

**Opting Out of Parenthood:
Lifestyle Choices, Global Concerns and Navigating Precarity**

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Short abstract

Italy is one of the countries where childless prevalence is booming. To explain this boom, sizeable literature emphasizes the role played by socio-economic factors, economic uncertainty and gender inequality, while recent studies suggest a surging inclination to childfree life or the emerging of environmental concerns.

Drawing on a sample of 4,000 25-45-years-old childless individuals from the web-based *ChildZero Survey* (2025), this paper investigates the inner motivations underlying the intention to remain childless among the younger cohort in a comprehensive and multidimensional way.

Using a complete battery of 30 items, an exploratory factor analysis identifies four latent motivational dimensions: 1) preference for a childfree lifestyle; 2) concern about economic uncertainty; 3) family concerns; and 4) global and ecological worries.

Linear models linking socio-demographic and psychological characteristics to each dimension show that motivational patterns vary markedly by gender and age. Women exhibit stronger orientations toward both a childfree lifestyle and global-ecological concerns, suggesting that aversion to parenthood among women intertwines with moral responsibility and reflexivity toward the future. Younger respondents express higher scores on these same dimensions, indicating that new value-based and environmental motives are emerging more distinctly among younger cohorts. Conversely, concerns about uncertainty and precarity remain more closely tied to structural vulnerability, reflecting persistent social and economic inequalities.

Overall, the findings highlight the coexistence of distinct motivational profiles: one rooted in self-realization, another in structural insecurity, and a third linked to ecological awareness. This evidence advances understanding of the changing meaning of childlessness in low-fertility societies and its policy implications.

Key words: childlessness, childfree, fertility motivations, fertility intentions, environmental concerns, uncertainty

Introduction

In low fertility countries, the transition to parenthood has become the result of an extremely carefully considered choice rather than a spontaneous or expected life event. This process leads often to a continuous process of childbearing postponement (Beaujouan 2023), and more and more frequently even to opting out and renounce completely to childbearing (Sobotka, 2018). As a result, in the last decades a *boom* in permanent childlessness has been registered in different contexts, prompting for investigating the deep motivations behind it and how they are interrelated.

Literature struggles to find the “magic bullet”, a single factor explaining this *boom*, as probably structural and ideational reasons coexist and reinforce one another to depress fertility and enlarge the hiatus between the desired number of children, almost constant across time, and fertility drop. Research indicates that fertility intentions are driven by multidimensional factors, combining structural, relational, psychological, and value-based elements rather than stemming from a single causal driver (Testa & Gietel-Basten, 2020; Dommermuth et al., 2011). However, it is not common to rely suitable data to investigate the relevance of different factors on the choice to remain childlessness among the younger cohorts.

Italy represents an interesting case study as it is at the forefront of the “childless boom”, together with a selected group of countries, namely Austria, Germany, Japan, and Spain, where more than 20% of women born in 1975 end their reproductive life without children (Beaujouan, 2020; Mencarini & Vignoli, 2018). In fact, in the last two decades, fertility drop has been driven essentially by the reduction of first-born children and accompanied by everlasting process of fertility postponement. Despite the increasing prevalence of the phenomenon, there are a limited number of studies focusing on Italian young adults to investigate the factors behind the *childlessness boom*. Interestingly, recent research finds in the last decade a surging inclination to not expect to have children during the lifetime among the Italians aged 18-35 (Luppi et al. 2025). Another study suggests that about one third of childless Italian aged 25-34 lacks a compelling inner drive to become parents and may well feel fully realized in life even without children (Luppi et al 2024).

In this line of research, this paper wants to investigate the inner motivations for not intending to have children among the young adults to verify whether childlessness boom is fuelled by a remarkable preference for a childfree lifestyle or rather by the intensification of precarious socioeconomic conditions; by the persistence of gender-based disparities in achieving work-life balance within the couples or by the emergence of novel, but less obvious factors, as fears about overpopulation, concerns about environment depletion and climate change, but also fears of pregnancy and delivery, which all may discourage intended fertility.

This paper seeks to investigate whether the above motivations, individually or collectively, contribute to the observed surge in childlessness boom in Italy. This study draws on a sample of 4,000 childless men and women, aged 25-45, interviewed in the ChildZero Survey, a nationally representative web survey designed *ad hoc* to investigate the characteristics of childless people in Italy, and the motivations underlying the decision not to have children.

Background

Extensive research has documented the enduring influence of structural constraints – unstable employment for young people, low wages, a scant housing market, and limited childcare availability (Van Wijk & Billari, 2024; Coppola et al. 2023) prevent young people to decide to have a child. A sizable part of literature reveals that a pervasive sense of economic uncertainty is discouraging or delaying parenthood, especially during the Great Recession and the post-pandemic period (Vignoli et al., 2020; Comolli & Bernardi, 2015; Mills & Blossfeld, 2013). From a theoretical standpoint, the Narrative Framework (Vignoli et al., 2022; Guetto et al. 2023) has emphasized that fertility behaviour

is shaped not only by objective risks, but also by the subjective narratives of the future individuals construct under uncertainty – what they perceive as possible lives.

Yet a growing body of evidence suggests that new motivational mechanisms are emerging behind the decision not to have children, extending beyond traditional economic explanations. On one side, value- and identity-based motives – self-realization, autonomy, and lifestyle preferences – are increasingly salient, consistent with processes of individualization and with changing norms of “intensive” parenthood that entail high emotional and temporal costs (Beaujouan & Berghammer, 2019; Lappegård et al., 2021; Mencarini & Vignoli, 2018). On the other, existential and ecological concerns, including climate anxiety and perceived danger of environmental threats (Muttarak, 2022; Jayasinghe, N., & Rackin, 2025), fears related to overpopulation, and a generalized pessimism about the future, have begun to enter fertility discourses, expanding the notion of uncertainty beyond its economic dimension (Schneider, 2021; Saraceno & Naldini, 2020). Interestingly, these fears increase the feeling of uncertainty not only among those who experimented extreme climate events or that are hit more directly by the economic downturn, but also among the general population.

These emerging motives interact with persistent gender asymmetries in the domestic and care domains: evidence from Italy shows that the unequal division of household labor and the gap between expected and actual equity remain significant deterrents to parenthood, particularly among childless working women (Garcia Pereiro et al. 2025).

In contemporary Italy – characterized by chronic labor precarity, delayed family formation, enduring gender inequality, and heightened insecurity across multiple life domains – it is crucial to assess whether and to what extent the classical reasons for not having children (economic hardship, unstable jobs, housing constraints) are now accompanied or even supplanted by emerging motivations: ecological concerns, pursuit of self-realization, aversion to parental roles and responsibilities, and general risk aversion. The present study situates itself precisely at this frontier, contributing to the debate on the structure and content of motives for non-parenthood in Italy, using newly collected empirical data to explore whether a distinct, affirmative childfree orientation is consolidating alongside structural constraints.

Data and methods

This study draws on original data from the *ChildZero Survey*, a web survey designed to investigate the determinants of childlessness and fertility intentions among Italian men and women aged 25-45, with particular attention to the motivations underlying the decision not to have children or to postpone childbearing. The survey was conducted between December 2024 and February 2025 by the independent research company Demetra Opinioni through a web-based panel. The childless group has been over-sampled. The final sample comprises 6,000 respondents – 4,000 childless individuals and 2,000 parents – stratified by sex, age, education, and region of residence, in order to be representative of the Italian population.

A key strength of the *ChildZero Survey* lies in its in-depth investigation of the motivations behind fertility intentions through two dedicated modules: one exploring the reasons for not intending to have children, and another focusing on the reasons for postponing parenthood. Each module includes a comprehensive set of about 30 statements covering economic, relational, value-based, and ecological domains. Respondents were asked to evaluate each motive for not intending to have children according to its relevance to their current situation – classifying it as *fundamental*, *secondary*, or *irrelevant* – thus providing a fine-grained measure of the salience and structure of motivations across individuals and age groups.

The analytical strategy unfolds in three steps. We first analyse the socio-demographic and psychological *characteristics* of the childless respondent who do not intend to have children in the future, estimating logistic regression models. Second, we examine the distribution of *motivations* among childless individuals across age groups, distinguishing between reasons considered fundamental, secondary, or irrelevant. This descriptive analysis provides insight into age-specific

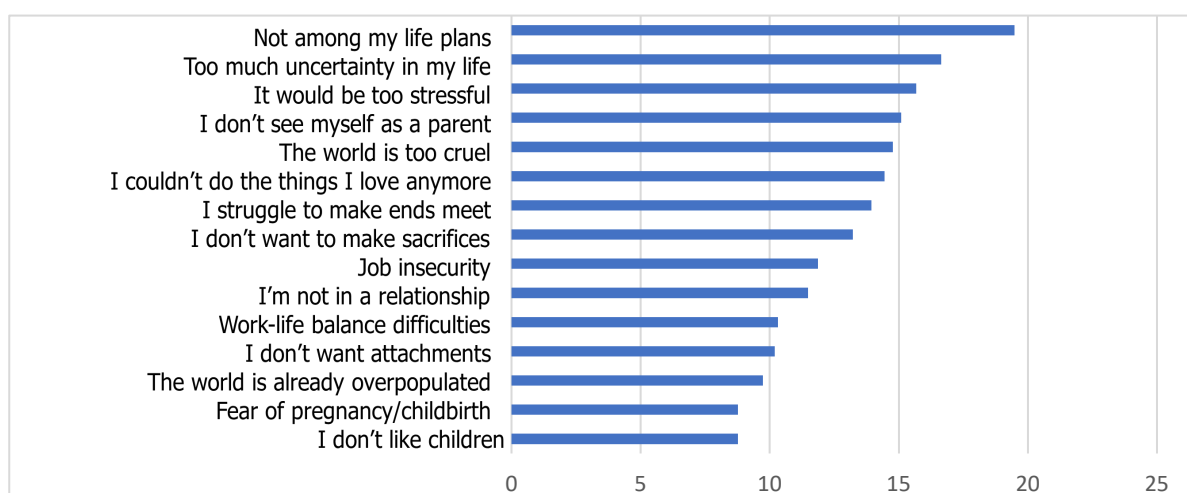
differences and sheds light on the largely unexplored universe of young adults, revealing which motives are most frequently rated as decisive in the decision not to have children. Finally, we perform an *exploratory factor analysis* (EFA) to uncover the latent structure underlying motivational patterns. Factor scores capturing distinct motivational dimensions are then analysed through linear models to determine which demographic, economic, and psychological characteristics are most strongly associated with each dimension.

This multi-step design provides a comprehensive understanding of the drivers of voluntary childlessness in Italy, bridging structural and attitudinal perspectives and offering new empirical evidence on the evolving motivational landscape of fertility intentions.

Preliminary results

Among the childless group at the interview, around 40% does not intend to have a child at all, about one third intends to have children within three years and the remaining third intends to have children in the future. Figure 1 shows the proportion of the not-mutually-exclusive motivations that the childless at the interview who do not intend to have children in the future indicate as fundamental for opting out of parenthood. Among the first motivations (from 13 to 19% of the respondents) we find several items connected with the preference for a child-free life style (“A child is not among my life projects”, “It would be too stressful”, “I could no longer do the things I love to do”, “I don't want to make sacrifices”), but also “I don't see myself in the role of a parent”, expressing a sort of sense of inadequacy for the parental role. Beside these typical childfree motivations, however, we found that between 11 and 17% of respondents reveal several difficulties: problem of uncertainty (Too much uncertainty in my life), financial troubles (“I struggle to make it to the end of the month”) and job insecurity, but also difficulties with work-life balance. Interestingly, the fifth motivation indicated as fundamental is “It's too ugly a world” (14.8%), an indication of pessimism on the current situation on the planet that it is also expressed by those who respond that “The earth is already overpopulated” (10.5%). Other worries expressed are linked surprising to the experience of pregnancy or delivery, that would prevent around 1 out of 10 of the respondents to intend children in the future.

Figure 1. Share (in %) of childless respondents citing each reason as a fundamental motivation for not wanting (future) parenthood



The preliminary results (Table 1) of the factor analysis identify four interpretable factors: (1) preference for a childfree lifestyle; (2) concern about uncertainty and precarity; (3) family concerns; (4) global and ecological worries;

Table 1: Main variables with the highest factor loadings for each extracted factor

Factor 1. <i>Preference for a childfree lifestyle</i>	Factor 2. <i>Concern about uncertainty and precarity</i>	Factor 3. <i>Family concerns</i>	Factor 4. <i>Global and ecological worries</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I don't want to make sacrifices - I don't want attachments - I don't see myself as a parent - I don't like children - It's not part of my life plans - I couldn't do the things I love anymore - It would be too stressful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Financial difficulties - Job insecurity - Too much uncertainty in my life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I have to take care of relatives - Having a child would put my relationship at risk - With a child, my partner would put me in the background 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The world is too cruel - The world is already overpopulated - Climate change

Linear models indicate that motivational factors are associated both with personality traits and structural characteristics. For the first factor, preference for a childfree lifestyle, higher scores are observed among women, non-religious and employed individuals, and those with greater risk propensity, with younger respondents more inclined toward a childfree orientation. The second factor, concern about uncertainty and precarity, is more clearly linked to structural and affective dimensions: it is stronger among singles, those in LAT relationships, the unemployed, and respondents with lower optimism. Family concerns (F3) are associated with risk propensity, resilience, and optimism. Finally, global and ecological worries (F4) show weak structural associations, but significant ties with resilience and gender – being stronger among women – and an age effect - slightly higher among younger respondents - pointing to a moral and reflective dimension of non-parenthood motivations

Conclusion

This study assesses the determinants of non-parenthood intentions, bridging the gap between structural explanations (economic and institutional constraints) and subjective motivational frameworks (values, attitudes, psychological orientations). In doing so, it contributes new empirical evidence on the changing meaning of voluntary childlessness in the Italian context and provides a foundation for comparative work within Europe.

In conclusion, recent data from *ChildZero survey* reveals that among Italian childless young adults (25-45), not intending to have children in the future, emerge on the one hand a group expressing a net preference for a childfree lifestyle, on the other, a group showing global concerns for the planet. For a not neglectable group of people, however, childlessness seems rather a strategy to navigate precarity. For this group, adequate policies in support would be necessary.