



Abortion Rights
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Canada's only national political pro-choice advocacy group

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Position Paper #41

Why Few Pregnant Women Choose Adoption

Adoption is frequently advocated as a good solution for unwanted pregnancy, particularly by the anti-choice movement. Abortion clinics and the pro-choice movement support adoption as a possible option for women and transgender people, and they provide information and referrals on adoption to those considering it. However, very few women facing an unintended pregnancy choose to give up their baby for adoption. Most will choose to keep the baby themselves or terminate the pregnancy. This paper explains why.

Background

There are no recent Canadian statistics, but in 1989, only 2% of single pregnant women under age 25 gave up their babies for adoption (compared to 5% in 1981), with 60% raising the child and 38% opting for an abortion.¹ It is difficult to obtain data, as adoption records are not public and no provincial government tracks (or at least publishes) data on the number of babies put up for adoption. Yet, as abortion became easier to access in 1988, it's possible that the percentage of women opting for adoption today has decreased even more since 1989. If you are attempting to adopt a child, it is very difficult (and costly) to find a newborn.

There are five adoption options to take when adopting (public, private, international, kinship, stepchild/children).² The "lack" of available newborns suggests that women are having abortions rather than going through the birthing and adoption process.

There are numerous important reasons a woman would prefer abortion or raising the child herself, over giving it up for adoption.

1. She avoids gestation and childbirth, as well as reproduction itself. Every pregnancy taken to term and the resulting childbirth carry medical risks – far greater than an early abortion. Pregnancy has a profound effect on a woman's body³ and emotional state⁴. It affects women's health, compromises bodily integrity, and alters the course of their life by making their work and other daily activities more difficult or complicated. Despite obstetrical or midwife appointments protected under the Labour Code, most women have difficulty taking time off, or their work suffers due to pregnancy and related illness. Childbirth itself can be a dreaded and painful ordeal, especially when a woman plans to give up the child. Further, continuing a pregnancy means producing a child. Regardless of whether it is adopted or not, some women simply do not want to reproduce. Women have a right to control their fertility, and limit and plan their families.

2. In the USA in 2014, some 56% of all abortion patients were married and 59% of women who had abortions already had at least one child (51% were using a contraceptive method when they became pregnant).⁵ It can be much more difficult for a married woman or woman with children to give up a child for adoption, both psychologically and logistically. Further, women may not want others to know they became pregnant accidentally, or that they plan to give up the baby for adoption. By continuing the pregnancy, it soon becomes apparent to everyone, and they would also be subject to the stigma attached to giving up their child.
3. While an abortion can be a difficult decision for many women, it can be considerably more difficult for many women to give up a child they have carried in their bodies for nine months, and may have bonded with to some degree. As well, the longer a woman waits to decide what to do about a pregnancy, the more attached she may become to her fetus, making it less likely for her to choose adoption. Further, many more women today choose (or feel pressured) to raise the child because of the reduced stigma attached to single motherhood, although the difficulty to survive as a single mother has not changed.
4. Even if a woman has the mental and emotional strength to relinquish a child at birth, women who choose adoption may spend their lives wondering what became of their child, how it is doing, or fearing being approached unexpectedly about a child they gave up decades previously. One cannot be sure that a child given up for adoption will be safe and provided for, or that it will forever stay out of one's life, as some women prefer. This uncertainty and wondering can be a source of ongoing emotional difficulty for many women.
5. Interviews with many women have demonstrated that they often have a gut feeling that adoption amounts to an abandonment of a child.⁶ This may stem from societal pressures of mothering. Women feel responsibility to the fetus they carry, reasoning that "good mothers" simply don't consign their children to an unknown and uncertain fate. Adoption can feel like an irresponsible choice to many women, and they may feel the fetus is better off being aborted before it becomes a child.

In sum, there are a wide range of reasons why women rarely choose adoption. Married women and women with children constitute the majority of women facing unintended pregnancies, and adoption is not a realistic option for most of them. The rest generally prefer to raise the child themselves or have an abortion, because of the emotional difficulty of going through pregnancy and childbirth only to relinquish the child to an uncertain future.

¹ Daly, Kerry J, Michael P Sobol. 1994. Adoption in Canada. Canadian Social Trends, Spring, no. 32. <http://www.familyhelper.net/ad/adres.html>

² <http://www.adoption.ca/faqs> and <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/adoption/decided-to-adopt/index.aspx>

³ <http://www.ontarioprenataleducation.ca/physical-changes/>

⁴ <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/pregnancy/depression-during-pregnancy.html>

⁵ Guttmacher Institute. June, 2017. Facts on Induced Abortion in the United States. <https://www.guttmacher.org/united-states/abortion>

⁶ Cannold, Leslie and Rene Denfeld. 2001. *The Abortion Myth: Feminism, Morality, and the Hard Choices Women Make*. Wesleyan University Press