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## **The Global Family Begins at Conception: Reconfiguring Feminist Theory to Include Intentionally Unmarried Heterosexual Women Who Choose Not to Become Pregnant**

By Kimberly Petrovic<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The global family begins at conception. Every person born into this world enters into a global society in which beliefs and ideas about the meaning of life and its purpose are shared, regardless of one's country of origin or the demographic characteristics of one's birth parents. Ultimately, we are related to one another. Our genetics do not differ significantly; there is no gene for race. If the global family begins at conception, then how might the meaning of a 'global family' cause us to rethink our antiquated ideas about conception, marriage, and parenting, particularly for heterosexual women who choose to remain single? Feminist theory has not devoted substantial scholarship to intentionally unmarried heterosexual women who choose not to conceive children. The same societies that reify the marriage-and-parenting perspective simultaneously neglect the perspectives of heterosexual women who break from the norm. What does a more inclusive form of feminist theory look like? As a new form of feminist theory and appropriately called 'inclusive feminist theory,' this form of feminist theory addresses singlehood for heterosexual women, particularly those who choose not to become pregnant or to parent children. Inclusive feminist theory supports changes to the negative perceptions about unmarried heterosexual women. Next, inclusive feminist theory encourages the choices made by intentionally unmarried heterosexual women with regard to personal and professional development, the definitions of family and friendship, as well as whether to parent children (e.g., through adoption). Inclusive feminist theory is global in scope and provides for women everywhere to live as intentionally unmarried individuals who are not defined by the standard of being married (with or without children). Finally, inclusive feminist theory speaks to the resilience required by heterosexual women to remain intentionally unmarried within societies that reify the norm for heterosexual women as being married.

*Key Words:* Global family, inclusive feminist theory, intentionally unmarried heterosexual women

### **What is the Global Family?**

The global family begins at conception. Every person born into this world enters into a global society in which beliefs and ideas about the meaning of life and its purpose are shared, regardless of one's country of origin or the demographic characteristics of one's birth parents. Ultimately, we are related to one another. Our genetics do not differ significantly; there is no

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gene for race. Not only are we human beings, we are ‘global beings’ who are connected and related to one another within a global family context.

While the argument can be made that we are genetically distinct individuals whose genes carry the potential to trigger both the onset of certain diseases as well as the presence of much more desirable traits within our individual bodies, we nonetheless remain genetically indistinguishable as an overall population of approximately seven billion people. At least within North American society, we tend to think of ourselves as lone individuals or as members of distinctive and separate familial units when, in fact, we are a collective of human beings who inhabit a global landscape that is increasingly smaller in its figurative size. Individuals from Canada and the United States are genetically related to individuals from Australia, China, England, India, Jamaica, Korea, Norway, Russia, Tibet, Zimbabwe and all other regions of the world.

If the global family begins at conception, then how might the meaning of a ‘global family’ cause us to rethink our antiquated ideas about conception, marriage and parenting, particularly for heterosexual women who choose to remain single? Such reconsideration is appropriate within the context of intentionally unmarried heterosexual women who choose not to conceive children or who may want to adopt children; it also is fitting within the context of a world inhabited by children who have no biological parents present. Moreover, because of the stigma attached to never marrying (Gordon, 2003) as well as the fact that not all women throughout the world are permitted the freedom and the opportunity to choose for themselves whether they conceive, marry or become parents, the need for reframing our notions of conception, marriage and parenting is met with a sense of urgency so as to benefit and improve the lives of as many women as possible worldwide.

### **Towards a More Inclusive Form of Feminist Theory**

For the most part, feminist theory has not devoted a substantial amount of scholarship to the intentionally unmarried heterosexual women who choose not to conceive children. While conservative, liberal, and socialist feminism may lend themselves to an examination of the reasons for the heterosexual woman’s voluntarily choosing to remain single and without children, feminist perspectives like these fail to capture the fundamental essence of the heterosexual women who break with the norms and social mores set forth by societies entrenched in the ‘marriage-and-parenting perspective.’ The very same societies that reify the marriage-and-parenting perspective simultaneously neglect the perspectives of heterosexual women who break from the norm.

Arguably, in many first world countries such as the United States, reification of the marriage-and-parenting perspective occurs as the rights of homosexual women (and men) who want to marry and become parents within the structured context of marriage are supported by means of financial benefits, legal status and other rights. Granted, the rights of homosexual women (and men) seeking marriage and the chance to parent within the context of marriage should not be denied, but neither should intentionally unmarried heterosexual women be denied their rights to live in a manner that allows for their shared reality and their truths. Ironically, the result of the fervent activism and social progress made by homosexual women towards equality with heterosexuals within societal norms is that homosexual women (inadvertently) end up emulating the reified and subjugated status of heterosexual women who are married with children.

Why would homosexual women not want to emulate the lives of the intentionally unmarried heterosexual women who may choose not to have children? Does the answer to this question surround the notion that the status of intentionally unmarried heterosexual women (with or without children) is not accepted readily within a world populated by societies that reify the marriage-and-parenting perspective? Whether actual progress has taken place for women regardless of sexual orientation then becomes a question in need of an answer that may find its beginnings within the context of a more inclusive form of feminist theory.

Not only this, but how might heterosexual women's decisions to forego marriage and childrearing altogether threaten the very fabric of societies worldwide in which marriage and parenting are not only reified but idealized? Granted, some men within the global society may possess strong incentives to marry and to settle down; however, seldom does history point to this occurrence as significantly differing from the norm in which men are able to choose from a global landscape of women socialized to become 'desperate' and less worthy of equality and respect if unmarried and without children. Arguably, in North American society as well as countless other societies throughout the world, women as well as men who wish to marry and parent children during the course of the marriage may feel 'threatened' by the conviction with which heterosexual women make decisions that do not include marriage or parenting children.

Historically within the United States, for instance, marriage was neither promoted nor stabilized until the 1920s (Coontz, 2012; Davis, 2010). Even before then, the radical argument was set forth that the inherent qualities and worth of women should be valued and that women should be encouraged to direct their energies and talents towards personal and self-satisfying pursuits that did not necessarily involve finding a husband so as to enter the one and only socially acceptable 'trade' at that time, that of marriage (Hamilton, 1909).

Likewise, even further back in time—and for thousands of years—marriage established a person's place within the larger society and with respect to economic and political hierarchies (Coontz, 2004). Because marriage at that time served any number of economic, political and social functions, the needs of the individuals within the marriage were not of primary concern (Coontz, 2004; Gordon, 2003). Regardless of the political or socioeconomic groups to which an individual arbitrarily belonged, the most important and respectable marker of adulthood and belonging was that of marriage (Coontz, 2004). Today, despite increased numbers of intentionally unmarried adults, the overwhelming majority of heterosexual individuals eventually marry (Gordon, 2003), perhaps thereby suggesting that not a lot has changed over the past few thousand years. Or has it?

That is, has change occurred even without its being identified by an official name? Are we as a global society able to set aside personal biases and the power that we believe we possess in order to understand the way in which reality occurs for others? Are we as a global society willing to listen to the "dissident voices" (Simmons 1996, p. 155), particularly those of intentionally unmarried heterosexual women who choose not to become pregnant? Because feminist theory identifies and supports the experiences, independence, and perspectives of women, the time is now for the reconfiguration of feminist theory to include the "dissident voices" (1996) of the heterosexual women who 'go against the grain' and the very fabric of what has contributed to the foundation of societies throughout history: conception, marriage and parenting. Such nonconformity is supported and understood by means of an entirely new form of feminist theory known as inclusive feminist theory.

## **Methodology of Inclusive Feminist Theory**

What does a more inclusive form of feminist theory look like? As a new form of feminist theory and appropriately called ‘inclusive feminist theory,’ this form of feminist theory addresses singlehood for heterosexual women, particularly those who choose not to become pregnant or to parent children. Furthermore, because decisions like these take place within the larger context of globalization (Ackerly & True, 2010), how does inclusive feminist theory transpire against the backdrop of a global society? Very little feminist work addresses this topic, which is surprising given that past and present societal values do not prepare individuals for singlehood (Gordon, 2003) or for the gradually more common decision not to have children at all (Coontz, 2004), particularly within the context of a global society.

Inclusive feminist theory supports changes to the negative perceptions about unmarried heterosexual women. Next, inclusive feminist theory encourages the choices made by intentionally unmarried heterosexual women with regard to personal and professional development and the definitions of family and friendship, as well as whether to parent children (e.g., through adoption). Likewise, inclusive feminist theory is global in scope and provides for women everywhere to live as intentionally unmarried individuals who are not defined by the standard of being married (with or without children). Finally, inclusive feminist theory speaks to the resilience required by heterosexual women to remain intentionally unmarried within societies that reify the norm for heterosexual women as being married.

## **Supporting Change: Inclusive Feminist Theory and the Negative Perceptions about Intentionally Unmarried Heterosexual Women**

At least within North America and Western Europe, the fact that marriages are not what they used to be is accepted without challenge (Coontz, 2010; Coontz, 2007; Goldstein & Kenney, 2001). High rates of dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment among married women in these societies have precipitated rising divorce rates (Coontz, 2007). How intriguing, then, that negative perceptions continue to persist towards intentionally unmarried heterosexual women in some of the very same societies in which the marriage rate and the *desire* to marry have fallen over time (Coontz, 2010; Coontz, 2007; Jones, 2005) while becoming increasingly accepted as part of the status quo. Inclusive feminist theory encourages heterosexual women to choose not to marry if so desired, thereby reducing the possibility of living the kinds of dissatisfying and unfulfilling lives characteristic within marriages of a bygone era and well as contemporary times.

### *Marriage: Opiate for the People?*

Marriage is viewed by many societies worldwide as the vital sign of belonging. Not only this, but given that marriage undoubtedly possesses benefits, unmarried heterosexual women can appreciate the curiosity of people inquiring as to when an unmarried heterosexual woman plans to marry. If no marriage plans exist, then many of a woman’s fellow members of society offer advice on how to ‘find someone’ to marry or how to enhance one’s chances of ‘meeting the right person’ while simultaneously refusing to ‘settle for less.’ How many unmarried heterosexual women are reminded not to despair for a variety of reasons? These reasons include but are not limited to: the right man is out there, therefore do not give up looking for him; they as single, unmarried women are ‘still young’ (and therefore can bear children) and have a lot to contribute to marriage; they may need to be less selective; they may need to be more selective; they must not wait too long or else miss out completely on the chance for everlasting happiness through

marriage and pregnancy resulting in biological children and unconditional acceptance from society.

Perhaps the majority of people are trying to be helpful in finding a remedy to what is perceived as the undesirable situation of being single; but, have we considered that marriage is not the only way to experience one's life? After all, history and research suggest that marriage possesses disadvantages for women as (financially) independent individuals (Forde, 2013; Fox, 1990; Fox and Fox, 1983) as well as a global collective; this is the case whether marriage occurs in China or Taiwan (Lee, 2009), India (Dugsin, 2001), Mexico (Salzinger, 2003), or Southeast Asian countries (Jones, 2005), just to name a few countries within the global society.

Not only this, but because marriage is the norm within societies worldwide, misunderstandings and stigma enjoy a pervasiveness that works against intentionally unmarried heterosexual women (Gordon, 2003). Few women are encouraged to rest in being alone and thus may pair up as quickly as possible with the hope for the almost magical appearance of something called 'true love.' Yet, if we are honest with ourselves and with one another, we would realize that very few people find, give or possess 'true love' and all its promised bliss (Davis, 2010; Coontz, 2010; Coontz, 2004). If true love does not exist in abundance, then is marriage a farce for any number of married couples? Without the pursuit of true love that culminates in marriage, what becomes the great 'opiate for the people' (Marx, 1978)?

#### *Married as Better than Unmarried?*

Arguably, the process of becoming a married person is more complex than many heterosexual women ever imagined, while the phenomenon of purposefully choosing to remain single is at least somewhat fascinating to one's married counterparts. Why would someone who could pursue marriage purposely choose to remain single? Is it possible to experience a fulfilled and meaningful life while choosing to remain unmarried and even uncoupled? Does being single become lonely over time? Of course, the corollary to such a premise is that being a married person is *rarely* lonely.

Granted, misunderstandings may develop between single and married people, despite the argument that neither marriage nor remaining single is ultimately better or worse than the other. Besides, not everyone is 'the marrying type,' and this includes women. Those who are scrupulously self-aware are fairly confident in this realization. This does not preclude one from changing her mindset over time; however, being candid with oneself about personal aspirations and goals, the ways in which meaning surfaces in one's life, and the legacy that one would like to leave behind cultivates a devotion to thriving as an intentionally unmarried heterosexual woman. Inclusive feminist theory cultivates an understanding that neither being married nor unmarried is better or worse than the other and enables dialogue on a global scale among and between members of the global family, particularly with regard to the ways in which change can and should be embraced and encouraged so as to move towards eradicating negative stereotypes and thereby benefitting the lives of intentionally unmarried heterosexual women who choose not to become pregnant.

#### **Encouraging Choice: Inclusive Feminist Theory and the Decisions Made by Intentionally Unmarried Heterosexual Women**

Freedom of choice is vital to inclusive feminist theory. Within this theoretical framework, intentionally unmarried heterosexual women are not judged by expectations and societal norms

that characterize the married-with-children status and instead are free to live their lives filled with meaning and purpose as characterized by conscious choice. Intentionally unmarried heterosexual women are encouraged to decide for themselves what perspectives they want to hold with regard to marriage, conception and parenting.

### *Frantic and Frenetic*

While times have evolved so as to recognize that not all heterosexual women desire to marry, this phenomenon remains one fraught with difficulty in being accepted fully by the larger, more global society. This is evidenced by relentless and very real pressures faced by heterosexual women to marry and to conceive ‘by a certain age.’ Through overt and subtle cues, societies worldwide remind unmarried heterosexual women that their reproductive choices and sexuality are not their own but instead belong to the larger society (Khan, 2013; Simmons, 2003). Unmarried heterosexual women are reminded to pay careful attention to the relentless tick, tick, ticking of biological clocks and that finding Mr. Right (or Mr. Will-Do-For-Fathering-A-Child) is imperative to one’s overall acceptance, fulfillment and success as women. Not surprisingly, anomie and panic may result for any number of unmarried heterosexual women.

As a result, otherwise mediocre relationships are made to work so as to increase women’s chances of conceiving children and raising families. The larger society not only applauds and reinforces the existence of such relationships but deceives women into becoming active participants in this form of self-deception. Heterosexual women are encouraged to deceive themselves into thinking that conceiving and raising (biological) children will ‘make everything better’ within a relationship or with regards to one’s status in the larger society. The trust and unconditional love that may be missing in such relationships are willed into existence once again as women and the would-be fathers of their children enter into the Conception Dance, sometimes freely and other times by means of coercion or promises to oneself and to one another for a more meaningful life together and as a family. Sometimes, out of despair or desperation or disenchantment with men who are not ready or suitable to become fathers, women ‘forget’ to take their birth control pills, woefully demonstrating just how far behind lags the progress of women and the willingness of society to accept women who claim their reproductive choices (Simmons, 2003) and deliberately decide not to have children of their own.

To an extent, these frantic and frenetic women lose self-respect and vitality throughout the course of trying to conceive according to the larger society’s expectations and timeline. Not only this, but adoption is viewed as second-best, the proverbial Plan B to be utilized only in the case of emergency, when conception does not take place or does not result in a baby born nine months later. Panic results and perpetuates itself. *My* genes and those of *my* significant other *must* be carried forth, or so the mentality becomes for heterosexual women (and men) unduly influenced by such burdensome circumstances and limited perspectives. What chaos! What heaviness! *Why* does life have to be lived this way?

### *The Elusive “Mr. Right” with Whom We ‘Forget’ to Have Children*

“Mr. Right” does not exist for all unmarried heterosexual women, particularly those who wish to become mothers. This realization is both frightening and surprisingly freeing as women for whom no suitable husband exists realize that adoption is no less an option than pregnancy and childbirth when considering the desire to become a mother someday. Inclusive feminist theory allows for the widening perspectives that unmarried heterosexual women possess with regard to adoption and reproductive choice. To be liberated from society’s reified expectations

surrounding the roles of women as married and pregnant is a form of happiness that increasing numbers of unmarried heterosexual women may have the privilege of experiencing one day in the not-too-distant future. Inclusive feminist theory allows intentionally unmarried heterosexual women to remain ahead of past repressive times that dictated pregnancy for women as the preferred gateway to becoming a parent. Whereas adoption was viewed as second-best, inclusive feminist theory argues that this is no longer the case.

### *The Single Woman and Adoption vs. Childlessness*

Inclusive feminist theory not only encourages intentionally unmarried heterosexual women in their choices about personal and professional lives, but this new form of feminist theory allows this same group of women to decide on their own definitions of *family*. Specifically, inclusive feminist theory accepts that intentionally unmarried heterosexual women may choose not to become pregnant as a means of motherhood but instead may decide to become parents by means of adopting children. Inclusive feminist theory encourages such a decision, especially given the deliberate thought with which such a decision is made. Adopting a child is by no means an accidental decision but one made with clear and purposeful intention.

As is the case in many societies worldwide, the expectation is that women will become pregnant at some point during their child-bearing years. Yet, at least within North American society, any number of intentionally unmarried heterosexual women continue to become parents through adoption. Whether marriage ensues is irrelevant. What *is* relevant, however, is the irony that many of the children adopted by this group of women within North American society are born in countries other than Canada and the United States, thereby reiterating that the global family begins at conception.

### **Inclusive Feminist Theory as Global in Scope**

Women from all over the world and from diverse cultural backgrounds are choosing either to delay marriage or not to marry at all, despite the expectations and varying purposes (e.g., economic, political, traditional) for marriage within respective cultures (Coontz, 2004; Coontz, 2000; Gordon, 2003). Research demonstrates that the traditional ways in which personal intimacy is organized and sustained have eroded over time and that this phenomenon affects individuals worldwide, regardless of culture or ethnicity (Ackerly & True, 2010; Coontz, 2003; Lee, 2009). Because the vast majority of women are born into societies that expect women to marry eventually, inclusive feminist theory provides intentionally unmarried heterosexual women with an increased capacity for psychological strength, self-awareness, and self-direction, all of which provide for the capacity to create one's legacy in a changing world that nonetheless continues to resist the idea of heterosexual women choosing not to marry.

### *Legacy and the Intentionally Unmarried Heterosexual Woman*

Each of us wants to belong; none of us wants to be forgotten. We want to matter. We want to know that our lives are worthwhile and that they are considered significant long after we are gone from this world. Not surprisingly, we create legacies. Historically and more often than not, these legacies have taken the form of hopes projected onto our marriages as well as onto the children in our lives. After all, one lifetime is too short for any of us as individuals to accomplish all that we desire for ourselves. Not only this, but marriage allows spouses to combine their efforts and resources so as to reach common goals. Parents may find themselves transferring

aspirations, dreams and goals onto their children so that legacies will be advanced and protected over time. A family's good name and reputation, estates and inheritances, opportunities to break cycles that families find themselves repeating all contribute to the legacies that parents leave for their children and spouses leave for one another.

For intentionally unmarried heterosexual women, however, legacies are not this readily created. Therefore, how might this group of women create legacies for themselves within societies worldwide that highly prize marriage and parenting? Once these legacies are created, will they be destroyed or forgotten as a result of a woman's choosing to remain single and quite possibly childless? Perhaps answers to such questions depend upon where unmarried heterosexual women place their self-worth. Should the self-worth of unmarried heterosexual women worldwide be gauged by the marriages that could have been or the children who never were, particularly when these entities are constructs shaped by societies that are by far predominantly pro-marriage and pro-parenting?

Likewise, for intentionally unmarried heterosexual women, should legacy and the sense of self-worth be found through the plan to adopt children someday? Intentionally unmarried heterosexual women recognize that they have not gone through life thus far in a manner that neglects serious thoughts about whether to parent children; furthermore, heterosexual women who choose to adopt stand to flourish from the love of families (including and potentially the family of origin for the adopted child), friends who are dedicated to understanding the choice to adopt and supportive others who realize that options other than pregnancy exist for parenting children.

For intentionally unmarried women who choose not to parent children, legacy may be created by means of one's career choices and perspectives on how best to live a fulfilling life. This is particularly the case as women on a global scale continue to experience greater financial freedom and occupational satisfaction, thereby disregarding the need to rely on the financial grace and income of one's husband. Would as many women worldwide marry if they were able to support themselves (and possibly children) financially, including doing so in ways that are entrepreneurial and innovative (Forde, 2013; Pettersson & Lindberg, 2013; Sinha, 2011)? How might intentionally unmarried women use their economic progress and financial gains to create legacies for themselves through the attainment of educational degrees and milestones, better employment opportunities or self-employment, and the pursuit of activities and goals about which they are passionate? Inclusive feminist theory allows room in which answers may be found to questions such as these.

### **Fortitude: Inclusive Feminist Theory and the Resilience of Intentionally Unmarried Heterosexual Women**

As part of a more global society, intentionally unmarried heterosexual women belong to something that is far greater than themselves. Within this larger entity, intentionally unmarried heterosexual women are able to discover and explore the depths of meaning that characterize life as well as personal significance and professional success; however, to accept this as reality on the collective and individual levels requires courage, a firm sense of self and an uncompromising determination to live one's life as one chooses. In other words, deliberately deciding to remain unmarried requires a significant amount of *fortitude* (Gordon, 2003). Inclusive feminist theory champions heterosexual women who are bold enough, confident enough and possess enough self-awareness to choose purposely to go through life unmarried and unmoved by judgmental

responses from others who prefer to conform to the societal expectations for heterosexual women.

### **“You Just Know.”**

Inclusive feminist theory urges heterosexual women to trust themselves. Whereas some heterosexual women ‘just knew’ from the time they were little girls that they were meant to become mothers by means of pregnancy, another group of heterosexual women ‘just knew’ that they were meant to adopt one or more children, whether domestically or internationally. Whereas any number of heterosexual women ‘just know’ they are destined to find and marry ‘Prince Charming,’ other heterosexual women ‘just know’ that they will find happiness by remaining single. Whereas some heterosexual women crave the comforts that accompany the married-with-children status, other heterosexual women recognize that they can ‘take it or leave it’ for the most part, thereby choosing to live life as intentionally unmarried individuals. *You just know.*

### **The Global Family as Courageous**

The global family is a courageous one, led by valiant women and men who choose to move forward unhindered by the fears that cause some individuals to doubt their decisions made for or against marriage or romantic relationships, parenthood, and reproductive choice. Especially for women, decisions such as these can weigh heavily with regard to fertility and motherhood. After all, from the moment they are able to hold ‘doll babies’ or help to care for younger siblings, little girls throughout the world are bombarded with overt messages and subtle cues pertaining to fertility, motherhood and reproduction as well as the relentless and unforgiving nature of Time.

Peer pressure and societal expectations to marry serve to reinforce one another, contributing to stigmatization of intentionally unmarried women and the misconception that heterosexual women who choose to remain single approximate deviant behavior. Saying ‘no’ to marriage should not be viewed by the larger, more global society as an out-of-the-ordinary decision, even though the choice to remain single is not easily accepted within the current framework of North American society or any other society, for that matter. Nor does choosing to say ‘no’ to marriage necessarily suggest that heterosexual women are ‘anti-marriage’ or ‘anti-family.’ Rather, this collective of unmarried women possess a depth of thoughtfulness that signifies the extent of their introspection and self-awareness.

Even our contemporary times do not lend themselves to uncomplicated definitions about the meaning of marriage, family, or fulfillment. Amidst all of this, the place of heterosexual women who remain unmarried is scrutinized and relatively misunderstood, even though desiring to remain single is not a new phenomenon. By reconfiguring feminist theory to become more inclusive, any number of intentionally unmarried heterosexual women suddenly ‘fit in’ and find a proverbial home. These same women may be spurred to use activism, education, and humanitarian values as the means of contributing to a larger, more global society in which unmarried women find acceptance, live a meaningful existence characterized by choice and self-respect and possess as much value as any other members of societies throughout the world.

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