



Gender Inequality and Reproductive Rights: Through the Lens of Existence Theory

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Abstract. This paper takes a deep dive into how societal pressures and personal choices intersect in women's decisions about having kids, using the concept of existence theory. We look closely at specific groups like middle-class women, domestic nannies, and rural women to uncover how societal expectations shape their choices. Existence theory sheds light on the time constraints and pressures that influence these decisions.

We explore the significance of parenthood, emphasizing the lifelong commitment it entails and the ticking clock that comes with it. The paper digs into how societal norms impact women's choices, creating a clash between what they want and what society expects. We also touch on assisted reproductive technologies, highlighting how they can either empower or limit choices, especially for women with different economic backgrounds.

The gender gap in reproductive decisions is a crucial aspect, showing how biases in the job market penalize women, contributing to ongoing gender inequalities. We conclude by emphasizing the need for policies that support reproductive autonomy, breaking down barriers, and changing societal attitudes. The call is to create an environment where women can freely make choices without facing judgment or discrimination.

Keywords: Reproductive Autonomy, Existence Theory, Societal Influences, Gender Inequalities

1 Introduction

This paper examines the gender-related inequalities through the lens of reproduction and fertility, acknowledging how they have been shaped and reshaped over time by various societal forces. I view women's reproductive rights and autonomy as not totally belong to women themselves, but highly influenced by societal influences, such as societal expectations, norms and values. To critically analyse the complex interaction effect between individual choices and the broader societal frameworks, I use existence theory to provide a unique lens to understand these dynamics, discussing the potential relationship between women's existence-related considerations and their reproductive decisions. The scope of this paper is intentionally focused on specific groups to provide

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a more detailed understanding of the issue. The groups include middle-class women, domestic nannies, and rural women, each representing unique perspectives and experience in the context of reproductive rights.

2 Existential urgency

In what follow, I will be drawing on existence theory to develop a new angle on the phenomenon of parenthood. The foundation of existence theory assumes that individuals structure their lives around a limited number of ‘existential milestones’, which depends on various cultural and structural influences. The theory also emphasises the concept of ‘existential urgency’, as there are time constraints for achieving certain existential milestones due to various factors, with flexibility being unevenly distributed. (Baert et al., 2022) Therefore, applying the existence theory as a framework for understanding the inequality of women’s reproductive rights can serve as a valuable starting point.

Existence theory emphasises how individuals perceive and interact with the concept of time, which can be an essential factor in understanding reproductive choices. A key aspect of the application of existence theory to women’s reproductive decisions, is the emphasis on future scenario projection. According to existence theory, individuals always extrapolate and reflect their decisions according to their imagined future standpoint. (Baert et al., 2022) When women facing with reproductive decisions, they also often project themselves into a future scenario. For instance, when confronted with the choice of whether to have a child or seek an abortion, individuals often imagine their possible life in each scenario. This reflection not only considers the practical outcome, but also include the evaluation of emotion and existence. As Irene Frieze points out, parenthood is the only significant adult role that cannot be abandoned once it has been undertaken, carrying with it an irreversible commitment and responsibility. (DeVore, 1983)

When making the decision of reproduce, women often consider their entire life stories. This involves considering their career, personal growth and status, relationships, and other life goals. Parenthood is not just a momentary decision with short-term effects around pregnancy and the initial years of childcare, as mothering is seen as a long-term, even permanent, commitment. While some may choose to seek the ‘help’ of nannies, this form of care is viewed as temporary and fleeting, meant to assist mothers in their important duties. (Búriková, 2019)

The existential ‘awareness of the irreversibility of time and of the finitude of existence’ can also create a sense of urgency to reproductive decisions. According to the decline of ‘un-wanted conception and birth’ and the rise of women’s ‘education and labor-force participation’, more people prefer to later parenthood. (Wilkie, 1981) Postponing parenthood can benefit their occupational status and have positive effects to pursue their personal goals, while older parents may also possess better parenting abilities compared to younger parents. (DeVore, 1983) However, for women, the consequences of missing the opportunity to have a baby are more irreversible and costly compared to men. Women who have missed the ‘best childbearing age’ may resort to

expensive medical techniques to have children, (Rowland, 1987) or they may face biological difficulties to have children.

3 Existential milestones and existential consideration

In the exploration of reproductive rights, a critical question arises: Do these rights genuinely belong to women, or are they heavily influenced, or even dictated, by societal norms and expectations? This query is essential in understanding the interplay between individual choice and societal conformity in the realm of fertility and motherhood. These decisions might be less about individual choice but more about conforming to societal expectations. This perspective challenges the conventional view of reproductive rights as solely within the domain of individual choices, highlighting the potent influence of societal constructs.

The notion of reproduction and raising children as existential milestones is deeply ingrained in many cultures. Due to the unique biological capacity, these milestones have been set within patriarchal structures that connect the value and roles of women to their ability to bear children, creating a societal framework that often evaluates a woman's worth with her reproductive capabilities. In traditional societies, especially those governed by feudal and collectivist principles, women's roles were often limited to marriage and family, as they were viewed as means of increasing family status or economic resources and producing next generation. This societal setup exerts immense pressure on women to conform to these roles and expectations, often at the expense of their personal desires and autonomy. According to Silvia Federici, reproduction is often treated as an unpaid natural resource or personal service, mystified and concealed under the guise of 'biological destiny'. (Federici, 2021) This framework not only limits women's choices but also places undue emphasis on their reproductive function, overshadowing other aspects of their identity and contributions. This historical context continues to shape contemporary perceptions, even in societies where women have ostensibly gained more autonomy, as the biological capability is still utilized as excuse for patriarchy. According to patriarchal ideologists and theorists, women are forced to obey men by God or nature. They also using slogans like 'protect the family' to implicitly enforce female submission to men. (Li, 2005) Under this context, women's unpaid work is considered as the labour for love, linking the emotional value to the ideals of womanhood and inducing the admiration of domesticity and intensive motherhood. (Palmer, 1989)

Moreover, this societal arrangement contributes to the division of society into manageable family units, undermining the personal significance of reproductive choices and transforming societal obligation into women's duty. This is particularly evident in roles women play in caregiving, especially for children and the elderly, aiming to maintain the stability and continuity of society by sacrificing women's individual option. Mothering, often described as the 'quintessential care work', produces public goods from which many benefit as 'free riders'. (England et al., 2016) This phenomenon illustrates how the relationships and benefits enjoyed within our social groups are partly formed through the often-unrecognised and uncompensated labour of mothers. These

caring works are tangled with emotional value as a 'labour of love', being seen as a 'natural' thing that every woman can do (Anderson, 2000) and debasing their economic value and rationalising by their moral value. (Folbre, 1991)

Although women can make their reproductive decisions from their imagined future standpoint, the subjective processes not only take place within individuals, but also among groups. The imagination of groups, such as family members, friends and societal norms, can generate expectations and pressures: they shape how women schedule their future. Those expectations can affect their choices in two ways. First, women may internalize the expectations so that is expected from them is also experienced by them as what they want. Second, even if they don't necessarily want to act in accordance with the expectations and would prefer to act differently, they might still comply because of various social pressures.

From explicit expectations about the 'ideal' age for childbearing to the implicit valuation of motherhood as a crucial component of a woman's identity, the societal framework is actively shapes and guides women's reproductive choices, often placing them at a crossroads between personal desires and perceived societal duties. This societal construct influences women's decisions about whether and when to have children. This internalisation can lead to a conflict where personal autonomy is compromised for societal conformity. Women's decisions about contraception, family planning, and fertility treatments are often not only navigated by their individual desire but also by the existential consideration.

Although some individuals strive for autonomy, in many cultures, the inability or choice not to bear children is seen not just as a personal decision, but as a deviation from the societal norms, leading to various degrees of social stigma that range from family pressures and social exclusion to workplace discrimination and derogatory remarks. The stigma can lead to feelings of inadequacy and guilt, particularly in environments where motherhood is idealised as the peak of womanhood. Women who choose alternative paths may struggle with internal conflicts, questioning their worth and facing societal judgment.

Furthermore, societal expectations are often reinforced by conforming behaviour within family and social networks. From a young age, women are socialised to view motherhood as a defining aspect of their identity. This socialisation process, often subtle and unconscious, exerts pressure on individuals to conform to established societal roles, further limiting personal autonomy in reproductive matters. The influence of these societal and familial pressures is significant, as they can dictate not only the choices women make but also their emotional and psychological responses to fertility and motherhood.

Women's reproductive activities under the context of rural societies, as elucidated by Benería (1979), can provide a critical and intuitive framework for understanding the control mechanisms that govern female fertility. In rural societies, the control over women's reproductive activities, particularly over female sexuality, represents a stark manifestation of male domination. (Benería, 1979) This control not just a matter of physical or biological management but is deeply rooted in existential concerns. The traditional preference for large families in rural economies, driven by the need for additional labour, has been further enforced by 'pro-natalist' religions and cultural norms,

exerting significant pressure towards high fertility rates. (Benería, 1979) These ideologies promote motherhood as an existential milestone, tying a woman's identity and societal value to her ability to reproduce and creating a strong societal expectation to force them to fulfil their 'duty' of childbearing.

Women's bodies are exploited by patriarchy due to their various values for this society, such as labour value, fertility value, and sex value. This leads to the dehumanisation and forces them to focus on their biological functions, such as their reproductive capabilities, rather than being recognised as equal human beings. For example, the restriction of mobility increasing sharply from the 'girl at puberty' to 'young married women', according to their reproductive abilities, to control the labour of reproduction and maintenance of human life. (Arruzza, 2016) These existential milestones, like motherhood, are predefined by patriarchal structures, as the ability to bear children is not just a biological function but a control method to rationalise the 'subordinate position' of women. (Benería, 1979)

4 Individual strategies

The advancements in assisted reproductive technologies, including in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), genetic engineering, embryo transfer and egg freezing, have revolutionised the approach to managing reproduction, helping women to delay their reproductive decisions. These medical interventions have become increasingly accessible, while their utilisation is notably towards women with higher economic means or societal status. This discrepancy highlights a significant socio-economic divide in the realm of reproductive choices. These technologies are currently questioned for their potential to either empower or restrict the decision-making process when it comes to reproduction, and in some case, even control these decision. (Blankenship et al., 1993) Women who lack of economic or societal powers may be forced to use these technologies, as the research suggests that men generally dominate in reproductive decisions. (Lorber, 1988)

These technologies provide new possibilities in family planning, particularly for women who choose to delay childbearing for career or personal reasons. They are empowered to overcome biological and temporal constraint, however, they may still encounter social sanctions for not following traditional timelines for childbirth. Furthermore, there exists a societal stigma associated with 'artificial' means of conception, especially in cultures where traditional notions of fertility and motherhood are deeply entrenched.

In addition to utilising technological solutions, working mothers can rely on the support of women in lower socioeconomic positions (Anderson, 2000), such as domestic nannies, to help them balance the demands of work and motherhood. Mothers who hire in-home childcare often seek a 'shadow mother' – someone who will take on the role of a mother while they are away, but would vanish when the real mother return. (Macdonald, 1998) Lan's research on Filipina domestic workers reveals that most studies of unpaid housework tend to focus on white, middle-class women, paying by the existential meaning of motherhood, while the literature on domestic service predominantly

centres around women of colour, redeeming through salaries. (Lan, 2003) Those employers can outsource most of domestic works through economic resources, in order to maintain both existence milestones at the same time. However, these employees have to leaving their own families far away, abandoning their motherhood to their own children most of time and replacing part of employer's motherhood.

In China, many domestic workers to choose to stay within the country rather than seeking employment abroad because of the high demands of nannies. However, due to the vast geographical size, many nannies still choose to live in a different city from their own families. Despite a trend towards younger nannies, the majority still contains two categories: middle-aged rural women and retired women. The former often have their own children due to the traditional concept of a large family, leaving them with other elderly female family members. The latter generally live in urban areas with their children who work in the city, preparing to care for their grandchildren. Before the birth of their grandchildren, they may work as nannies during the day to support their children. It is ironic that they may essentially be doing the same work whether they are employed as nannies or staying at home, yet their housework is paid as nannies while it goes unpaid as mothers.

Tronto raises the issue of the inequality present in hiring domestic workers, highlighting the moral dilemma it presents for feminists delicated to social justice. The women working as domestic nannies may experience significant moral pressure, as they operate within the household but are not considered true family members. (Tronto, 2002) Hochschild argues that family policies are designed to encourage mothers to participate in the labour force, but they still leave them bearing the majority of the caregiving responsibilities at home. (Midgley, 2004) However, Bowman and Cole argue that most objections to the commodification of housework are ultimately rooted in a gendered understanding of the domestic sphere, which serves to reinforce existing inequalities. They also claim that cultural norms that discourage the commodification of housework not only impede women's progress in achieving equality in the labour market, but also perpetuate the division of labour along gender lines within the home. Instead of criticising women who hire housecleaners, progressive efforts should be directed towards elevating the status of this type of labour. (Bowman & Cole, 2009)

5 The gender gap in reproductive decisions

Women also encounter significant normative discrimination in the paid labour market. Employers may unconsciously equal success with stereotypically masculine qualities, while perceiving women as 'less warm and more interpersonally hostile'. This bias becomes particularly evident during pregnancy, as women are often perceived as less capable and committed compared to other workers, especially by male evaluators. (Benard & Correll, 2010) As masculinity is commonly associated with self-respect for men in lower positions and power for men in higher positions, reinforcing the supposed superiority of their gender. (Acker, 1990) Numerous studies have demonstrated the conflicting cultural norms of the 'good mother' and the 'ideal worker', wherein the

former is expected to prioritise the care of her children while the latter is expected to wholly devote themselves to their professional responsibilities. (Kricheli-Katz, 2012)

This dilemma is accompanied with different stage women, whether they have pregnant or not. The personal strategy of minimising 'the career costs of motherhood', such as choosing to have only one child, was found to be 'ineffective in the fixed-effects models'. These models show that 'status losses for a first birth are not just short-term but accumulate over the career'. (Abendroth et al., 2014) These women are still seen as have the possibility of giving the second, or even third children in future. It is ironically contrast with the pro-natalist tendency in most societies, as women who decided to leave high-status professional jobs often felt a lack of support from both their partners and employers in continuing their careers after having children, while they will receive significant praise and encouragement when opting to leave the workforce in order to care for their children fulltime. (Rosner, 2010)

Therefore, motherhood can act as a barrier to pursuing higher-status employment opportunities, often leading to a shift towards lower-status, less demanding jobs with limited opportunities for career advancement. (Abendroth et al., 2014) Women with advanced skills and higher wages are particularly susceptible to facing significant penalties in the workplace. According to England's research on white women, 'the total motherhood penalty is highest – 10 percent per child – for women with high skills and high wages'. (England et al., 2016) This is largely because these women often have to navigate the delicate balance between career aspirations and the desire to become mothers. Unfortunately, this complex dynamic can provide employers with a seemingly justifiable rationale for expressing prejudice against these women. (Kricheli-Katz, 2012) They may argue that the decision of women to 'opt out' of the workplace is not due to 'structural barriers', but rather individual choices. (Rosner, 2010) This assumption often leads to the belief that 'opportunities in the labor force are equal and that gender discrimination is nonexistent'. (Kricheli-Katz, 2012)

The presupposed existential meaning of women is often contradictory; those who choose to disobey traditional expectations of childbearing face stigma, while those who conform may still face the 'motherhood penalty'. On the contrary, fathers are not generally expected to experience these inequalities, as the expectations placed on them as 'good fathers' are not seen in our society as conflicting with the expectations placed on them as 'good workers'. (Correll et al., 2007) Moreover, these men who do not experience the same biological and societal consequences may benefit from a 'father bonus'. (Ye, 2023) This highlights the ongoing difference in societal expectations and consequences for women and men within family planning and parenthood. This aggravates the gender pay gap and diminishes the economic security of single women and their children, undermining the bargaining power of women in heterosexual relationships. (England et al., 2016)

6 Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the complex interaction between societal influences and individual autonomy in women's reproductive decisions through the lens of existence theory. It reveals the how societal frameworks, which deeply embedded in cultural norms and patriarchy, profoundly shape and reshape women's rights and autonomy of fertility. The application of existence theory has highlighted the importance consideration of women's reproductive decisions, as societal expectations often play a significant role these decisions by imposing existential milestones and temporal constraints, overshadowing their individual aspirations.

Exploring the factors that influence reproductive decision-making through the lens of existence theory can lead to the measures of more effective and empathetic policies. These policies should aim to break down barriers of reproductive autonomy and ensure equity to reproductive health services, creating an environment where women can make informed choices without facing coercion, stigma, or discrimination. It's also important to shift societal attitudes and norms that restrict women's reproductive autonomy, which can be achieved through education, community involvement, government initiatives, and individual efforts.

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