

In a society that pays homage to the family with children, it is difficult to find one's place as childless

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September 19, 2020

The last episode of DR documentary 'When the stork flies by' has been shown at the Danish National Television (DR). Week after week, 3 couples and a single woman's struggle to get the desired child were shown along with white smocks, test tubes, waiting time, disappointments, anger and tears. When the series ended, two of the couples were able to show off healthy babies, the single woman had reached a few steps further in the fertility treatments ... and then there was the last couple. For them, the treatments did not bear fruit, now they dream of a brown Labrador to be named Balder.

I am glad that there is great openness about the difficulties many have with becoming a parent. That openness was not there when my husband and I had fertility treatments. Series like 'When the stork flies by' help break the taboo. But there is also something that is jarring, because the documentary left out one of the biggest taboos in the field of fertility treatments relatively untreated: What is it like to have to give up the dream of having a child? Can a brown Labrador fill the void? How do you find peace within yourself as involuntarily childless in a world that praises parenthood?

In the media and society in general, those issues are absent. Here is the story that fertility treatments succeed in the end. People struggle, stop eating sugar, get acupuncture, stop thinking about getting pregnant, and then they get pregnant. It is almost a fairy tale. But the happy ending is not for everyone. About every third couple stands with empty arms after finishing fertility treatment in the public health service. It is hard to accept, not only for the unhappy couple, but also for the society. We would rather have happy endings.

There are many reasons, why the story of involuntarily childlessness remains untold. Part of the problem grows paradoxically, as fertility treatment options improve. It creates a huge amount of trust in science, but science is not the answer to everything. For many people it is almost incomprehensible, because there must be an answer, and there must be a solution. We expect that science will probably make sure that we can become parents in one way or another: if only our eggs could be frozen a little longer, if only we could be allowed to get paid treatment for child number two or have the right for treatment a little later in life.

At the same time, today there is a distinct discourse that 'you can do what you want'. 'Dream it and you can do it'. But this is not the case when you are involuntarily childless.

The combination of the two makes it extra difficult to come up with this story of permanent involuntary childlessness, because did you not do enough to get

pregnant? Didn't you want to become a parent enough? You are held responsible for your childlessness.

My husband and I went through countless fertility treatments with my own eggs, donor eggs and donor sperm. It was the hardest decision of our lives when we said we would stop having more treatments. I never thought I would give up, because it meant we would never become parents. And please do not tell me suggestions on how it can still be done. I've researched it. I've tried it. I will never be a mother. Science does not help everyone. I have had to realize that. I wish the outside world would also accept it and recognize that childlessness can be a grief rather than a problem with a technological solution that just needs to be found.

Involuntary childlessness breaks with society's notions of the good life. Our entire society, structures, norms, media and culture are based on the premise that a family is a family with children - that part of an adult life is having children. If life is only complete, when you have children, a life without children is deficient. I constantly hear people report that having children is the most meaningful thing that has happened in their lives. Phrases like: 'It was only when I became a mother that I really understood what life was all about'. 'Only when I became a mother did I understand what it means to love'. 'It was only then that I grew up'.

As a childless person, you always end up being different. We do not fit into the welfare state. We do not use the institutions. We are not part of the friendships / relationships that are created through mother groups, parent parties and the like.

I am often excluded - even the ordinary conversation over the lunch table with colleagues can sometimes hurt deeply. I cannot contribute with my story about the children in school, about home schooling during the corona crisis, about the confirmation, about the graduation party. When colleagues show off their new babies, I am so happy on their behalf, and at the same time it hurts profoundly. I will never be a mother.

When you are not someone's mother, who are you then? The roles offered to the childless woman are rarely attractive. Am I the cat lady? The career woman who did not want children? The evil woman who steals your children? The nasty stepmother? Can I be empathetic when I do not have children? Or give my opinion on family life? Maybe I am lucky to be the aunt, the godmother or the wise woman?

As childless people, we are rarely portrayed nuanced in movies, series or books. Instead, we are Samantha the Maneater ('Sex & the City'), the possible murderer ('Where the crayfish sing'), and in the English and Nordic detective stories we are most often frustrated, strange and probably a little dangerous. In the 2016 English election campaign, Theresa May was criticized by her opponent Andrea Leadsom for not being able to lead the country when she is not a mother, because then she could not have a real interest in the country's future.

It is important to create more nuanced narratives about childless people in our society with positions other than the sad, the twisted or the one that everyone should feel sorry for.

Perhaps it will reduce the feeling of exclusion and of not having 'delivered' what is expected. And maybe it will even give women who undergo countless fertility treatments better opportunities to say stop before they end up as traumatized or strangers in their own body. Many never get advice from the health system to end the treatments, but are met by an invitation to try again. It reinforces the individual's experience that she is not fighting hard enough if she thinks about saying stop. When at the same time there is no visibly attractive position in society for the childless woman, it is tougher to make the decision to end the treatments.

A break with the taboo about life as an involuntarily childless person might make it possible to share the grief with others or to get the support from others to live with it, because it is a deep grief to put the dream of becoming a mother aside.

For me, it is a grief never ever to be able to feel my child's skin, hear its voice, laugh and laugh - and cry wildly and worry. Get angry and love. You might understand that. The grief of never becoming a mother I carry with me all my life. It's a part of me. Occasionally there are some people that I experience understand what I am saying. And I feel seen and understood. Perhaps that would become more frequent if the taboo were broken.

Fortunately, forums have begun to emerge that can alleviate the feeling of being excluded. In Denmark, there is the forum 'Et Andet Liv'. Outside Denmark, there are several clear voices in the fora: 'Gateway Women', 'World Childless Week', and 'Walk In Our Shoes'. The next step is to do away with the taboo in society in general.

The grief will always be there, but it may be a little easier to live with if we are not alone. Perhaps friendships will be easier to maintain if there is a greater understanding of our lives and stories. Maybe I can feel like a real woman even though I am not a mother. And maybe I would no longer have to answer the question, 'Do you have children and why not' every time I meet new people. Maybe we could even get more inclusive stories about being a woman and a human being today?

Imagine if there were also 1,615 women who wrote: 'We are involuntarily childless'. Not because we should be pitied, but to show who we are and that we are here too. (*The week of the article; there were 1615 women in the Danish media who had signed a letter that they had experienced sexual harassment in relation with their job*)