

My choice to go child-free for the sake of all life

“Is the highest and best use of a planet really to see how many humans can be crammed onto every square mile of its space?”

This is a question that a friend of mine, a senior environmental advocate in his 60s, is fond of repeating. And it is a question that I have mulled over with increasing frequency after I began to study the sixth mass extinction and the climate crisis more seriously. In the last year, a millennial friend and I have both independently come out as being voluntarily child-free. We are both choosing to forego having children because we are aware that the single most impactful decision an individual can make to improve their ecological footprint is to have one child fewer, or none at all (Perkins, 2017).

Coming out as a child-free woman in South-East Asia has been akin to deliberately pinning a bullseye on my own back. Pro-natalism is still strong in South-East Asian culture. I have had elders tell me that I should feel “flattered” if a man tries to assault me to impregnate me via rape, because even having a rape-born child is “better than dying an unwanted, lonely spinster.” Having people wish rape or battery upon me has not daunted me one bit, however. Despite the seemingly insurmountable cultural barriers we are up against, the ranks of the child-free movement are still growing steadily. And many of the young adults in my age group are choosing to remain child-free for environmental reasons.

To the hostile naysayers who have repeatedly told me that I have no worth as a woman if I don’t have children, I say this: in forfeiting my right to have biological children, I have freed up my time and

energy to improve the lives of already existing children. I regularly volunteer with the Brighter Brains Institute, which is bringing education and contraception to impoverished young girls and orphans in East Africa. The United Nations’ Children’s Emergency Fund has estimated that there are a staggering 153 million orphans in the world at present. If my partner and I decide to have children, we would prefer to give one or two of these 153 million orphans a loving home, as opposed to bringing another child into an overcrowded world barreling towards climate and extinction catastrophes.

I do not presume to tell other people what choices to make regarding their family life, but I would like to be accorded that same respect. I intend to channel my efforts and resources into fighting for the best possible future for the 153 million orphans alive today, and for the children and grandchildren of any parents or grandparents who may be reading this (SOS Children’s Villages – USA, 2017). More importantly, the time and energy that, hypothetically, I would have dedicated to rearing a child can now be dedicated to campaigning to repair the damage that has been done to the ecosphere, and to supporting the existence of millions of other species with whom we share the Earth. ■

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