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Maybe baby: Torn between the joys and cries of motherhood

I'm among the many young women today contemplating motherhood, having to choose between career and family – and whether to have kids at all.

Faye Ng Yu Ci

As a medical student, I have glimpsed the reality of motherhood first-hand.

First in obstetrics and gynaecology, where I witnessed the painstaking labour of carrying a child to term, as well as my paediatrics posting, where I appreciated the boundless joy and anxiety that come with parenting.

These experiences have made me conscious of what lies ahead when it comes to having children – and the fact that while there are heartwarming moments, there are also trade-offs.

No wonder I – along with other young women I know – am ambivalent about motherhood: caught in the middle, overwhelmed by the possibilities.

FEMALE V MALE EXPECTATIONS

At 24, I am at an age when the first of my friends are tying the knot with their long-term partners and settling down with their families. On the cusp of my next phase of life, just about to graduate from university and contemplating the future with my partner, I mull over the question and possibility of motherhood that has wandered in front of me.

"Do I or do I not want to become a mother?"

Conversations about this stage of life inspire a mix of conflicting emotions – hope, dread, doubt, bewilderment – as we ruminate on the prospect of bringing another life into this world, amid our struggle to find our place in it.

My female friends are generally ambivalent or cautiously optimistic about having children, while my male friends are simply thrilled by the prospect of parenthood.

Even in terms of the number of children, the girls are happy to stop at one, or at most two, whereas the guys would be inclined to have more.

Increasingly, women are giving birth later and having fewer children. Singapore's birth rate fell to an all-time low of 1.04 in 2022, dipping below 1.12 in 2021 – and way off the replacement level of 2.1.

In turn, fertility rates plunged from 91.6 to just 48.8 per 1,000 women aged 25 to 29 between 2002 and 2022.

In a study by the National Population and Talent Division in 2021, 92 per cent of married respondents wanted to have two or more children. In reality, about half had one child or none.

How did children go from the final piece of the puzzle in a "complete" marriage and "fulfilled" life, to a mere preference?

A FULL-TIME JOB

More young women now prioritise their careers and aspire to pursue postgraduate studies. Consequently, there's apprehension over being a working mum, as those seeking to excel in their careers face greater opportunity costs in potentially having a child.

For full-time employees aged 25 to 54, the unadjusted gender pay gap was 14.4 per cent in 2020. The adjusted gap – which attempts to capture differences in pay between women and men doing similar work – was 4.3 per cent. The figures have narrowed from 2018, with the Manpower Ministry citing improvement in the occupational profile of females.

However, as gender advocacy group Aware highlights, the unadjusted gap reflects the over-representation of men (and under-representation of women) in higher-paying positions and sectors, largely due to "occupational segregation, imbalance in caregiving responsibilities and gender discrimination".

The fact is, the role of a new mother is equivalent to a full-time job position, encompassing a host of responsibilities such as three-hourly breastfeeding sessions, bedtime lullaby duty to coax a fretful child to sleep, changing nappies and washing soiled linen around the clock – all while staying on top of routine health check-ups, vaccinations and school registration deadlines.

Being a parent requires significant time, attention and emotional energy. If a mother wishes to watch her child grow up and be present for each milestone in the initial years – first word, first wave, first walk – she will need to take considerable time away from work.

"I don't want to be a half-hearted mum. If I become a mother, I'd want to be there all the way. If I have to constantly pit my career against my family, I'd rather not have a child," one of my university peers commented.

Similarly, as a future doctor, I'm aware that my working hours will be long and I will have to be on call at the hospital for multiple days in a month. As I contemplate motherhood, I am cognisant that there will be trade-offs between professional success and parental duties.

"It doesn't seem fair that I have to give up so much to be a mother, while my husband gets to enjoy being a dad without making the same commitment," said a friend, who recently broached the topic of parenthood with her partner.

Despite the strides forward on gender equality, the mental overhead and invisible toil that goes into raising a family still falls heavily on women. Some of this load is biologically programmed; some is societally driven.

THE HARD LABOUR OF BIRTH

Inevitably, women are the ones who go through the process of childbearing – carrying a foetus for nine months, and then delivering an infant into this world.

Childbirth can be excruciating. Labour contractions last from hours to days, and many mothers sustain complications such as bleeding and perineal tears.

For many of us female medical students, our obstetrics and gynaecology postings vividly brought to life the sacrifices of motherhood, as we had the chance to assist in vaginal deliveries and observe caesarean sections. Once, a clinical group-mate came out of the operating theatres ashen, shaken by how a patient almost lost her life on the surgical table from a complication.

Every child is a gift – of patience, joy and fortitude. A child can help you embrace the serendipitous, gain a more grounded appreciation for life and for the unexpected, and transform your world view in fundamental ways.

Then come the biological changes after childbirth. Your body takes a hit – weight creeps up, metabolism slows down, breasts start to sag, and abdominal wall muscles slacken.

As a parent, a child is a stark reminder of your mortality. As a woman, your child is a reminder of your own body's age and decline.

Postpartum depression is another hidden toll on motherhood on the rise globally. In Singapore, KK Women's and Children's Hospital reported a 47 per cent increase in postnatal depression between April 2021 and March 2022, compared with April 2019 to March 2020.

Motherhood also alters your perception of self, as well as society's expectations of you. Suddenly you are simply a "mother". Instead of "Jane" or "Mrs Tan", you are "Jayden's mum". Even in the labour wards, healthcare workers often address mothers by referring to their infants' names.

In a series by The New York Times on how motherhood transformed the lives of 16 women, one said: "And then I had children. Suddenly I was barely getting to or even halfway doing the things I cared about most: working, deepening my marriage, tending to my precious female friendships."

Society also tends to have incredible expectations of mothers, which puts added pressure on them. Daring to bottle-feed your baby without trying breastfeeding can lead to criticism from friends and strangers. Leaving your child unattended for five minutes in the car to buy coffee can trigger finger-pointing.

Women feel stress, exhaustion and guilt from the demands of motherhood: Time spent parenting is at the expense of sleep, time alone with spouses and friends, leisure time and housework.

ON THE OTHER HAND...

Parenting is not the sole responsibility of women.

Fathers now play a more central role in the family, bolstered by modern-day virtues of egalitarian parenting, as well as more progressive and inclusive childcare policies. Parenthood in our contemporary era is more so than ever a joint project: Mothers and fathers both play distinct yet indispensable roles in their children's growing-up years.

One measure worth noting is that paternity leave will be doubled from two to four weeks starting from Jan 1, 2024. However, there remains work to be done.

A survey by online job portal Indeed shows that almost one in two employees (47 per cent) in Singapore support commensurate parental leave. However, shared parenting needs to go beyond policy. It requires a mindset shift away from gender-segregated roles in raising a family. Division of labour within a household should affirm the efforts and support the aspirations of both parties while allowing for give-and-take. This, in turn, sets the stage for a lifetime of commitment and mutual respect.

A child presents a radical chance to reimagine and re-evaluate our world.

During my paediatrics posting, seeing young patients interact with their parents gave me a prelude to the joys of motherhood.

A child's delight is pure and unencumbered, teaching us adults to revel in the moment, savour beauty when we notice it, and be grateful. A child's arrival is an opportunity to practise love without expectation of return, a challenge to reel in your temper and extend grace, and a doorway to get in touch with your inner child.

From what my mother has also shared with me, being a mum is a journey of continuous self-reflection and discovery, where you grow and mature alongside your child.

Before you know it, many monsoon seasons pass.

You listen to your child's day on the car ride home and learn about their favourite animated heroes over dinner table conversations; your heart skips a beat when they turn around to wave you goodbye again before slipping behind the school gate.

You fluster over every exam script they bring home for you to sign, their success so closely tied to your sense of achievement – telling yourself to let go, for their battles are not yours to wage.

Every child is a gift – of patience, joy and fortitude. A child can help you embrace the serendipitous, gain a more grounded appreciation for life and for the unexpected, and transform your world view in fundamental ways.

There is a tug in my chest when I glimpse toddlers being led back to kindergarten in rows of two at the void deck, when a baby smiles up at me from inside her pram as I stand on the MRT, when my newborn nephew plants a kiss on my cheek.

I don't think there ever comes a point in time when one is ready to become a mother.

For many of us, motherhood is something we stumble into, gradually, as an idea, and then all at once, when we find ourselves on the cusp of bringing a new life into the world.

Amid this ambivalence, I am inexplicably drawn towards motherhood. I am more hopeful than I am apprehensive, and more open to the possibilities presented than I am sceptical.

Looking over childhood photographs of myself, I think about how I came into the world knowing little, marvelling endlessly. Perhaps one day, I will have the chance to re-encounter the world again through the eyes of a child. Perhaps for that, I am willing to go the distance.

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