wonder and meaning in other aspects of my life. We are both worthy of respect.

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— **annareader** 9 hours ago

✓ ANSWERED

I'm writing from the perspective of a Gen Xer who is the mother of two children who are now happy, thriving young adults in their early and mid twenties. While raising my children (along with a supportive husband) was time intensive and sometimes exhausting (especially when they were young and I was working full time as a lawyer at a big law firm in Los Angeles), it was also the best and most meaningful thing I have done in my life. The relationship and love you have for your children is unlike any other you will experience. When you leave a job, they may miss you for a short time, but you will be replaced and forgotten. No one can replace me as my kids' mom. Often the hardest things we do end up being the things that give us the greatest long term satisfaction. For me, the only truly hard thing about having children is that it creates an unparalleled vulnerability. When you have children, you really do have a lot to lose. Another consideration for Millennials and Gen Zers is that it is really nice to have a family as you grow older and be connected to a younger generation. When I was a young parent and looked around at the older, childless attorneys at my firm, I often observed that some of them seemed a bit warped in a way and appeared to regret not having kids.

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— **ASHLEYMARISA** 3 hours ago

↩ In reply to **annareader**

So what I'm reading is "already had a good career in place and could therefore afford things that made it easier to be a mom" and "supportive husband". I hate to nitpick, but it doesn't surprise me that the women who have great support systems and have decent-ish money have a more positive experience being mothers. You also sound like someone who enjoys kids and wanted to be a mother. For those of us who have no desire to have kids or be mothers, we would not report the same satisfaction. Also, you don't have to have kids to have a family or be connected to a younger generation. Lastly, you have no clue what all was going with the older, childless attorneys at your firm. SMDH.

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