

`Non-moms' find child-free terminology offensive.

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Nearly one in five U.S. women see their child-bearing years come and go without having a baby, up from just one in 10 in the 1970s. The dramatic increase, described in a new report by the Pew Research Center, is consistent across all racial and ethnic groups, and most education levels.

But at the same time the reproductive imperative is being rethought, critics say the language used to express the trend remains shockingly retrograde, with ``childless" - appearing throughout Pew's analysis - implying a deficit or disability.

``'Childless' has such a depressing connotation," says Danielle M. Stern, assistant professor at Christopher Newport University in Virginia. ``Some women and couples are actually choosing to be 'childfree.'"

Between 1996 and 2006, Statistics Canada reports that the percentage of married or common-law couples with children of any age declined from 59.3 per cent to 54.3 per cent. Looking at the window between 2001 and 2006, households consisting of couples with children (defined as age 24 or younger) crawled ahead 0.4 per cent, compared to 11.2 per cent growth in households consisting of couples without children.

``We're at the turning point of generations who value family in multiple ways versus a more traditional understanding of family," says Stern. ``However, the recent Pew study and others like it focus on a particular educated, middle- to-upper class understanding of family choice."

Though it may seem like trivial semantics, Stern says the language used by a society is indicative of its values.

As child-bearing is brimming with gender and family politics issues, couched within larger class concerns, she says it's important to call attention to rhetoric ``so that we can move toward more inclusive language in both policy and popular culture."

Pamela Tsigdinos, who spent more than a decade trying, unsuccessfully, to conceive with her husband, says the term ``childless" has become a ``legacy reminder of that painful period."

She finds the jauntier ``childfree" no more respectful, with its implicit message of embracing liberation from a life of parenting - a sentiment often expressed by those who've chosen not to have kids, but rare among those mourning the loss of the family of their dreams.

Parents have similarly taken offence at the modern term's uprising, as ``childfree" bears a negative insinuation that anyone with kids is somehow tethered down in life.

Though Tsigdinos wishes people weren't identified by child rearing at all, ``non-mom" is her trope of choice for now.

``There's this pressure to define adults by whether they have children directly in their lives or not," says Tsigdinos, author of **Silent Sorority: A Barren Woman Gets Busy, Angry, Lost and Found**. ``And there are so many value judgments placed on those labels."

Roger Pierson, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Saskatchewan, agrees but isn't sure such a multi-faceted issue can ever be justly portrayed by a single term.

``Everyone has their own expectations of what it means to be sub-fertile, infertile or childless by choice ... English might not be equipped (to describe) all that," says Pierson. ``You almost have to start every conversation with a disclaimer that you're not trying to be offensive in any way."

That people are debating this issue at all, however, is encouraging to those hoping for greater understanding

- Vancouver's Jerry Steinberg among them.

"I think it's wonderful that people are discussing the semantics of the terms for those who don't have children," says Steinberg, "founding non-father" of No Kidding, an international social club for people who aren't parents.

"It brings childlessness and childfreedom out of the shadows and makes both more acceptable to everyone."

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