



August 2026

Women in the 21st Century: Why They No Longer Want to Have It All

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Summary

Women today do not reject careers, relationships, motherhood, or personal growth. Increasingly, however, they are questioning a model in which they are expected to manage all of these roles simultaneously while bearing a disproportionate share of the costs and receiving insufficient institutional support. The gap between women's aspirations and their ability to achieve them has a direct impact on their well-being, relationships, and decisions about parenthood.

Key points

- Expanding opportunities for women has not replaced traditional expectations—it has added to them.
- In the Czech Republic, responsibility for childcare and household duties remains unevenly distributed, with women carrying most of the burden.
- Social media intensifies pressure to excel, maintain an ideal appearance, and project a perfectly balanced life. These external pressures can contribute to mental health challenges.
- Low fertility is also linked to the gap between people's desire to have children and the conditions that make parenthood feasible.

The role of women has changed dramatically over the past few decades. In the 21st century, women achieve high levels of education, participate in the labour market to an unprecedented extent, and enjoy greater freedom to shape their careers, relationships, and family lives. Yet expanding opportunities have not been matched by a decline in traditional expectations. Today's women are expected to be financially independent and professionally successful while also building a stable partnership, becoming mothers at the "right" time, taking primary responsibility for childcare and household duties, and maintaining family and social relationships. On top of this, they are expected to remain physically attractive, lead healthy lifestyles, maintain good mental health, and continuously invest in personal development. These roles are not meant to be fulfilled one after another—they are expected to be managed all at once.

This has created one of the central paradoxes of modern emancipation. While women have gained greater freedom of choice, the time, institutional, and social conditions needed to combine multiple life roles have evolved much more slowly. Society encourages women's economic independence, yet motherhood continues to impose significantly higher career, financial, and caregiving costs on women than on men.

The result is not simply greater autonomy, but an accumulation of expectations. Women are increasingly expected to succeed professionally, be fully present for their families, care for others, prioritize their own well-being, and cope with growing uncertainty—all at the same time. Social media reinforces these pressures by turning different aspects of life into a single, continuous space for comparison.

Under these conditions, structural barriers are easily internalized as personal failure. Limited access to childcare, high housing costs, inflexible workplaces, and the unequal distribution of household responsibilities are often experienced not only as institutional shortcomings but also as evidence that individuals have failed to organize their lives successfully. This tension affects mental well-being, relationship quality, and decisions about parenthood. Declining birth rates cannot simply be explained by a lack of interest in having children. Rather, they reflect a widening gap between people's aspirations for family life, their plans for parenthood, and their ability to turn those plans into reality.

Women today are not rejecting careers, relationships, motherhood, or personal development. Increasingly, however, they are questioning a model that expects them to manage all of these roles simultaneously. The real question is therefore not whether women in the 21st century want to "have it all," but whether society still assumes they should shoulder that burden largely on their own.

From Emancipation to an Accumulation of Expectations

The expansion of educational, professional, and social opportunities has been one of the defining transformations of modern society. A woman's life is no longer automatically defined by the roles of wife, mother, and primary caregiver. Financial independence, career development, and personal fulfilment have become widely accepted parts of women's lives. Yet this transformation has not occurred evenly across all areas. While access to education and paid employment has expanded significantly, the division of caregiving responsibilities, household work, and social expectations has changed much more slowly.

Educational attainment clearly illustrates the scale of this generational shift. According to OECD data, in 2020, 40% of Czech women aged 25–34 had completed tertiary education, compared with 26% of men in the same age group. However, higher educational attainment has not eliminated differences in career paths. Women and men continue to choose different fields of study and enter different segments of the labour market. Women are more likely to pursue careers in education, healthcare, and social services, while men remain overrepresented in engineering, information technology, and other technical fields that often offer higher salaries and stronger labour market demand. As a result, broader educational opportunities do not automatically translate into equal economic outcomes or equal career prospects (OECD, 2023).

Female employment in the Czech Republic is relatively high by international standards, and most households depend on the income of both partners. Even so, women continue to take primary responsibility for childcare, often leading to career interruptions or extended absences from the labour market. The OECD notes that Czech women typically spend longer periods outside the workforce than women in many other countries, affecting their earnings, career progression, and long-term financial security (OECD, 2023). Society expects women to be economically active, yet at the same time assumes they will also fulfil the roles of primary caregiver and mother, often at the cost of their careers.

This has led to an accumulation of expectations. New opportunities have not replaced traditional responsibilities—they have been added to them. Women are expected to be well educated, financially independent, and professionally successful while also managing the household, taking primary responsibility for caregiving, and maintaining family relationships. They perform a larger share of routine household tasks, have less leisure time, and are more likely to struggle with balancing competing responsibilities. As a result, they often adjust both their working hours and personal time to meet the needs of other family members (EIGE, 2026).

These pressures also have important cultural and psychological consequences. Greater freedom of choice, combined with persistent social expectations, brings greater responsibility for achieving the "right" outcomes. Women are expected to choose the right education, build successful careers, find stable partners, decide on the right time to have children, and at the same time maintain their health, appearance, social relationships, and personal development. The timing of these milestones often conflicts. The years that are most important for building a career coincide with the period when social expectations to establish a stable partnership and start a family are at their strongest.

The ability to choose is one of the greatest achievements of women's emancipation. However, having more choices does not guarantee that those choices are compatible in practice. When women are expected to carefully plan and successfully manage every aspect of their lives, structural constraints can easily be internalized as personal failure.

Work, Motherhood, and Institutional Lag

In the Czech Republic, family policy primarily supports parents by allowing them to spend an extended period away from work. In practice, however, the costs of a prolonged career break are borne almost entirely by one parent. In 2023–2024, women accounted for more than 98% of parental allowance recipients (OECD, 2025a). If a long parental leave reflects a family's genuine preferences and is supported by real choice, this need not be problematic. In the Czech Republic, however, that choice is constrained by the limited availability of alternatives. According to OECD data, only 7.7% of

children under the age of two were enrolled in formal early childhood education and care, compared with the OECD average of 35.9%. As a result, parents often have no readily available institutional childcare option, and an earlier return to work depends largely on support from extended family, household finances, or the local availability of childcare facilities (OECD, 2025b).

Opportunities for a gradual return to work are also limited. Part-time employment remains among the least common forms of work in the OECD, and flexible working arrangements are far from standard across many occupations. They are more readily available in skilled office-based jobs, while in education, healthcare, services, manufacturing, and shift-based work, opportunities to adjust working hours are often minimal or non-existent. As a result, the common recommendation to "work more flexibly" overlooks substantial differences between occupations and the socioeconomic circumstances of women (OECD, 2025a, 2025b).

The core issue, therefore, is not whether an individual woman chooses to stay at home or return to work. What matters is the environment in which that decision is made. As long as childcare for young children remains difficult to access, flexible work arrangements remain the exception rather than the norm, and parental leave continues to be taken almost exclusively by mothers, having a child will continue to mean a career interruption primarily for women. Institutional arrangements therefore shape not only how caregiving responsibilities are divided but also the professional and economic costs that motherhood carries.

Partnership, Caregiving, and the Invisible Burden

Equality in a partnership is often measured by whether both partners share childcare and household responsibilities. Yet participation alone does not reveal how responsibility for running a household is actually divided. Beyond visible tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or taking children to school, there is a less visible form of work: recognizing what needs to be done, planning ahead, keeping track of deadlines, and making sure everything gets done.

The evidence shows that routine caregiving and household work remain unevenly distributed. A study of two-parent families found that women were always or usually responsible for routine household chores in 71% of households. Mothers also took primary responsibility for caring for young children and helping with schoolwork in 65% of families (Kuchařová et al., 2022). Decisions about leisure activities and household finances were generally made jointly. However, the day-to-day responsibilities of managing routine tasks, repeating them, and adjusting schedules to meet children's needs fell much more often to women. As a result, partnerships may be equal when it comes to major decisions while remaining far less balanced in the everyday management of family life (Kuchařová et al., 2022).

This imbalance is captured by the concept of cognitive labour, often referred to as the mental load. It describes the ongoing responsibility of anticipating a family's needs, planning ahead, delegating tasks, and keeping track of everything that needs to be done. For example, one partner may take a child to the doctor, while the other notices the child's symptoms, finds a suitable clinic, schedules the appointment, prepares the necessary documents, and arranges any follow-up care. Completing the task is visible and time-limited, but everything that makes it possible often remains unseen. Carrying a larger share of this invisible responsibility has been linked to higher stress, burnout, symptoms of depression, and lower relationship satisfaction.

The defining feature of invisible labour is not simply the number of tasks involved but its constant presence. Physical tasks can be completed, whereas planning and coordinating family life is an ongoing process that often continues alongside paid work or even during time meant for rest. The person responsible for managing the household must continuously keep track of appointments, supplies, healthcare needs, school responsibilities, and relationships with the extended family. This work has no clear beginning or end, and its importance often becomes apparent only when it is not done.

Life as a Project: Social Media and the Culture of Comparison

Social media did not create the pressure to succeed professionally, remain attractive, or build a fulfilling family life. What it has changed is the intensity with which people are exposed to these ideals—and the way they evaluate themselves. In the past, people primarily compared themselves with those around them. Today, digital platforms provide a constant stream of carefully curated snapshots of other people's careers, relationships, and personal lives.

Social media brings together areas of life that were once separate, exposing users to multiple standards of success at once. Within just a few minutes, a woman may see her peers celebrating career achievements, traveling, buying homes, building relationships, announcing pregnancies, sharing parenting advice, documenting their post-pregnancy transformations, and promoting self-care routines. These posts rarely reflect everyday reality. Instead, they present carefully selected and edited moments. As a result, people are no longer comparing themselves with individual lives but with an idealized version that combines the best moments from many different lives. Research has found a strong association between social comparison on social media and greater body dissatisfaction, as well as symptoms of eating disorders (Bonfanti et al., 2025).

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable because this is the stage of life when identity, body image, and the need for social acceptance are still developing. According to an international WHO survey, the share of adolescents showing signs of problematic social media use increased from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022. Among girls, the figure reached 13%, compared with 9% among boys. Problematic use is not simply a matter of spending many hours online. Rather, it involves losing control over social media use, struggling to reduce it, and experiencing negative effects on everyday life (World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe [WHO Europe], 2024).

Digital culture does more than expand opportunities for comparison. It also reinforces the belief that every aspect of life can—and should—be consciously managed and continuously improved. Work is expected to provide both achievement and purpose. Relationships should be stable and emotionally fulfilling. Parenthood should be carefully planned. One's body should be healthy, and leisure time should be used productively. Even rest, self-care, and mental well-being can be presented as further signs of successful life management. Social media increasingly blurs the line between inspiration and expectation. Content originally shared as personal experience can collectively create the impression that there is a single "right" way to build a career, maintain a relationship, experience pregnancy, raise children, and care for oneself. The problem lies not in any individual post but in their cumulative effect: users are exposed to countless isolated successes that can easily come to appear as the normal standard of a single attainable life.

What Public Policy Can—and Cannot—Change

Accessible, high-quality early childhood education and care. The Czech system continues to rely primarily on extended parental care within the family, while childcare services remain unevenly available. Childcare groups are an important part of the solution, but they are not enough on their

own. What matters most is that childcare is geographically accessible, affordable, and of consistently high quality.

Expanding childcare services should come before any reduction in the length of parental leave. Shortening parental leave without providing accessible alternatives would not increase parents' freedom of choice. Instead, it would place additional pressure on families, particularly single parents, low-income households, and those living in regions where childcare services are limited. The goal should not be to encourage every mother to return to work as quickly as possible, but to ensure that families have several genuinely viable options to choose from.

A second priority is a more balanced sharing of parental leave between both parents. Simply allowing parents to alternate leave has limited impact if the system provides little incentive for the second parent to take on a meaningful share of childcare. One effective approach is to allocate a separate, non-transferable period of paid leave to each parent.

A third priority is creating working conditions that allow mothers to return to work gradually and sustainably. High-quality part-time work should not become a low-paid career dead end with limited opportunities for advancement. Public policy can support predictable work schedules, return-to-work programmes, job-sharing arrangements, professional training during parental leave, and the right to request reasonable adjustments to working conditions. At the same time, policymakers must recognize that opportunities for flexible work vary greatly across occupations. Flexibility is far easier to implement in office-based jobs than in shift work, healthcare, education, manufacturing, or many service occupations.

Family policy should also extend beyond childcare. Overload often results from the combined demands of paid work, caregiving, household management, and responsibility for other family members. Support services for caregivers, respite care, and assistance for families caring for relatives with disabilities or chronic illnesses are therefore just as important as early childhood education and care.

Mental health deserves special attention as well. Better access to psychological and perinatal care can help identify problems at an early stage, but it cannot replace changes to the underlying conditions that create chronic overload. Well-being policies should therefore avoid reducing a structural problem to an individual's ability to cope with stress. Alongside professional support services, public policy should strengthen access to care, improve job security, protect time for rest, and provide practical support for parents. Otherwise, even caring for one's mental health risks becoming yet another responsibility that already overwhelmed individuals are expected to manage on their own.

Conclusion: Do Women Want to Have It All—or Simply Not Carry It All Alone?

Women in the 21st century do not aspire to less than previous generations. They are not rejecting careers, relationships, family life, or personal growth. What is changing is their willingness to accept a model in which these aspirations come with one-sided responsibility, chronic overload, and disproportionately high personal and professional costs. The problem is not the scale of women's ambitions, but the conditions under which they are expected to achieve them.

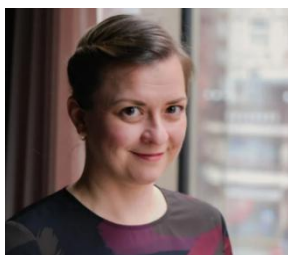
The real question is not whether women want to "have it all." A more relevant question is whether they are able to combine different life roles without carrying most of the responsibility for making them compatible. The goal of public policy is not to dictate how families should organize their lives, but to remove the barriers that make it difficult to balance work and family responsibilities. Otherwise,

freedom of choice can easily become the expectation that women should be able to do everything on their own.

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