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Swimming Against the Tide: Resistance Strategies and Agentic Skills Used by Childfree Women

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Abstract: In pronatalist societies, the decision to remain childfree creates a conflict-laden scenario. This article explores how childfree women confront social hostility and defend their reproductive autonomy through resistance strategies and tactics. With this aim, the results of a feminist research, positioned from feminist Standpoint theory and digital ethnography, are presented. The researcher conducted biographical-narrative interviews with sixteen voluntary childless women from Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, Spain, and the United Kingdom, all of whom were members of a childfree Facebook group. This research revealed that there is a persistent tension between societal pressure placed on these women in pronatalist societies and their exercise of reproductive autonomy. This tension compels them to adopt four resistance strategies: questioning socialization and societal expectations surrounding motherhood; coping with social pressure; assuming a transgressive identity; and projecting a positive future. Each one of these strategies entails specific tactics employed by the participants. This paper highlights the connections between these strategies, their associated tactics, and the agentic skills involved.

Keywords: childfree women, pronatalism, reproductive autonomy, agentic skills, resistance

Introduction

This paper examines how childfree women maintain reproductive autonomy despite societal hostility. It explores various strategies, tactics, and skills employed by these women, which they develop and refine over the course of their lives. The research presented here centers on the following question: How do women who chose not to become mothers and engage in childfree groups on Facebook experience aggression, and what resistance strategies do they use to defend their reproductive autonomy?

Women who choose not to have children are often rendered invisible in advertising, negatively portrayed in media and film productions (Turnbull, Graham, and Taket 2016; Archetti 2019), and subjected to stigmatization and exclusion in pronatalist societies (Turnbull, Graham, and Taket 2016; Yeshua-Katz 2018; Harrington 2019). Given the opposition they face due to their decision, defending their reproductive autonomy remains challenging (Penney 2022). At this juncture, resistance strategies become vital. Previous research refers to different forms of describing resistance to social pressure among those who have decided not to have children. These include strategies (Hayfield et al. 2019), resistance strategies (Saha 2016; Morison et al. 2016), coping strategies (Muñiz and Ramos 2019), resistance practices (Gomez and Guerrero 2018), and management techniques (Park 2002).

Strategies can be individual, collective, or both. This article focuses on decisions and actions at a personal level. To this end, I present a dialogue between the agentic skills proposed by philosopher Diana Meyers (1989, 2001, 2014), and the resistance strategies and tactics used by women from six Ibero-American countries. The data were collected and analyzed through a feminist digital ethnography. As a

result of this research, I previously published a paper that describes the social pressure experienced these women face. This pressure is exerted by friends, colleagues, and even acquaintances, as noted in other studies (Ávila 2004; Muñiz and Ramos 2019; Penney 2022). In that paper, I also categorized forms of aggression—following Barbara Krahé's concept (2021)—suffered by these women as a form of social punishment (Rojas-Madrigal 2023). Additionally, the research included a second phase of participant observation within two childfree Facebook groups; however, those results are not part of this work.

It is crucial to clarify that my aim is not to suggest that women who have children lack reproductive autonomy. In this context, autonomy is not defined by the act of procreation; rather, it is a complex dimension of a woman's life, especially given the significant impact this decision has on her personal story. Therefore, my focus in this paper is on highlighting the distinctive experiences of women who choose to remain childless, as their rupture with societal reproductive expectations constitutes a transgression, which I will discuss in more detail later. With this established, I will now present the theoretical framework, describe the methodological approach employed, reflect on the results, and conclude with some final thoughts.

Theoretical-Conceptual Framework: Deciding Not to be a Mother and Its Relationship with Reproductive Autonomy

The decision not to gestate or raise children implies a biographical burden for women. It is both historical and social, as it represents a transgression of the woman-mother binomial (Ávila 2005; Gómez and Guerrero 2018), a construct developed over centuries with the purpose of controlling female reproduction. This control has been exercised in various ways: through violence, such as the persecution of women with knowledge about contraception in the Middle Ages, branding them as "witches" (Federici 2013); through the social organization of care work by promoting a sexual division of labor based on biological differences; and through ideological constructs, such as the naturalization of motherhood with the propagation of the "maternal instinct" (Badinter 1981).

The woman-mother binary has been reinforced by pronatalism, defined as "an attitudinal stance that favors and encourages childbearing, as well as supports policies and practices that construe and venerate motherhood as the sine qua non of womanhood" (Gotlib 2016, 331). This ideology is underpinned by a sexist logic that assigns women's primary roles to gestation and child-rearing and is further bolstered by conservative religious discourses that uphold the heteronormative family structure. As noted by Samuel Perry et al. (2022), pronatalism is fundamentally rooted in ideologies characterized by authoritarianism, sexism, conservatism, and nationalism.

Popular media—encompassing films, magazines, news, and advertisements—exacerbates the pronatalist discourse by depicting motherhood as the principal source of fulfillment for women. Diana Meyers (2002) posits that a representational system has been constructed in which womanhood is subsumed by motherhood, resulting in the idealization of the mother figure (e.g., Marian imagery). She calls "this pronatalist discourse matrigyno-idolatry" (48).

The pronatalist ideology and the matrigyno-idolatry affect voluntarily childless women across various cultural backgrounds, who are often stigmatized as unfeminine (Ruegemer and Dziengel 2022), immature, incomplete (Ávila 2005), unsuccessful (Gotlib 2016), selfish (Peterson 2015), lazy, unusual (Martínez and Andreatta 2015), and even child-hating (Saha 2016). As a result, women who choose not to have children often navigate a social environment that is hostile to their reproductive decisions.

Despite the prominence of pronatalist discourses and the efforts of conservative groups to limit women's control over their own bodies, there is considerable questioning and resistance from feminist

activism and academic scholarship. Consequently, it has been possible to historicize motherhood, and collective actions have been undertaken to guarantee sexual and reproductive rights. Furthermore, examining how control has been exercised over women's bodies has enabled the conceptualization of motherhood as a social construct (Palomar 2004) that is "both the source and effect of gender" (Palomar 2005, 36).

In this context, women's reproductive autonomy is positioned as a relevant matter. Why focus on autonomy rather than reproductive freedom? Because reproductive decisions are not made within a framework that allows for the free exercise of choice. As Dorothy Roberts (2007) and Orna Donath (2016) point out, these decisions are taken in a context plagued by moral norms, discrimination, and social pressures, shaped by reproductive policies that constrain available options. Thus, it is more appropriate to speak of reproductive autonomy, exercised within a sociohistorical context and a limited spectrum of options (Álvarez 2015). These options are further shaped by systems of inequality based on class, race, ethnicity, age, disability status, geographical origin, and religion (Viveros 2016). They are also interwoven —as Patricia Rodriguez (2015) indicates—with the historical oppression of women as a gender and the consequent interest in regulating and controlling female sexuality. It is not the same for a woman to exercise her reproductive autonomy today as it was a century ago. Similarly, it is different to exercise it within the boundaries of a state that prohibits and criminalizes abortion compared to one that legalizes and provides safe conditions to for the practice. Although legal and institutional availability can restrict or expand the margins for exercising reproductive autonomy, all women, to varying degrees, face their decisions within a framework of social pressure imposed by heteronormative and familistic norms.

Because reproductive autonomy is exercised within a historical, geographical, political, economic, cultural, legal, and social framework, it is critical to examine how childfree women manage to resist and sustain their decisions, even when this implies going against the current. What is autonomy and how is it exercised? Diana Meyers (2014) argues that the exercise of autonomy cannot be measured on a scale that assesses how closely a person's decisions and actions conform to social norms. Rather, it should be based on whether a person is able to express their desires, needs, and distinctive values—their identity, authenticity, and uniqueness—throughout the process. Autonomy is not determined by outcomes (e.g., whether a woman becomes a mother) but by the process of decision-making and its execution. Meyers's theory emphasizes that autonomous individuals make use of a repertoire of agentic skills in their daily decisions and actions:

> The autonomous individual is an evolving subject—a subject who is in charge of her life within the limits of imperfect introspective decipherability and welcome, though in some ways intrusive (or downright harmful), social relations; a subject who fashions her self-portrait and shapes her self-narrative through a process of skillful self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction. (2001, 744)

Meyers (2001) argues that agentic skills are vital in the process of self-determination, requiring practice to develop and coordinate effectively. Regular use of these skills enables women to apply them during critical decision-making processes or when they sense that something is amiss in their lives. Mastering these skills can make women less likely to submit to oppressive practices and more inclined to join others for a common cause (Meyers 2014). The skills, as outlined by the author, are as follows (Meyers 2014, 121):

> 1. Introspection skills that sensitize individuals to their feelings and desires, enable them to interpret their subjective experience and help them judge how accurate their self-understanding is

2. Communication skills that enable individuals to get the benefit of others' perceptions, background knowledge, insights, advice, and support
3. Memory skills that enable individuals to recall relevant experiences—from their own lives and also those that acquaintances have recounted or that they have encountered in literature or other art forms
4. Imagination skills that enable individuals to envisage feasible options—to audition a range of self-conceptions they might aspire to and to preview a variety of courses of action they might follow
5. Analytical skills and reasoning skills that enable individuals to assess the relative merits of different conceptions of what they could be like and the directions they could pursue
6. Self-nurturing skills that enable individuals to secure their physical and psychological equilibrium despite missteps and setbacks—that enable them to appreciate the overall worthiness of their self-understandings and pursuits and to assure themselves of their capacity to carry on when they find themselves wanting or their life directions misguided
7. Volitional skills that enable individuals to resist pressure to capitulate to convention and enable them to maintain their commitment to their values and goals.

By examining resistance strategies and tactics, this paper aims to understand how women who choose not to become mothers sustain their reproductive decisions and how these decisions are supported by agentic skills.

Methodology

In feminist research, it is essential to challenge, dismantle, and change gender inequalities. This study defines the problem, objectives, methodological approach, and instruments through a feminist lens that advocates for women's reproductive autonomy, drawing from Standpoint theory, which emphasizes the generation of critical analysis and proposals in research based on situated knowledge (Harding 2009; Silvestre, López, and Royo 2020). This approach guided continuous reflection on the feminist postulates that form the basis of this research and their relationship with information gathering, interpretation, and the communication of findings. Self-criticism was also crucial in this study to avoid, as Barbara Biglia (2014) points out, falling into the assumption that feminist knowledge is produced merely because of the researcher's position.

To explore the experiences of childfree women on the social network Facebook, which facilitates the creation of interest-based groups, digital ethnography proved to be a valuable method. This approach involved technology-mediated contact in a shared digital space, where I engaged with participants in online settings (Pink et al. 2016; Hine 2017).

I conducted a digital ethnography study in three childfree groups to gain an immersive understanding of their interactions and document the unique culture that emerges online. This was facilitated by what Hine (2017) describes as co-presence, achieved through regular participation in each group, including reading posts, reacting, commenting, and following ongoing discussions. These groups function as hubs for sharing stories and experiences related to the social pressures faced by childfree individuals, validating this lifestyle, and exploring ways to resist pronatalism. Given their purpose, each of these groups can be classified as an "online support group" (Hine 2017, 323). While this work delves more deeply into the interviews conducted, a detailed description and analysis of the posts can be found in other publications I have produced on this subject.

I contacted the interviewees from one of these three Facebook groups, which consists exclusively of women who have chosen not to become mothers. Given the Latin-American and Spanish origins of the group members, all interactions were conducted in Spanish. Although the group is private, its existence is

publicly visible, but only members can access its content. At the time of the interviews, the group had 9,134 participants. As a Central American childfree woman and a member of the group, I was able to connect with potential interviewees. I posted a message in the group feed, expressing my interest in conducting interviews for research purposes. Fifty-one members expressed interest in participating. I then contacted each of them, requesting their email addresses to provide further information about the study and to send them the informed consent form.[1] Ultimately, sixteen women completed the consent process and continued communicating with me via Messenger and email to arrange their interviews. All sessions were conducted virtually through Skype or Google Meet and held in Spanish. Utilizing these online communication platforms was very useful because, as Adolfo Estalella and Elisenda Ardèvol note, conducting research through virtual means allows for "accessing realities that would be extremely difficult, inaccessible, or impossible if these technologies did not mediate the process" (2011, 96) In other words, without e-interviews, it would not have been possible to reach women from seven different countries due to my time and resource constraints. Biographical-narrative research was used to address the selected participants. I applied biographical interviews, which promote a dialogic approach between the interviewer and the interviewee, allowing the interviewee—after consenting to the topic—to co-create a narrative during the exchange (Bolivar 2012). The interviews provided insight into fragments of the life stories of these voluntarily childless women.

This conjunction of Standpoint theory with digital ethnography and the biographical-narrative interview required a thorough review of the ethical requirements, following similar guidelines from previous research (Allen 1996; Astudillo-Mendoza, Figueroa-Quiroz, and Cifuentes-Zunino 2020). I maintained a transparent stance regarding my identity and intentions as a researcher, inviting the participants to take part voluntarily. All sixteen participants completed the online informed consent process, during which they were fully informed about how the data would be handled. Additionally, each participant chose a fictitious name (listed in figure 1), and all necessary measures were taken to protect their physical and online identities.

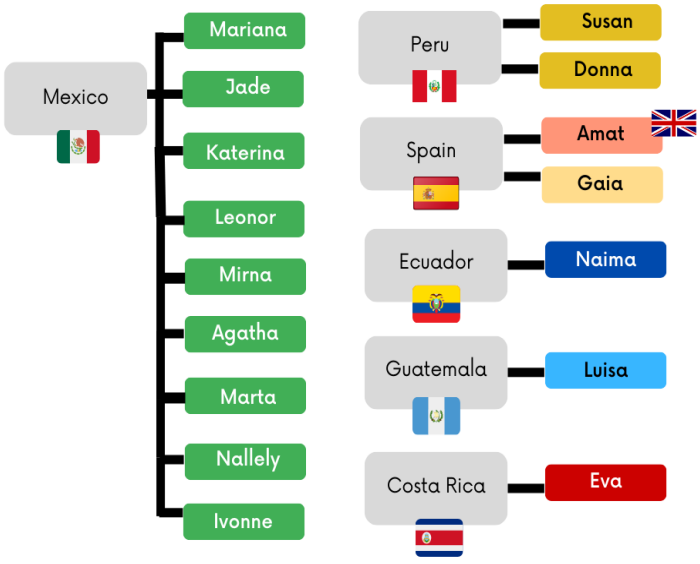


Figure 1: Participants' Country of Origin

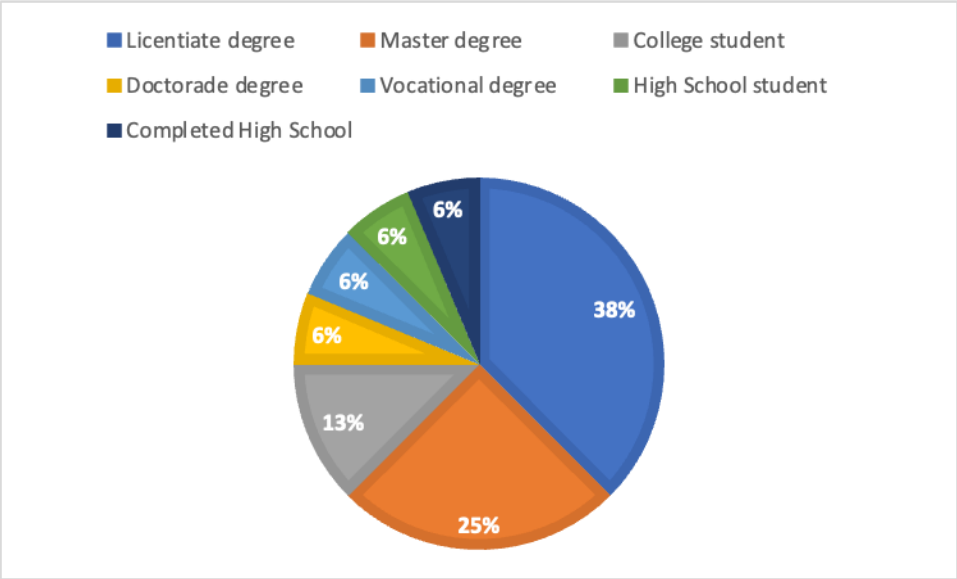
After the interviews were conducted, I transcribed them verbatim. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, starting with an initial round of coding that divided the dataset into "units of meaning" (McAllum et al. 2019, 5) using NVIVO nodes. I then implemented a second level of coding which required "extensive rounds of (re)coding to create categories that will adequately integrate codes" (McAllum et al. 2019, 5). Throughout this process, I identified codes related to social pressure and resistance and subsequently established categories that enabled the identification of specific forms of resistance and associated skills. Finally, I transformed these categories into themes (McAllum et al. 2019), facilitating the description and reflection on the strategies, tactics, and related skills.

A significant methodological point is that although the interview instrument included questions about the resistance exercised to sustain reproductive autonomy, I did not ask questions that directly verified the use of the skills proposed by Meyers. Instead, the questions were broad and open-ended. For example: What strategies have you used to maintain your decision despite social pressure? Based on the responses, I was able to conclude that many of the reflections and actions of these women are related to the skills they have developed throughout their lives. My intention was never to force the answers fit the theory; nevertheless, after the coding process, correspondences between the narratives and the theoretical references became evident.

Sixteen women from Ibero-America participated in the study, as shown in figure 1, with most being from Mexico. This is because the Facebook group primarily consists of women from this country, which can be attributed to its population density. The selection of the interviewees was coincidental: they were the women who responded to my post expressing interest in participating, who then replied to my follow-up messages and completed the informed consent process. Of all the interviewees, only one—Amat—does not reside in her country of origin.

As part of the interview instrument, I considered various characteristics of the participants to determine whether, in addition to gender oppression, they were exposed to other forms of inequality or oppression that could also impact their reproductive autonomy. From an intersectional perspective (Viveros 2016), I inquired about their age, health conditions, disabilities, level of education, employment, ethnic and gender identity, and sexual orientation. We also discussed the reasons behind their decision not to have children, the significance of motherhood, the responses they received from different individuals and groups, the social pressures they encountered, the nuances of being childless in their local context, their strategies for resisting social pressure, their aspirations and projects, their involvement in the Facebook group, and other related topics.

The interviewees ranged in age from twenty to thirty-nine years, with a median age of thirty-one. By coincidence, all the participants identified as heterosexual women, and none reported belonging to any specific ethnic or racial group. Regarding health, only one participant mentioned hyperthyroidism, which influenced her decision not to conceive. Two interviewees had disabilities acquired as a result of traffic accidents, but only one considered it a significant factor in deciding not to have children. In terms of education, most participants held a university degree (Licentiate and Master's), as shown in graph 1.



Graph 1: Participants' Educational Attainment

Regarding occupation, nine participants were employed in their respective professions, two held low-wage jobs, two were unemployed, and three were students. In terms of marital status, seven participants reported being single, three were in a relationship but unmarried, five were married, and one was in a common-law partnership.

Given that this research was conducted in the second decade of the twenty-first century, all the women interviewed had access to contraceptive technologies and basic reproductive information. However, there were significant differences in the right to abortion based on their country of residence. In Great Britain, abortion is legal before twenty-four weeks of pregnancy (British Pregnancy Advisory Service 2023). In Spain, it is legal up to fourteen weeks, and in cases of risk to the woman, the term is extended up to twenty-two weeks. In Mexico, voluntary termination of pregnancy was recognized as a constitutional right in 2021, and since then, the federal states have been adjusting their legal frameworks. Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Peru have the strictest restrictions on abortion. In Guatemala, abortion is only permitted to save a woman's life after all other options have been exhausted. In Costa Rica and Peru, it is allowed only to preserve a woman's health. Ecuador has similar restrictions but also permits abortion in cases where women with mental disabilities have been raped. In these four countries, there are prison sentences for women who consent to or seek an abortion, as well as for those who perform abortions (Center for Reproductive Rights 2024; CEPAL 2024). Although this topic is extensive and not the main subject of this paper, it is important to emphasize that legality does not necessarily equate to access; access can vary significantly within the same country. Moreover, while these countries have similar legal standards, variations in the criminalization and enforcement of abortion laws can also occur.

In the study, no notable differences were found in the education level, employment, or disability status in relation to social pressure to become a mother. However, clear differences emerged based on geography, age, and religion. For instance, Spanish women living in Europe experienced less social pressure compared to Latin American women. Social pressure also varied with age, becoming more intense when women were expected to become mothers. The specific age range associated with this expectation varied depending on the respondent's country of origin. Finally among the Latin American participants, stronger social pressure was linked to higher levels of religiosity of the immediate context. Therefore, it can be

affirmed that for the participants in the research, "place of origin, age range, and religion are the three key factors that both differentiate and simultaneously shape social pressure" (Rojas-Madrigal 2023, 179).

It is important to note that, despite differences in country of origin, age, educational level, and occupation, each woman experienced social pressure to varying degrees and employed resistance strategies, tactics, and skills, as I discuss below.

Results and Discussion

When visualizing the life trajectory of the sixteen women interviewed, it becomes clear that the decision not to become a mother manifests in different ways. Some interviewees—Mirna, Amat, Susan, and Eva—identified it as a childhood decision; others—Mariana, Jade, Luisa, Katerina, Leonor, and Agatha—traced it back to their adolescence; and for others—Ivonne, Nallely, Gaia, Marta, Donna, and Naima—it was an adult decision. For some, reluctance to assume the roles of gestation and child-rearing was evident in their childhood games, while for others, the decision was shaped by numerous life experiences:

> Not all of us made the decision when we were little . . . Personally, life took me to it . . . Let me tell you, when I was a little girl and then as a teenager, I used to say that at 24 I would be married and I would have children, like my mother, that was my ideal for life, because that was what I saw since I was little with my cousins and all the women around me . . . then it got to the point where I didn't even want to study a university career because I didn't see any sense in it, but as I got older, I met people, I went out, I got to know what I could do on my own and that's what made me finally decide: you know what? I don't want children. (Ivonne, in discussion with the author, March 21, 2021)

Ivonne's words illustrate the profound impact of pronatalism and matrigyno-idolatry on women, highlighting how heterosexual marriage and procreation are often perceived as life's ideal and as expectations imposed by societal norms. As Helen Peterson and Kristina Engwall observe, "the pronatalist norms included that wanting a child is the natural order of things, and that a woman who mothers has also achieved her biological destiny" (2019, 386).This is undoubtedly linked to the cultural context of the study participants, characterized by narratives that reinforce traditional family structures and heteronormative values while simultaneously rejecting any deviations from the motherhood mandate. In Spain, despite advances in reproductive rights, pronatalist attitudes persist, and women who choose not to become mothers face considerable social pressure and stereotypes. They are labeled as unproductive, selfish, irresponsible, and incomplete (Miguel 2019). Similarly, childfree women in Latin America experience stigmatization, being perceived as immature, incomplete, irresponsible and selfish (Ávila 2005; Mandujano-Salazar 2021). These women endure persistent social scrutiny and questioning regarding their decision (Muñiz and Ramos 2019) due to the normalization of motherhood.

This context explains why the biographies of the interviewees present moments of ambivalence and an arduous process of reflection as they confront the social pressure associated with defying the procreative mandate. The analysis of these biographies enabled me to trace a relationship between resistance strategies, their tactics, and the associated agentic skills. Through the findings, I classified four strategies. In each strategy, the connection to previous research is presented, but with two novel contributions: the first detailing the tactics used by participants in each strategy, and second explaining the agentic skills presented by Meyers (2014) in relation to these results.

Before describing the strategies, tactics, and skills details, the following table outlines the order and relationships among them:

Strategies	Tactics	Agentic Skills
Questioning socialization and societal expectations about motherhood	Awareness of socialization and social pressure	Memory Introspection Analytical and reasoning
	Reflective view of motherhood	Memory Analytical and reasoning Communication
	Validation of the desire to remain childless	Imagination Introspection Analytical and reasoning
Coping with social pressure	Use of humor and sarcasm	Self-nurturing
	Avoid uncomfortable situations	Self-nurturing
	Demand respect	Volitional
	Articulate the benefits of childlessness	Memory Imagination Analytical and reasoning
Assuming transgressive identity	Seek support from social networks	Self-nurturing Communication
	Reframe the transgression	Volitional Introspection
Projecting a positive future	Question future threats	Memory Volitional Analytical and reasoning
	Focus on personal goals, dreams, and projects	Imagination
	Other childfree women inspire me and give me strength	Memory Introspection

First Strategy: Questioning Socialization and Societal Expectations About Motherhood

This strategy reflects the participants' ability to recognize that their socialization has been shaped by a procreative mandate. Through their experiences, they can distinguish between their personal desires and societal expectations regarding motherhood. This awareness enables them to identify instances when they are subjected to social pressure. Gallardo Muñiz and María Elena Ramos Tovar (2019) also identified this strategy in their research, linking it to a redefinition of education for motherhood, which allows differentiation between social impositions and personal desires.

I identified three tactics in the data within this strategy: awareness of socialization and social pressure; a reflective view of motherhood; and validation of the desire to remain childless. In the first tactic, the interviewees explore how they came to understand that society socializes and pressures women into motherhood. To do this, they use memory skills that help them analyze their biographies retrospectively in terms of their decision not to have children (Meyers 2014).

> It was during my first year of high school, I was 15 years old and precisely in Psychology class, when a professor … wanted to have a debate about when we wanted to be mothers or fathers, and I brought up the subject, I was the only one who commented that the truth is that we are taught to want to be parents. (Leonor, in discussion with the author, March 13, 2021)

Likewise, participants use introspection skills to confront emotions, desires, projects, perceptions, and self-concept (Meyers 2014) related to their decision. They also employ analytical and reasoning skills to critically assess socialization and patriarchal mandates.

> We are in a surprisingly sexist era, women are expected to be the best mothers, the best professionals, and the best everything. And you can't achieve everything, it's an exaggeration, I think it's diabolical, to be honest, everything that is asked of women today, you can have it all, do you want to? do you? do you really want to have it all? (Gaia, in discussion with the author, March 4, 2021)

In the second tactic, a reflective view of motherhood, participants utilize communication, memory, analytical, and reasoning skills to present a realistic perspective on gestation and parenting. Meyers (2014) notes that communication skills help individuals obtain relevant information by listening to others, capturing knowledge, seeking advice, and gaining support. This is exemplified by Naima, who recounts the perspective of her mother and grandmother on child-rearing: "They tell me "This is hard, it will take your breath away if you decide to do it, but I would suggest you not to" (Naima, in discussion with the author, February 20, 2021). Naima also employs memory skills, similar to Agatha, who, as illustrated in the following quote, uses these skills alongside analytical and reasoning abilities:

> It is documented, presenting hypertension problems, and the risk of dying mainly due to pre-eclampsia or eclampsia, which are the complications related to blood pressure in pregnancy, is very high. (Agatha, in discussion with the author, February 27, 2021)

The final tactic is the validation of the desire to remain childless, even when it contradicts societal expectations. For this purpose, participants use imagination skills (Meyers 2014) to project their future and

carefully visualize what their lives would look like as mothers, considering their current circumstances. Additionally, they employ introspective, analytical, and reasoning skills:

> What I am very clear about is that I would be unhappier if I were a mother, I know that I would love my children, I do not doubt it, I would not doubt it at all, but I know that I would lose quality of life, and I know that the life project I want is incompatible with having children, and I am not ashamed to say it either. (Amat, in discussion with the author, February 19, 2021)

> We relate the maternity part to the childhood stage mostly, that is, we always think "I am a mother" and we think about breastfeeding or small children, meaning, we do not consider that they are going to grow up, that they are also going to be teenagers and that they are also going to be adults and that they are also going to have a life. (Eva, in discussion with the author, March 25, 2021)

Second Strategy: Coping with Social Pressure

Several studies confirm the impact of social pressure on voluntary childless women (Park 2002; Gotlib 2016; Saha 2016; Muñiz and Ramos 2019; Hayfield et al. 2019; Penney 2022). These studies present different ways of coping with pressure, often referred to as strategies or resistance practices. In this research, coping with social pressure is conceptualized as a strategy consisting of four tactics, which vary depending on the specific situations women encounter. These tactics include employing humor and sarcasm, avoiding uncomfortable situations, demanding respect, and articulating the benefits of childlessness. Using humor and sarcasm has been identified as a strategy by Dipabali Saha (2016) and Muñiz and Ramos (2019). For the participants, this approach services as a way to respond when asked about their reasons for not wanting to have children: "I think it depends a lot on the person, if I have a certain amount of trust I laugh or make a joke or change the subject" (Marta, in discussion with the author, February 25, 2021). The use of humor and sarcasm involves self-nurturing or self-care skills (Meyers 2014). These skills are a source of self-validation and enable women to maintain their emotional well-being amid social pressures.

The second tactic, avoiding uncomfortable situations, is also related to self-nurturing skills (Meyers 2014) because it serves as a form of protection for these women. They choose not to expose themselves and keep their ideas private to avoid being attacked. Amanda Penney (2022) considered this a method of self-preservation to cope with judgement about their decision to remain childfree: "I am mostly evasive to protect myself because people are very cruel to those who do not want to have children" (Susan, in discussion with the author, February 7, 2021).

The next tactic, demanding respect, is a more direct approach to confronting social pressure. It involves speaking up in defense of their reproductive autonomy and temporarily halting excessive pressure in certain settings. This is connected to volitional skills (Meyers 2014) because it involves expressing self-determination and self-direction:

> In Peru, things are handled a lot in a way of not saying something so that they don't take it this way or that way, and I'm not like that. My mom tells me that I lack restraint, yes, maybe so, but I prefer to say things as they are than later swallow my lies to pretend something or to be someone I'm not. (Donna, in discussion with the author, February 21, 2021)

Penney (2022) described this approach as a defensive strategy rather than a tactic, used by childfree individuals who are direct and assertive when they feel judged by others. However, I view it is a component of a broader strategy for coping with social pressure.

Finally, articulating the benefits of childlessness is associated with memory, imagination, and analytical and reasoning skills (Meyers 2014), as the interviewed women consistently reflect on the implications of motherhood. For some, having children is complex due to environmental concerns; they raise issues of overpopulation and resources depletion, aligning with Saha's (2016) previous research findings. For others, the analysis focuses more on everyday aspects of life, such as time availability and economic conditions. They consider how motherhood would impact and alter their current jobs, studies, and future projects. As part of their reasoning, they carefully assess the daily lives of the mothers around them.

> I have been working since I was 15 years old . . . at work among female colleagues they say, "My children did this and that, and to top it off my husband is also another child." So, I think that women suffer much, too much, and . . . I feel that a child does not help a lot to make your life more pleasant, to stop suffering, my main feeling is that women who are mothers suffer more because one has to do a thousand things and one has no time for oneself. (Mariana, in discussion with the author, February 27, 2021)

In addition, these women's concerns are closely tied to the economic, social, and political instability of their countries of residence—conditions that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic: "In my country there is too much poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy, only a very small percentage of us have the opportunity to study; jobs are very scarce" (Luisa, in discussion with the author, March 12, 2021).

In summary, coping with social pressure involves addressing negative comments about their reproductive choices, either by responding directly, using humor, or avoiding unpleasant situations. The participants handle this pressure more effectively by articulating both social and personal reasons that lead them to a clear conclusion: remaining childless is preferable for them.

Third Strategy: Assuming Transgressive Identity

By swimming against the tide and breaking the procreative mandate, childfree women occupy what Anna Gotlib (2016) has termed a liminal space:

> To be liminal is to be in-between: to be seen and invisible; to speak, but not necessarily to be understood; to exist within a community but to not necessarily be of it. The burdens borne by voluntarily childless women locate them in a unique position within the intersectionality of social and political oppressions: regardless of whatever else they do, this single choice invariably defines them as transgressive in the eyes of others, and because this transgression cannot be undone by any other act (other than motherhood itself), it marks them as permanently and irrevocably liminal—on the periphery of the moral spaces whose language they no longer seem to speak. (342)

However, the interview data revealed that the women I spoke with do not remain isolated in this invisible and oppressive space. Instead, they employ two tactics to reconcile their perceived transgression.

On one hand, they seek support through social networks that cultivate a sense of belonging rather than separation. On the other hand, they reframe the notion of transgression, as I will explain below.

Network support can be found in the immediate circle, as in Eva's case, or in virtual networks, as Jade describes with reference to childfree Facebook groups. In both cases, communication skills (Meyers 2014) are essential for gathering support from others:

> I am an only child and my extended family is just 5 female cousins and 1 male cousin, the oldest has already decided to have a vasectomy and not to procreate, then my cousin A doesn't want to have children and my cousin S doesn't want to have children either and neither do the other two, so when we are at family meetings or parties it is very nice because we are all adults so we can talk about whatever we want to. (Eva, in discussion with the author, March 25, 2021)

> I feel sort of like I am understood in these groups ... I feel good knowing that I am not the only woman who does not need or does not want to be a mother and that this does not mean that we stop being or are less of a woman. (Jade, in discussion with the author, February 18, 2021)

In the following quote, Gaia expresses the central role of these networks and provides further evidence that they contribute to the strengthening of self-nurturing skills, defined by Meyers (2014) as a way to secure their psychological equilibrium:

> It is important to have a community, if you think you are alone or that you are a weirdo or you are the exception to the norm, you will try to conform, you will try to do what everyone else does, but if you know that there are people in your same situation who do not have any problem, they simply decide to be like that and they are very happy, and if you meet people in your community who are maybe 10 years older than you, 20 or 30 years older than you... because society puts a lot of fear in you, telling you "oh you are going to be different, you are going to be unhappy, you can't be like that" and yes you can, you have to see examples. (Gaia, in discussion with the author, March 4, 2021)

In Gaia's view, the value of social networks is highlighted as they provide a means to share an identity that society labels as negative. This interaction helps individuals feel less alienated and out of place—not because their identity becomes more aligned with societal norms, but because it is regarded as a valid option within their own networks.

The second tactic is reframing the transgression. To this end, the interviewees offered narratives that diverged from societal norms. Rather than accepting the marginalized position assigned to them, they redefined their identities in fulfilling ways: “I have never seen myself as a mother, I cannot miss something I don't have, so for me, I'm fine, I'm complete, I don't need children, I don't see myself with children” (Luisa, in discussion with the author, March 12, 2021).

Reframing transgression involves shifting perspectives to view deviation from conventional norms as a desirable trait. The data show that participants tend to place a positive value on making autonomous decisions, even when defying family expectations. This tactic requires introspection and volitional skills. Agatha's narrative about her career choice, despite her family’s pressure to become a physician, exemplifies the utilization of these skills:

> I always wanted to study nutrition and my mother and father, because of family influence, wanted me to study medicine. My father said "no, Agatha has to study medicine because doctors are the best and medicine, medicine, medicine" and I said "no, I want nutrition" and they brought me brochures, they even enrolled me in some propaedeutic courses and I said, "oh yes, yes", and I ended up doing all the paperwork myself to enroll in the major I wanted. … I was always very independent in that sense, both in important decisions and in matters that I felt I didn't like. (Agatha, in discussion with the author, February 27, 2021)

Introspection skills are crucial because they help participants become more aware of their feelings and desires, allowing them to interpret their subjective experiences and identities (Meyers 2014) positively, even in the face of social pressure:

> It's not that I don't care about people's comments, but at the end you have to focus on what you think, on what you decide, on what you want for yourself and how you visualize a future, then especially because a comment from someone will be momentary, it will not go further and will not transcend to more, so I think that also depends on how we know how to manage those emotions. (Nallely, in discussion with the author, March 6, 2021)

The interviews reveal that participants place a high value on autonomy in decision-making, viewing it as integral to embracing their transgressive identity. Despite pronatalist discourses suggesting that women should prioritize others' needs over their own, the interviews indicate that childfree women are motivated by the freedom to manage their time, change jobs, pursue further education, travel, and plan for the future without the added responsibility of raising a child. Helen Peterson (2015) also highlights the importance of freedom for childfree women in Sweden, describing it as “a part of their deep-rooted identity and as an important part of their personal identity construction” (186).

Fourth Strategy: Projecting a Positive Future

As discussed in a previous paper (Rojas-Madrigal 2023), childfree women often face warnings about a grim future. These warnings imply that if they do not change their decision, they risk losing what they currently have, experiencing a lonely and unhappy old age, and even suffering from illness. Notably, the narrative about physical suffering has been reinforced by medical professionals who link childlessness with an increased risk of cancer and other uterine diseases. In response to these negative messages, the women interviewees have developed strategies to envision a positive future. The data reveal three primary tactics used for this purpose: questioning the validity of future threats, focusing on personal goals, dreams, and projects, and drawing inspiration and strength from other childfree women.

In the first resistance tactic, these women challenge the assumption that having children guarantees future care, as expressed by Amat in the following quote:

> I often hear "Oh, but if you don't have children, who's going to take care of you when you grow up?" and that's a comment that hurts me a lot . . . well, to start, having children with that mentality is very selfish . . . And unfortunately, having children does not guarantee that they will take care of you in

> the future, because, well, this world has a bit of everything and children go around and around, just like parents do. (Amat, in discussion with the author, February 19, 2021)

Cruz Gómez, Brenda Magali, and Olivia Tena Guerrero (2018) found in their research with Mexican women that questioning medical knowledge as absolute and true, which reproduces stereotypes about women's bodies, is an important resistance practice for childfree women. Challenging these threats and making decisions based on desire rather than fear requires memory, volition, and analytical and reasoning skills.

In all the interviews, it was evident that goals, dreams, and projects hold significant importance for these women. They use their imagination skills to create a vision of their future. Regardless of their age, educational level, economic status, or place of residence, all of them expressed optimistic expectations for their future if they remain childfree:

> I come from a middle class family, my current level of education is high school, so the fact of being able to pursue a career at the University is very demanding, so 20 or 30 years from now I see myself working in my career doing long shifts, I could not raise a child, I would not know what to do with my long shift and having such a demanding responsibility. (Luisa, in discussion with the author, March 12, 2021)

Finally, the last tactic, which I have named "other childfree women inspire me and give me strength," relates to memory and introspection skills. These skills allow for a retrospective reading of one's biography, helping to analyze how these memories align with one's self-image (Meyers 2014). The tactic involves recalling experiences from role models who hold symbolic significance, such as Gaia's aunt or Naima's father's ex-girlfriend:

> I have a very old aunt who is probably 75 years old, almost 80 . . . her life is about helping people, free classes of a thousand different things, lots of volunteering activities and there are always lots of people in her house and it is incredible because as I mentioned she is single and without children and she has never lacked anything, neither love nor companionship, so I have seen that you can grow up and get older by yourself, without children or a partner and be very, very well. (Gaia, in discussion with the author, March 4, 2021)

> Many years ago my dad had a girlfriend . . . she is . . . I mean I have always looked up to her with great admiration . . . She studied, graduated, works, travels, has a partner and everything, I think that she inspired me a lot, because in her I see . . . I see freedom, and that is what I aspire to, to live my life in freedom and peacefully. (Naima, in discussion with the author, February 20, 2021)

The findings indicate that the women interviewed have developed various strategies to cope with pronatalism. Although these strategies and tactics were not used in a planned or structured manner, data analysis enabled me to delineate the relationship between strategies, tactics, and skills, thereby contributing to a more systematic understanding of resistance. While this study focuses on the resistance demonstrated by these sixteen women, I argue that their experiences reflect broader societal changes. This shift is not

necessarily due to a reduction in pronatalist pressures, but instead highlights the fact that an increasing number of women now view motherhood as a choice rather than an inevitable destiny.

Conclusions

The decision to have, raise, or adopt a child is a transformative one for women; it changes the course of their lives, their social situation, and even modifies their "economic horizons" (Meyers 2001, 736). This is why feminist actions have focused on the possibility for women to "choose freely and autonomously in matters of procreation, without suffering discrimination, coercion or violence, including the right to abortion as a right over one's body and personal privacy" (Ávila 2004, 119).

This study demonstrates that, through feminist digital ethnography and biographical-narrative interviews, it is possible to trace the resistance strategies, tactics and skills that sustain women's reproductive autonomy in pronatalist societies. This autonomy often conflicts with historical, geographical, political, economic, cultural, legal, and social frameworks that impose possibilities or restrictions on women.

The first strategy identified in this study involves questioning socialization and societal expectations about motherhood. It is supported by memory, communication, introspection, and analytical and reasoning skills. Within this strategy, I identified three tactics used by the participants: awareness of socialization and social pressure; a reflective view of motherhood, and validation of the desire to remain childless.

Humor, sarcasm, avoiding uncomfortable situations, and demanding respect are key tactics used to cope with social pressure, which constitute the second strategy identified. Self-nurturing and volitional skills play important roles in these tactics. As part of this strategy, the women interviewed also articulate the benefits of childlessness, drawing on memory, imagination, and analytical and reasoning skills.

The third strategy involves embracing a transgressive identity. Within this strategy, the participants employ two tactics: seeking support through childfree social networks that foster a sense of belonging rather than isolation, and reframing transgressions. Fully aware that they are defying societal norms and family expectations, they ascribe positive value to their transgressive decisions, viewing them as integral to their autonomous self-portrait. This process is sustained by self-nurturing, communication, volitional, and introspective skills.

The final strategy is projecting a positive future and comprises three tactics: questioning future threats, focusing on goals, dreams, and projects, and what I refer to as "other childfree women inspire me and give me strength." For these tactics, memory, volitional, imagination, introspection and analytical and reasoning skills are crucial.

Based on the explanation of the strategies, it can be concluded that the participants maintain their reproductive autonomy through a complex process of reflection, contrasting their own desires and self-portraits with the socialization processes associated with motherhood. Simultaneously, their continuous and diverse use of agentic skills to confront or avoid social pressure throughout their lives, beyond reproductive autonomy, has allowed these women to remain steadfast in their decision not to become mothers. Ultimately, the decision not to have children is related to their self-image, dreams, projects, and future expectations.

At the conclusion of this research, several key points deserve emphasis: (A) The use of agentic skills is crucial for individuals to exercise autonomy, even in oppressive contexts. (B) It is imperative for academic work to continue challenging pronatalist narratives and resist the naturalization of motherhood as the ultimate marker of ideal femininity. As Helen Peterson argues, one way to resist the reproduction of

pronatalist discourse is to stop assuming "that voluntary childlessness is abnormal" (2015, 189). (C) Politically, women must remain vigilant against conservative and authoritarian ideologies that seek to exert control over their bodies. This requires action to dismantle any proposals that threaten women's autonomy, not just in reproductive matters but across all aspects of life. (D) From a feminist perspective, it is necessary to debate matrigyno-idolatry and propose alternative identity configurations for women.

Given that the participating women come from different geographical regions, the findings cannot be generalized to their respective countries. More research is needed within specific contexts, comparing variables such as urban and rural environments, women with diverse sexual identities, and populations from specific ethnic and racial groups. Additionally, the study does not provide age cohort data, which could help determine whether shifts in attitudes exist across generational groups. Nevertheless, since the results derive from a transnational study, it is reasonable to conclude that while the effects of pronatalism and matrigyno-idolatry may vary, they impact women across different countries. Despite geographical distances, the participants' narratives show more similarities than differences.

Notes

1. The article presented here is based on the findings of the doctoral thesis titled "What if I Don't Want to Be a Mother? Resistance to Aggressions That Challenge Reproductive Autonomy." The research design was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Granada, as it adhered to the principles established in both international and Spanish legislation in the fields of biomedicine, biotechnology, and bioethics, as well as the rights related to the protection of personal data.

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