

Not all women who freeze their eggs want to have children

November 4 2021, by Yolinliztli Pérez-Hernández



Credit: Pavel Danilyuk from Pexels

Since the development of ultra-rapid egg freezing [around 2013](#), more and more women worldwide are choosing to undergo the procedure. [In the UK](#), egg freezing has increased by 240% in recent years, from 569

completed cycles in 2013 to 1,933 in 2018. In France, according to my research, around 2,500 women freeze their eggs each year.

Egg freezing gained increased international popularity in 2014, when [Apple and Facebook announced](#) they would cover the procedure for female employees who wanted it. The aim at the time was to allow [women](#) to balance motherhood with working life.

Such associations lead to a "careerist" image of women who freeze their eggs in the name of the working life. But most of the research published to date indicates that it is the [absence of a partner](#) rather than the pursuit of education or a career that is the main motivation for [egg freezing](#).

Other [studies](#) on the topic suggest that women who freeze their eggs have a strong desire for [children](#). But not all [women who have children after egg freezing](#) do so with their frozen ova. Indeed, the return rate is [less than 10%](#).

This raises the question: why do women freeze their eggs, if not to use them later? My [doctoral research](#) in social anthropology and ethnology examined this question.

The borderline between motherhood and childfree

I conducted 43 interviews with French women who had frozen their eggs for age-related or medical reasons, or who taken part in egg donation.

Although a majority of the women I spoke to expressed a desire for a child, a third said they felt uncertain about having children, while five said they wanted to remain childfree.

In their testimonies, the women who were unsure or who didn't want children often placed themselves on the borderline between wanting and

not wanting to become mothers. Ilka (names have been changed), 39, said: "I took this step to confront the question of whether I really want children or whether I want them at all costs. So, I don't fall into the category of "I don't want them at all" or "I want them at all costs."

This was also the case for Rosalinda, 34, who froze her eggs for medical reasons and also for egg donation: "I don't know if I want a child. Every time I'm asked the question: "You don't want a child now. What about later?" I don't want one, full stop. Maybe later, I don't know."

For these women, egg freezing allowed them to confront the question of their "true" desire for a child without losing the possibility of conceiving altogether. Faced with potential infertility associated with aging, [medical treatment](#) or illness, they feared they would no longer be able to give birth, if the desire one day arose. Egg freezing offered them a kind of prolongation of uncertainty until one or other option becomes obvious.

The decision not to have children is a difficult and [socially marginalized](#) one for women to make, both from a social and personal point of view. They are frequently questioned about their choices. In my study, even these the women who said they definitely did not want children expressed the fear of regretting not having had them in future.

Rita, 35, explained her decision to freeze her eggs this way: "I don't want to have a child. I am 35 years old. I don't want to. I've never wanted to, but I know that you can change. I tell myself that if one day I change my mind, I will have planned for this option."

Tania, 32, had her eggs frozen after being diagnosed with [breast cancer](#). She said: "I have evolved in my relationship with the world and have become increasingly firm and radical about what I want. Not only do I not want a child, I don't particularly want to be in a couple either."

Tania talked about egg freezing as a "well-directed choice" at the time. She said she and her doctors considered it to be the right option after her [cancer diagnosis](#), a moment of psychological distress when making a decision about having children in future would have been difficult.

All doors open

My research shows that some women undertake an arduous and psychologically costly journey for a purpose that is not necessarily reproductive. Having frozen eggs places these women not in the "childless" group, but in the "not-yet-mothers" group.

Egg freezing seems to leave women with all doors open. It aims to give them a chance of childbearing in the future. It also allows them to make the choice, temporary or permanent, to be childfree without completely losing the possibility of having children later.

The decision to freeze [eggs](#) thus offers a temporary medical response to the uncertainty associated with motherhood in the modern age.

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