

No spouse in the house

Why are single women in the majority in this country?

Story by Anne E. Wright
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Holly DeWees, 51, has never been married. “I put a lot of effort into my work life through my 40s,” she says by way of explanation. Barbara Burke, a divorced mother of two, has been single for 14 years and says she doesn’t have any strong desire to get remarried. “I am surrounded by the love of my family and friends, and I am happy with myself. I just don’t feel the need to have a relationship,” says Burke, 55. These Albuquerque women aren’t alone — in fact, they are in the majority in this country. A recent New York Times analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data found that in 2005, 51 percent of adult women in the United States were living without a spouse.

That percentage was up from 49 percent in 2000. By contrast, single women made up only 35 percent of the female population in 1950. Like these two women, the reasons for the steady rise of single women vary. Some of the rise can be attributed to personal choice, some of it to societal trends. Whatever the reason, the statistics suggest marriage might no longer be the default lifestyle for women.

Already whole

Independent filmmaker Anne Stirling of Corrales interviewed some 30 people for her 2005 documentary, “Why Get Married?” She found that many women today “don’t buy the myth that you need to be married to be happy and complete.”

Medical advances in fertility have extended the childbearing age range, meaning that women can, and do, put off marriage and children until they are in their 30s and 40s. In addition, women are earning advanced degrees in greater numbers than ever before. In 2003, almost 7 percent more women earned a bachelor’s degree or higher than did a decade earlier. Because women are staying in school longer, they are getting married later. College degrees also improve the employment outlook, and women with successful careers tend to put off marriage until they are established in their fields. DeWees, an academic adviser at Central New Mexico Community College’s main campus, is a perfect example of the trend. But she adds, “I haven’t decided to remain single. I decided not to choose something that’s unhealthy.”



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"I haven't decided to remain single," Holly DeWees says. "I decided not to choose something that's unhealthy."

That sentiment is one Joanie Griffin, who owns the It's Just Lunch dating service in Albuquerque, finds common among her clients. "I think women are choosing to be single rather than stay in unhappy marriages or relationships," says Griffin. Stirling thinks that in years past, marriage was often an "economic union" as much as it was a romantic one. Through her research for the film, she discovered that in Canada, which has government-provided health care and pensions, there are fewer marriages than ever. Stirling also says she believes that modern longevity rates have contributed to a larger single population. "People died younger," says Stirling. "Marriage wasn't forever."

With many people living into their 80s and beyond, the length of a marriage will naturally be longer if one stays married to just one person during a lifetime. But the more years a couple spend together, the greater potential for external influences to strain their marriage. To that, Stirling adds that a successful

marriage should be more than “just getting to the finish line. Marriage should enhance your life,” she says.

Growing population

The divorce rate is a big factor in creating a larger pool of single women, says Mary Molina Mescall, executive director of the New Mexico Commission on the Status of Women. In New Mexico, the number of single mothers has increased 102.9 percent from 1994 to 2003, according to a report from Women Work! The National Network for Women’s Employment. The report, “Chutes & Ladders: The Search for Solid Ground for Women in the Work Force,” states that the number of single mothers in New Mexico was 52,559 in 1994 but rose to 106,622 in 2003.

Mescall calls those numbers “staggering.” Mescall says the numbers reflect that women are less likely to stay in a troubled marriage than in years past. “If things aren’t going well in a marriage, more and more women are finding the courage to move on,” she says.

Denise Merrell, 45, and mother of two school age children, is one of the 106,622 single mothers in New Mexico’s 2003 statistic. Now divorced for five years, Merrell admits that going it alone hasn’t always been easy. “It’s hard in the middle of the night when you have two sick kids and no one else to rely on,” she says. “You can’t have a bad day.” Socially, she has had to adjust to her newly single status. “In the beginning you are constantly reminded that New Year’s parties are for couples. But eventually, socially, a whole new world opens up.” Post-divorce, Merrell and her daughters have developed a steadfast circle of friends.

After her divorce, Burke found that being single helped strengthen her connection with friends and family. “I realized that being single had many advantages,” the bookkeeper says. “I can do what I want to do, when I want to do it.”

Merrell also has found certain freedoms come with being single. “I always wanted to continue my education,” says Merrell, and she has gone back to school for nursing, expecting to graduate as a registered nurse in December. Her success in following her dreams is what so many other women hope to achieve by becoming, or staying, single. Merrell no longer yearns for the extra paycheck or second set of hands a husband might provide, because she’s able to live her life on her terms. “I’m pursuing my goals,” says Merrell, “and I’m becoming self-sufficient. It’s been tough, but also extremely rewarding. I have no regrets.”