

The Womb Under Pressure: Feminist Perspectives on Reproductive Expectations

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Abstract

This paper examines contemporary calls urging women to reproduce for cultural or religious survival through a feminist lens. Taking the 2026 public statement by Shankaracharya Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati as a case study, the article argues that such appeals convert women's bodies—particularly the womb—into instruments of social, religious, and demographic anxiety. While framed as moral duty or cultural preservation, these demands disproportionately burden women with physical risk, emotional strain, economic dependence, and social surveillance. The paper demonstrates how reproductive pressure operates subtly through family expectations, moral language, and social approval rather than explicit coercion, making refusal costly and choice largely theoretical. It further highlights the long-term consequences of this logic: reinforcement of rigid gender roles, erosion of women's autonomy, neglect of structural solutions to social problems, and the ethical reduction of children to demographic tools. Ultimately, the paper contends that a society's strength lies not in population numbers but in the freedom, health, and dignity of its women.

Keywords: Reproductive pressure; Feminism; Bodily autonomy; Cultural survival; Gender inequality; Population politics

In 2026, Shankaracharya Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati publicly urged Hindus to have more children, claiming that a declining Hindu population threatens the survival of *Sanatan Dharma* (Saraswati, 2026). At first glance, this might appear as a call for cultural preservation—but feminist reasoning forces us to ask: whose bodies are actually being called into service? Who pays the cost of this “religious duty”? The answer is simple, and yet

deeply unsettling: women. A womb is not a neutral vessel or an abstract symbol of continuity—it is flesh, blood, nerves, hormones, and enduring physical labor. Who experiences the exhaustion of pregnancy, the pain of childbirth, the risk of complications, and the life-long impact on health? Women do. Who faces social and economic repercussions for complying—or for resisting? Again, women. Their education, careers, and personal aspirations are often interrupted, reshaped, or sacrificed entirely.

If reproduction is framed as a moral obligation for the sake of culture, who really has the choice? Women do not. The call to “produce more Hindus” becomes an invisible chain that binds them, a duty dressed as patriotism or piety, leaving no room for dissent. What happens to the children born under this pressure? Are they welcomed for who they are, or are they born as instruments in a population project, expected to carry forward a lineage, a religion, a demographic statistic? Is this survival, or is it subtle coercion? Feminist thought makes it clear: it is coercion disguised as duty.

The implications are practical and immediate. Imagine a young woman, juggling her studies, career ambitions, or personal well-being, now being told that her primary responsibility is to the survival of a religious community. How does she navigate this? Does she delay her dreams, compromise her health, or submit entirely? Every pregnancy carries real risk—gestational diabetes, anemia, hypertension, postnatal depression, or even maternal mortality. Does the society that demands this sacrifice provide support, healthcare, or economic security? Rarely. Instead, it frames compliance as moral righteousness and resistance as selfishness.

Why are structural solutions ignored? Education, economic empowerment, voluntary family planning, and gender equity could stabilize populations far more humanely and sustainably. Yet, the discourse returns, again and again, to the womb: as the vessel, the arbiter, the carrier of cultural destiny. Feminism asks: can a society truly thrive if it treats women’s bodies as means rather than ends? The womb, in this logic, becomes political—every menstrual cycle, every conception, every pregnancy is watched, measured, and morally judged. Is this a call for survival, or a call for control? Every woman becomes a node in a social algorithm, her reproductive choices transformed into instruments of collective anxiety.

This is not hypothetical. Across India, countless women already face indirect pressures: family expectations, social shaming, moralized conversations about duty, and the

persistent idea that not reproducing—or not reproducing enough—is a failure, a betrayal, a threat to culture. What happens when this pressure is internalized? Mental health crises, resentment, and physical strain are inevitable. Feminist critique asks a radical question: if the future of a culture depends on forcing women's bodies into service, is that culture worth preserving in its current form? In this light, the womb is no longer a personal or private space; it becomes a political battleground, where power operates not through explicit laws but through moral obligation, social expectation, and generational inheritance.

This pressure does not appear suddenly or violently; it operates quietly, almost invisibly, through family expectations, moral language, and social approval. But why does it feel invisible? Because it is normalized—women hear statements like “It’s your duty to your community,” or “A good wife gives her family children,” and over time, such messages shape decisions before the woman even realizes it. Who bears the burden? The woman herself—her body, her time, her health, her aspirations. In practice, this means that refusing or delaying childbirth becomes almost impossible. What happens to a woman who chooses education, career, or personal freedom over motherhood? She is often labeled selfish, disloyal, or irresponsible, as if her personal choices threaten the social order. The consequence is subtle but powerful: choice exists in theory, but in daily life, women experience indirect coercion.

What are the real-life effects of this quiet pressure? First, it can force early marriages and early pregnancies, often before a woman's body is ready. Second, repeated pregnancies without sufficient recovery time can cause chronic anemia, fatigue, and long-term health complications. Third, mental health suffers—stress, anxiety, and feelings of guilt become constant companions. Women may feel trapped between social expectations and personal desires. Even urban, educated women face these pressures: relatives may comment on a delayed pregnancy, colleagues may gossip, and religious leaders may frame childbearing as a moral obligation. Why is this a problem beyond personal choice? Because it transforms private bodies into instruments of social or religious policy, removing autonomy and making women responsible for broader cultural survival.

Could there be a practical solution? Education and awareness can help, but only if society respects a woman's right to choose. Access to healthcare, maternal support, and family planning services are critical, yet often ignored in speeches about population growth.

Without such support, the pressure to bear children becomes dangerous—not only for women’s health but also for children, families, and communities. Is freedom real if saying no comes with social punishment? Feminism argues that it is not; real freedom is the ability to say no without fear of shame, violence, or social isolation. In this context, reproductive pressure is not just a personal issue—it is a social problem, a public policy concern, and a moral question about whose rights and bodies are considered expendable for the sake of tradition, religion, or nationalistic goals.

Recent statements urging women to have more children in the name of cultural survival raise several fundamental questions: Why is the burden of ensuring population continuity placed solely on women? Is it fair to equate cultural or religious survival with the biological labor of one gender? These questions highlight a critical feminist argument: reproduction is not just a personal or family matter; it becomes a site of social, political, and ideological control. When women are told that their wombs carry the future of a faith, community, or nation, the implication is that their value is measured by their ability to produce children. What happens when women resist or delay childbirth? Social disapproval, moral judgment, and family pressure often emerge as tools to enforce compliance. The “choice” to say no becomes risky, creating a coercive environment in which reproductive labor is both expected and morally sanctioned. Feminist logic asserts that freedom is meaningful only when women can exercise both the power to consent and the power to refuse without fear of social punishment.

What are the real-life consequences of such indirect pressures? One immediate outcome is early marriage and early pregnancies, especially in communities where family and religious expectations dominate women’s lives. Early childbearing increases maternal and infant health risks, including complications during delivery, higher infant mortality rates, and long-term maternal health issues such as uterine prolapse, chronic anemia, or weakened immunity. Why does this matter socially? Because it is not just a health issue—it has cascading effects on education, economic participation, and social mobility. A young mother who is physically exhausted and medically vulnerable may be forced to drop out of school or leave the workforce, reinforcing cycles of gender inequality and poverty.

Repeated pregnancies, often encouraged without regard for maternal health, create another layer of risk. What if women lack access to healthcare, proper nutrition, or family

support? In such cases, each pregnancy carries compounded physical and emotional burdens. Mental health suffers too, yet public discussions of population growth rarely address postpartum depression, anxiety, or the stress of continuous reproductive labor. Here, feminist reasoning emphasizes that reproductive duty should never supersede a woman's well-being. Society applauds the act of childbirth but rarely invests in the recovery, autonomy, or dignity of the mother—transforming natural biological processes into socially mandated labor.

How does social surveillance exacerbate this issue? In many communities, reproduction is tightly monitored: when to have children, how many to have, and even the preferred sex of children becomes a public matter rather than a private choice. Families may intervene in birth control decisions, spacing of pregnancies, or medical options, effectively stripping women of bodily autonomy. Who suffers most in this scenario? Women's mental health and agency, as their bodies become sites of public expectation, social judgment, and ideological enforcement. Feminist arguments stress that the political becomes deeply personal when reproduction is controlled externally; a woman's status and respect in society are tied to compliance with reproductive norms rather than her abilities, intelligence, or personal achievements.

What about the children themselves? Children born under these pressures often arrive in circumstances where their mother is physically or mentally compromised. This can impact their health, cognitive development, and emotional well-being. Furthermore, families that treat children as instruments of cultural survival risk imposing excessive responsibilities, gendered expectations, or economic strain. Is population growth sustainable if these pressures continue? Practically, no. Encouraging reproduction without considering healthcare infrastructure, nutrition, education, and women's autonomy creates cycles of vulnerability rather than strengthening a community or nation.

Finally, the pressure on women's wombs also silences discussions on alternative ways of contributing to society. Could women participate in cultural or social preservation without giving birth? Certainly. Leadership, education, healthcare, social activism, and economic contributions are all avenues through which individuals shape their communities. Yet, when childbirth becomes the singular measure of commitment to faith or nation, these other forms of contribution are undervalued. Feminist thought insists that reducing women to their

reproductive capacity is not only unjust but strategically shortsighted—it ignores the social, economic, and intellectual potential women bring to society beyond the womb.

Economic impact is one of the most visible and practical consequences of reproductive pressure. So, we might ask: *What really happens when women are encouraged to have more children but no support systems are put in place?* The answer is that it traps women in unpaid labor, often for life. Imagine a woman who already manages a household, perhaps works part-time, or even tries to pursue a career. Each additional child increases caregiving responsibilities, reduces time for education or paid work, and ties her ever more closely to family structures that may or may not be supportive. This is not just inconvenience—it is an erosion of personal freedom. *How can a woman make independent choices when every new life she brings into the world adds to her obligations and dependence?* In many cases, it creates economic vulnerability: fewer opportunities, lower income, and higher risk of domestic control or abuse. A society that glorifies reproduction but refuses to invest in maternal healthcare, childcare, or workplace flexibility is not empowering women—it is institutionalizing inequality under the guise of duty.

This leads to a deeper ethical question: *Why are these children being born in the first place?* When childbirth is framed as a solution to population decline, as a service to religion or culture, or as a strategy for “protecting society,” children risk becoming instruments of ideology rather than individuals with their own needs. Think about it: a child is born not because their parents were ready, prepared, or motivated by love, but because society demanded it. Such a child carries expectations from day one—expectations to fulfill cultural, religious, or demographic goals before they even have an identity. *Is it fair to place the weight of social survival on someone who has no choice in the matter?* Feminist logic would say no. Life should be a gift, not a mandate. Children should be born into families that are prepared to offer care, nurture, and opportunity, not to meet abstract societal quotas.

The consequences ripple further. When children are treated as demographic tools, they may face pressure, over-regimentation, and restricted freedoms themselves. They may grow up knowing that their value was measured by their ability to sustain a cultural or religious narrative rather than by their own abilities or character. This is not just unethical—it is socially unsustainable. *What kind of society thrives when reproduction is about obligation rather than desire, and when mothers and children alike are instruments of ideology?* The

answer is a society that undervalues individuality, undermines equality, and normalizes coercion. Feminist reasoning insists that population growth, cultural preservation, or religious survival cannot justify sacrificing autonomy, health, or ethical responsibility. Reproduction must be a conscious, voluntary, and supported choice—not a moral weapon wielded against women’s bodies.

Long-term, we have to ask: *What does this pressure to reproduce really do to society and to women?* One immediate effect is the reinforcement of rigid gender roles. Women are defined primarily by their biological function—their ability to bear children—while men remain free from the bodily sacrifices of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding. Men are often asked to “protect tradition” symbolically, while women are asked to sustain it physically. *Is this fair?* Clearly not. This imbalance maintains gender inequality under the seemingly neutral language of duty, culture, and survival. It asks women to anchor the future with their bodies while keeping men safely distanced from the physical consequences.

We must also ask: *What happens to women when their identities are reduced to motherhood alone?* When society measures a woman’s worth by the number of children she produces, other forms of contribution—intellectual, creative, emotional, political—are quietly erased. A woman who pursues education, career, or artistic passion is often judged as less dutiful, less “womanly,” or even selfish. The question feminism forces us to confront is: *Can true equality exist if half the population is trapped in biologically defined roles while the other half walks free?* The answer is no. Freedom, choice, and value cannot coexist with coercion disguised as obligation.

Another critical question emerges: *Does increasing population solve real societal problems?* Anxiety about declining birth rates or “cultural survival” is often used as a justification to pressure women, but it distracts society from concrete issues like poverty, unemployment, education, healthcare, environmental degradation, and systemic violence. Adding more children to a world where social infrastructure is already strained does not improve lives—it multiplies struggle. A child born into poverty without access to education or health services cannot contribute meaningfully to culture or society, no matter how “necessary” they are deemed by population discourse. Feminist logic asks: *Why prioritize quantity over quality of life?* The answer is simple but often ignored: life’s value is measured not by numbers, but by justice, care, and opportunity.

Finally, we must ask: *What kind of future does pressured reproduction create?* When childbirth is framed as duty rather than desire, society risks repeating failures across generations. Women suffer, children inherit inequality, and cultural anxiety persists—because coercion never resolves the underlying social problems. Feminism argues that reproduction should be an informed, supported, and voluntary choice, not a tool of ideological enforcement. Only then can society hope to achieve equality, dignity, and genuine progress.

In conclusion, when public statements urge women to bear more children for cultural or religious survival, the womb is transformed from a part of a human being into a tool of social obligation. But should a society measure its strength by the number of bodies it produces rather than the freedom and well-being of those who carry them? This pressure is never violent in the obvious sense—it operates quietly through family expectations, social approval, and moral language—but its consequences are profound and tangible. Women are compelled to give birth not because they want to, but because society demands it, because fear and guilt are imposed as moral duties. What happens when women are denied the right to refuse? They face early, repeated pregnancies, health complications, mental stress, economic dependence, and social criticism. Their education, careers, personal growth, and creative potential are often sidelined. And for what? For a population statistic, for cultural continuity, for the abstract survival of an idea.

Feminism asks: is it ethical to place an entire culture's survival on the body of a woman? What kind of society is built when childbirth is coerced, even subtly? Children born under such pressure are not fully welcomed as individuals but expected to fulfill demographic or ideological goals, turning the next generation into instruments rather than autonomous beings. Meanwhile, men often escape the physical, emotional, and social costs of reproduction, remaining free to contribute symbolically to tradition while women bear its material burdens. Such arrangements reinforce rigid gender roles, reduce women to reproductive machines, and erase their intellectual, emotional, and political contributions.

Moreover, population anxiety distracts society from the problems that actually affect quality of life—poverty, lack of education, environmental degradation, unemployment, healthcare access, and gender-based violence. Can more children alone solve these issues? Clearly not. Without structural support, increasing population only multiplies struggle, suffering, and inequality. A society that glorifies reproduction while ignoring the lives of women is not

ensuring its future—it is exploiting the present. Feminism insists that a secure, just, and thriving future depends on respecting women’s autonomy, protecting their health, and valuing their choices. Life cannot be meaningful if it is coerced; dignity cannot exist under obligation. If a society truly values life, it must first honor and protect the women who bring life into it. Anything less is neither ethical nor sustainable—it is a violation of human freedom disguised as duty.

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