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Modern Women Without Children

CINDY GRAHAM

In dining rooms, boardrooms and newsrooms across Canada, there is growing discourse centred on population aging and declining fertility rates. One frequently discussed topic has been the increasing number of couples who are choosing *not* to have children. Many women are talking about the pressure they feel to have children as part of their role in society and the economy, and the difficulties they face managing their personal aspirations in this context.

According to Statistics Canada, Canada's fertility rate in 2011 declined for the third year in a row to 1.6 children per woman – a rate that hasn't been anywhere near the 2.1 replacement rate required to sustain the population in the absence of migration since the early 1970s.¹

A growing proportion of women are opting to have fewer children, or none at all, citing the difficulties that working parents face in finding affordable quality daycare or the challenges that can accompany living far away from family members who can help provide child care. Some decide not to have children simply because they value the premium of time that not having children affords them – time they can devote to other life goals, such as higher education or careers.

Adding to the mix are women who *want* to have children but who haven't been able to find a partner with whom to share the parenting role. Melanie Notkin, a New York-based writer, has recently featured these voices in her memoir *Otherhood: Modern Women Finding a New Kind of Happiness* (Viking, Penguin Canada Books, 2014). She posits that as part of the cohort of women choosing not to have children until they find a partner, they must come to terms with the possibility that they may not have children of their own before their fertility declines.

Notkin has coined the term "PANKs" (Professional Aunts No Kids) to describe North American women who, whether by choice or circumstance, do not have children of their own (or do not have them yet). Well-established in their careers, they give their time, resources and skill sets to their extended families, neighbourhoods and communities. More often than not, these women, despite not having children of their own, still have very child-full lives – whether as aunts, teachers, coaches, neighbours to families with children or caregivers to friends' children.

"We've all heard the proverb 'It takes a village to raise a child,'" Notkin writes, "and yet, the women who help to raise the nation's children – the aunts, godmothers, cousins, nannies, teachers, coaches, neighbors and so on are sometimes thought of as 'less-than' women because they are not mothers. They are the 'other mothers,' and their selfless devotion to children not their own should be celebrated and honored, not overlooked."

Women who are single or who are part of a couple without children create families of their own with the friends they choose. They care for and nurture their families of choice. They may be at the centre of a debate that questions the decision to forgo having children, but it is important to recognize their value as supporters, caregivers and contributors to our communities. ◀

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¹ Anne Milan, "Fertility: Overview, 2009 to 2011," *Report on the Demographic Situation in Canada*, Statistics Canada catalogue no. 91-209-X (July 2013), accessed May 20, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1h5mWnH>.