



# I Do ... *Or* I Don't

## The Future of Marriage

presented by the Independent Women's Forum



## MISSION STATEMENT

IWF's mission is to improve the lives of Americans by increasing the number of women who value free markets and personal liberty.

IWF is a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.



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Sponsored by the **GFC Foundation**  
May 13, 2015 | Washington, D.C.



## MODERATOR

**Sabrina Schaeffer**, Executive Director  
The Independent Women's Forum

## PANELISTS



**Isabel V. Sawhill**, whose latest book is *Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood without Marriage*, is co-director of the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution



**Kay S. Hymowitz**, whose four books on the family include *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age*, is the William E. Simon Fellow at the Manhattan Institute



**W. Bradford Wilcox** is Director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, an associate professor of sociology at the University and coauthor of *Gender and Parenthood: Biological and Social Science Perspectives*

We regretted that **Kate Bolick** was unable to attend at the last minute. Her book *Spinster: Making a Life of One's Own* had just come out, and she is a contributing editor at The Atlantic, where her much-discussed article "All the Single Ladies" appeared.



## Introduction by Charlotte Hays

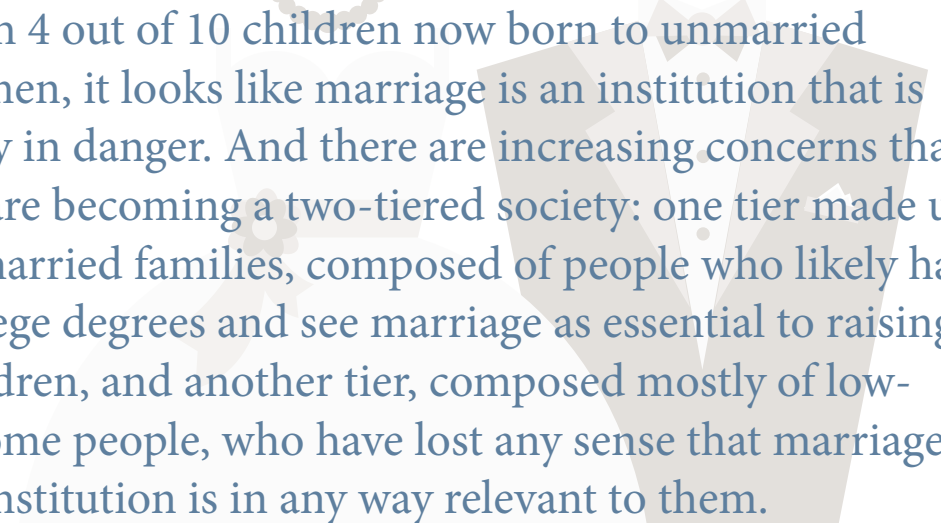
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The Independent Women’s Forum (IWF) has developed a reputation for putting on spirited but civil panels that address tough questions, but I don’t think we’ve ever tackled a more crucial issue than this one: the future—if there is one—of marriage. An astonishing 40 percent of children in the U.S. are born to unmarried women, a clear indication that marriage as an institution appears to be in jeopardy.

Many never-married, low-income women are struggling to raise children in single-parent households, while a significant portion of more affluent young people are opting out of marriage in favor of a single’s lifestyle. Does all this mean that marriage is beyond saving? Can marriage be saved? Should it be saved? On the answers to these questions hang economic outcomes for families and the overall character of our society.

We convened a distinguished panel composed of, as a friend of mine put it, “everybody you’d most want to hear from on this topic in one room at one time.” We thank our panelists for such an impressive and provocative discussion. It was so good we wanted to preserve it and make it available to an even wider audience.

*Charlotte Hays*  
Director of Cultural Programs,  
Independent Women’s Forum



With 4 out of 10 children now born to unmarried women, it looks like marriage is an institution that is truly in danger. And there are increasing concerns that we are becoming a two-tiered society: one tier made up of married families, composed of people who likely have college degrees and see marriage as essential to raising children, and another tier, composed mostly of low-income people, who have lost any sense that marriage as an institution is in any way relevant to them.

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## **SABRINA SCHAEFFER**

Good evening and welcome to our forum “I Do ... Or I Don’t: The Future of Marriage.” I’m Sabrina Schaeffer, the Executive Director of IWF, and I’m so glad that you’re here for what I’m sure will be a provocative discussion.

First, I want to thank our sponsor here tonight, the GFC Foundation. We are so appreciative of your support and the support of the foundations and donors that recognize the value of cultural programming that IWF presents.

Tonight’s conversation is vital. With 4 out of 10 children now born to unmarried women, it certainly looks like marriage is an institution that is in danger. And there are increasing concerns that we are becoming a two-tiered society: one tier made up of married families, composed of people who likely have college degrees and see marriage as essential to raising children, and another tier, composed mostly of low-income people, who have lost any sense that marriage as an institution is in any way relevant to them.

To put this in perspective, a recent Pew Research study—and Brad and I were just talking about it—found that in 1950 the vast majority of single mothers were divorced or separated or widowed. Only four percent of single mothers in the 1950 study had never been married. Today the percentage of single mothers who have never been married is 44 percent. This startling percentage is upside down from 1950.

When Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote his famous study of the black family in 1965, the African-American illegitimacy rate was considered alarmingly high at 23.6 percent. Sadly, in 2011, that percentage had skyrocketed to a staggering 72.3 percent. I talked about this very issue with Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton from here in Washington, D.C., just last Friday, and I think it's now widely accepted by both the left and the right that this trend has a profound impact on poverty and crime and the growth of government, a concern for many of us here. And of course there is the effect on children in these scenarios.

Then of course, there is the question of how these changing attitudes affect more affluent women in society. Certainly women's educational and professional achievements today, as well as our financial independence, have led some to argue that marriage is—at best—optional, but realistically obsolete for women. This was part of what Kate Bolick, who could not be here because of a last-minute emergency, argues. I'm going to put on my Kate Bolick hat from time to time so she'll be here in spirit and so we can talk about some of the arguments in her important new book *Spinster: Making a Life of One's Own*.

This wouldn't be an IWF event if we didn't also consider the impact that the modern feminist movement has had on our perceptions of marriage. A few years ago, I wrote a review of Erica Jong's book *Sugar in My Bowl: Real Women Write about Real Sex* for *Commentary*. It's a collection of essays and memoirs from feminist writers, and there is, as you might expect, a strong anti-marriage theme running through it. What was so interesting to me when I was reading the book, was that it seemed as though the modern feminist attempt to undermine traditional marriage had left women more obsessed with sex and gender rather than liberated by it. They are more confused and tormented rather than clearer and more confident in their understandings.

If Kate were here tonight, she might very well ask us if perhaps it's time to reconsider how we perceive marriage. Should it be this high ideal that many of us here continue to think it is? Or it is just as well or even better for many women, especially those who prefer educational and professional success, to live very happy, full, exciting lives as single women?

And so all of this leads us to the big question of the evening: Does marriage have a future here in America? And should we care about that?

With us to discuss this all and seated in the middle is Isabel Sawhill, a senior fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution. Her research spans a wide range

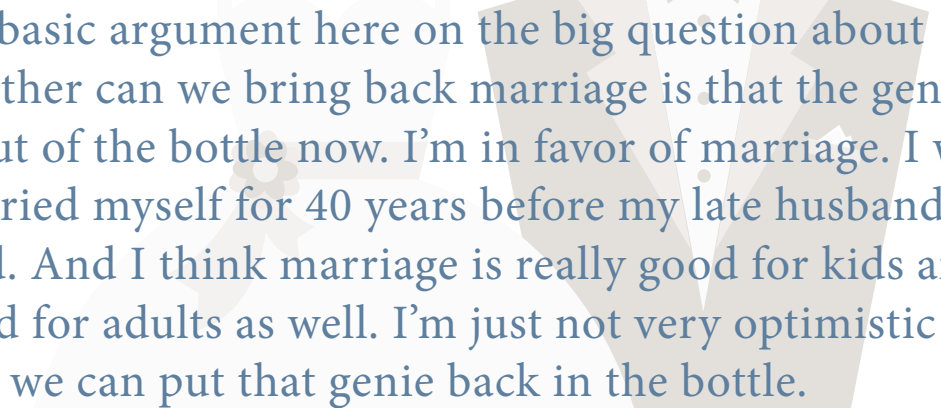
of economic and social issues and fiscal policy and economic growth, including poverty and inequality. Her most recent book is *Generation Unbound*. She was the subject of a recent profile in *The Washington Post*, which described her as a long-time proponent of marriage who is reassessing the institution's future. So we are so happy to have you as part of this panel tonight.

Brad Wilcox is director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia and associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia, a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and senior fellow at the Institute for Family Studies. He's the author of many books, including his most recent *Why Marriage Matters*, which argues that marriage is a vital social good.

And finally, Kate Hymowitz, a longtime friend of the Independent Women's Forum, is a William E. Simon fellow at the Manhattan Institute in New York. She's the author of four books, including *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age*, as well as most recently *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men Into Boys*.

So with that, I'm going to turn it over to Isabel, and I look forward to an interesting discussion.





My basic argument here on the big question about whether can we bring back marriage is that the genie is out of the bottle now. I'm in favor of marriage. I was married myself for 40 years before my late husband died. And I think marriage is really good for kids and good for adults as well. I'm just not very optimistic that we can put that genie back in the bottle.

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## ISABEL SAWHILL

Sabrina, thank you so much. And hello to all of you who are here tonight. I think I'm keeping you from dinner or more wine or something, so we want to be relatively brief and hear your questions.

Also, it's an honor to be on a panel with Brad and Kay. I've known them both for many years and am highly impressed with their work. We don't agree on absolutely everything, but we all three, I think, really care about research and data and about a very civil discourse about these issues.

I want to begin with the growing gaps that we're seeing between children in less-advantaged and more-advantaged families. Bob Putnam, a professor at Harvard, has a new book out called *Our Kids* in which he talks about this in detail. And basically what he shows, and what I've shown in some of my work, is that if you look at today's kids, the gaps are much bigger than they used to be. It's not just gaps in income, it's gaps in the way families are formed, it's gaps in educational achievement, it's gaps in who goes to college and who graduates. And those gaps are, I think, somewhat troublesome.

One way to put it is that if you are a very well-educated, married couple, you're investing heavily in your kids, both time and resources. You're exposing them to all kinds of social capital, as we say in the literature. And you're buying a house in

a good neighborhood, and you're sending them to the best schools you can. And you're helping to prepare them for college. And they have all kinds of advantages.

And at the other end of the educational spectrum, you have just the opposite, including way too many families that are formed as the result of an accidental pregnancy to a young, single mom. And I'll get back to that.

Just about everyone who looks at this situation of growing gaps says "Well, we should do something about that," and "We should invest more in education, we should do more in terms of early childhood education, career and technical training and wage subsidies and child care for the working poor and so forth." And I want to admit that I like that agenda, but I don't think it is sufficient.

I think we could be doing more on all of those fronts, especially when any assistance is basically provided only if you're working and only if the evidence shows it passes a cost/benefit test. But there are a lot of programs like that now.

But my basic message is that, if we care about kids—and I think one reason, not the only reason, but an important reason that we care about marriage is primarily because of its effects on kids—we need to start thinking not just about what happens after the child is born. I'm going to argue we need to go upstream, meaning we need to think about what happens before the child is born, not after the child is born. Because once the child is born, the trajectories, the life trajectories of these children are often very difficult to change.

And almost no one talks about the upstream story. Let me tell you a story that some of you may have heard before. It's about a guy who lives in a village, and there's a river running through the village, and there's a bunch of kids floating down the river, and he's yanking the kids out of the river—they're at risk of drowning, and he's yanking them out about as fast as he can.

And he's getting very tired and getting very frustrated. And finally he realizes that upstream there's another guy who's throwing those kids in the river as fast as he's yanking them out. And that's what I mean about going upstream and that's what I mean about caring about all of this before the children are born.

So let me tell you some facts about what's going on upstream. As I think Sabrina said, 40 percent of all children in America are now born outside of marriage. So if there's one data point that I want you to go away from this meeting with, it's that

statistic, 40 percent. If we're talking about the millennial generation, women under 30, the proportion is 50 percent of babies born outside of marriage.

There are big differences by race and by education. So if you're very well-educated—and Brad has done very seminal work on this—your chances of having a child outside of marriage are quite low, around 12 percent, I think. But if you are anything less than a BA-degreed woman, your chances of having a child outside of marriage are maybe two-thirds, way up there. It's the typical way of having children nowadays, if you're not a well-educated woman.

The rate of unwed childbearing has exploded over the past 40 or 50 years. And you could ask: Well, why has it exploded? And it's because people are either not getting married or they're getting married much later than they used to.

In my generation, and I'm really old, believe me—I won't admit it, but I am—in my generation, everybody got married young. You know, we got married right after we got out of school. If it was college, we got married in our early 20s; if it was high school, we got married even earlier than that. And then we had children within marriage.

The average age at first marriage is now late 20s. So there's this whole decade when people are having relationships, they're typically sexually active in those relationships, and they haven't stopped having children.

The next fact you need to know is that the reason they haven't stopped having children is because they are getting pregnant unintentionally. Seventy-three percent of all pregnancies to single women, unmarried women under the age of 30, 73 percent are unintended, meaning that the woman herself told the surveyor from a big government study that either she didn't want the child at all or it came way too soon.

Some of them go on to have abortions. But if you look at the births to this age group, the unmarrieds under 30, 60 percent of these births are unintended, not really wanted or prepared for by the parents.

Next fact you need to know is that unplanned pregnancy rates and birth rates are much, much higher among disadvantaged women than among more-advantaged women. Whether you look at it by income or by ethnicity or race or education level, the rates of unplanned pregnancy are really high, much higher amongst less-advantaged women. They have not been as able to control their fertility as well as more-educated women.

So what could we do about all of this? One option is to bring back marriage. My friend Brad likes to argue this and to say it's okay if you're young and you get married in your early 20s, and then more of these babies would be born inside of marriage. And that's true.

I am more pessimistic than he is that we can bring back marriage to these young women, especially those who are less-educated. And well-educated women aren't getting married young, they're going to wait typically until they have finished graduate school and gotten a job and gotten where they want to be in life before they marry.

My basic argument here on the big question of whether we can we bring back marriage is that the genie is out of the bottle now. I'm in favor of marriage. I was married myself for 40 years before my late husband died. And I think marriage is really good for kids and good for adults as well. I'm just not very optimistic that we can put that genie back in the bottle when we're at a point where 50 percent of the entire population and a much higher proportion of the less-advantaged are having babies outside of marriage.

So what could we do?

Well, another thing we could do, which I talk a lot about in my book *Generation Unbound* is we could reduce unplanned births to young women by providing them with more affordable and more effective forms of birth control. That way they could finish their education, they could get settled in a job or career, they can find Mr. Right, or at least a better right—I know there's never a perfect Mr. Right—before having children.

And in my view, this would eventually produce more stable relationships and more marriage. And even if it didn't, the women involved—and I'm so sorry Kate Bolick isn't here because I think she might have talked a little bit more about this—would be in a much better position to go it alone, to provide for their children.

There are some women—I read a little piece about this recently—who never find Mr. Right and decide they're just going to have a child on their own. And I think that should be accepted. I don't want to see a whole society full of what I call "single-mothers-by-choice," but I don't think it's a lifestyle that I want to criticize.

You're probably thinking to yourself, "Well, women already have access to birth control, so what are you worried about, what are you talking about here?" Well, let me tell you what young, most young adults use. You probably know this, especially some of you younger people in the audience. Don't need to listen to me.

But the birth control forms of choice are condoms and pills. And the problem is that most people, including most young people—I have my colleagues at Brookings who are twenty-something —come up to me and say, “Oh my God, we didn’t know.” What they didn’t know is that failure rates from condoms and pills are as high as they are.

It is not because these devices or these forms are flawed; technically, they’re not. If you were really careful, if you always took your pill every day, if you always remembered to get your prescription refilled, if you always used a condom in the heat of the moment with whoever your partner was at that point, then fine, it would work. And I don’t think abstinence, by the way, is a option.

But people make mistakes—and we all make mistakes. I go on periods when I say I’m going to diet, I’m going to lose weight, no chocolate ice cream, and I fail inevitably.

And chocolate ice cream is not as good as sex.

So we have tons of accidental pregnancies. Let me remind you of this statistic again. Seventy-three percent of all pregnancies to unmarried women under the age of 30 are unintended according to the women themselves.

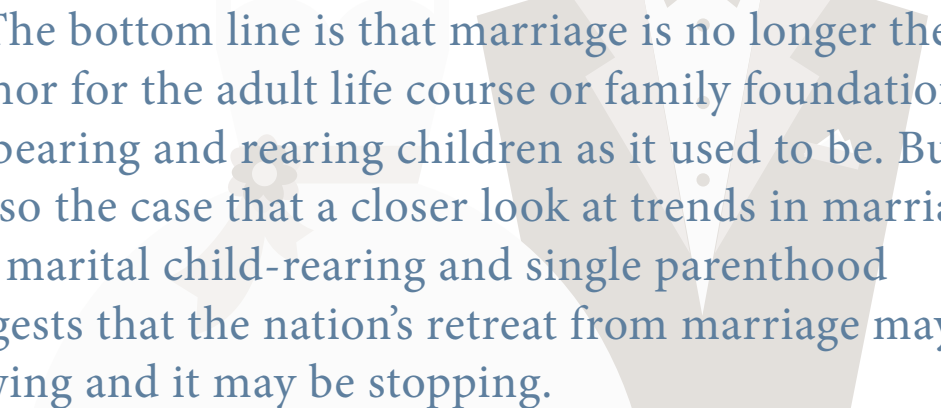
Large-scale studies have shown—I’m talking about studies in the whole state of Colorado, I’m talking about Iowa, I’m talking about Missouri—that when you provide more good counseling and more effective forms of contraception and no cost for these women, unplanned pregnancies plummet, abortion rates plummet, and costs to the government plummet.

So my argument to people who are of a more conservative persuasion, is that, if you want to rein in government, if you want to also reduce poverty, and if you also want to reduce abortion, this is the way to go. That’s what the evidence shows. And if any of you want the numbers, I could give you tons of things to read.

So my argument is—in a nutshell—that we go upstream and we not wait until we are faced with all those children who are floating downstream and need to be saved by a variety of social programs that sometimes work, sometimes don’t, but in any case cost us a ton of money.

And I think both adults and children would benefit. The women would be freer to get on with their lives, the children would be more likely to be born into a stable and hopefully married family, and the American taxpayer would save money.

So that’s my argument in a nutshell. Thank you for listening.



... The bottom line is that marriage is no longer the anchor for the adult life course or family foundation for bearing and rearing children as it used to be. But it is also the case that a closer look at trends in marriage and marital child-rearing and single parenthood suggests that the nation's retreat from marriage may be slowing and it may be stopping.

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## W. BRADFORD WILCOX

Thanks, Sabrina. And thanks, Isabel, for hitting a homer right off the bat there.

In fact, I'm planning to open my remarks with your point about the genie being out of the bottle. You wrote in the *New York Times* a little while ago that marriage is disappearing. You wrote in that piece that we've been worrying about marriage for years and wondering if marriage can be restored as the standard way to raise children. "As much as we might welcome a revival," you wrote, "I doubt if it will happen."

So I think a balanced position seems quite reasonable. Over the last half century, marriage has taken quite a beating. Since the '60s, for instance, the marriage rate has come down by more than 50 percent, divorce has more than doubled, and single parenthood has increased by more than 100 percent.

The bottom line here obviously is that marriage is no longer the anchor for the adult life course or the family foundation for the bearing and rearing of kids as it used to be. I think that's pretty clear. But it's also the case that a closer look at trends in marriage and marital child-rearing and single parenthood suggests that the nation's retreat from marriage may be slowing and it may be stopping.

In a new report colleagues at Demographic Intelligence believe, for instance, they see that the decline in the marriage rate has basically stopped. Also, the ratio of

babies being born outside of wedlock has held steady since 2007. This is really quite remarkable. Since the '60s, marriage rates have fallen. But this appears to have stopped since the Great Recession. So the data suggests that perhaps—perhaps—the reports of marriage's death have been exaggerated.

Why is this important? Of course, it's a good thing that marriage's retreat may be halted. And why? Besides the fact that I'm the director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, so what I would say to that? What's the sort of thinking there?

First, I first need to echo a point that Isabel made just a few moments ago. Marriage is about providing the best environment for our kids. And virtually every week I run across another study showing this. But what's striking in terms of talking about the research on kids and family structure today is that we're seeing more and more evidence that boys in particular benefit from being raised in a child-rearing, two-parent home.

We have seen two studies to this effect coming out in just the last ten days. One, of course, is from Raj Chetty, an economics professor at Harvard, and the other is from Princeton sociologist Sara McLanahan and her colleagues. And both of these different scholars and their colleagues at Harvard, Michigan, and Princeton—places noted for right-wing thinking—found that family structure is particularly important for boys.

Just a quote from Raj Chetty's new work: "Areas with high crime rates and a large fraction of single parents generate particularly negative outcomes for boys relative to girls" when it comes to rags-to-riches mobility, and other outcomes for many key aspects of life.

Likewise, Sarah McLanahan and her colleagues found in a different study which looked not just at family structure but also at genes, that boys showed quote, "stronger and more consistent responses to father exits"—that means the dad is leaving the household—as compared to girls, but also that boys have quote "more sensitive genes to their environments, boys responded more negatively to the exit of a father from the household and more positively to the entrance of a biological father into the household." Okay?

The broader point that I'm making here is that we're seeing more and more evidence that marriage and a stable, intact biological family matter for our kids, particularly for our boys.

If we're concerned about, for instance, this growing opportunity gap that Robert Putnam's been speaking so eloquently about, I think we've got to be concerned about the way in which the retreat from marriage means that fewer kids have access to the stable two-parent household that is linked to a better chance in this world.

But marriage matters also for adults, for men and for women. And the social science tells us that marriage, for instance, makes men work harder, be smarter and also become more successful. Robert Lerman, an economics professor at American University, and I found that married men work about 400 hours more per year than unmarried peers of roughly equivalent backgrounds and earn about \$16,000 more per year compared again to unmarried peers of roughly equivalent backgrounds who are single.

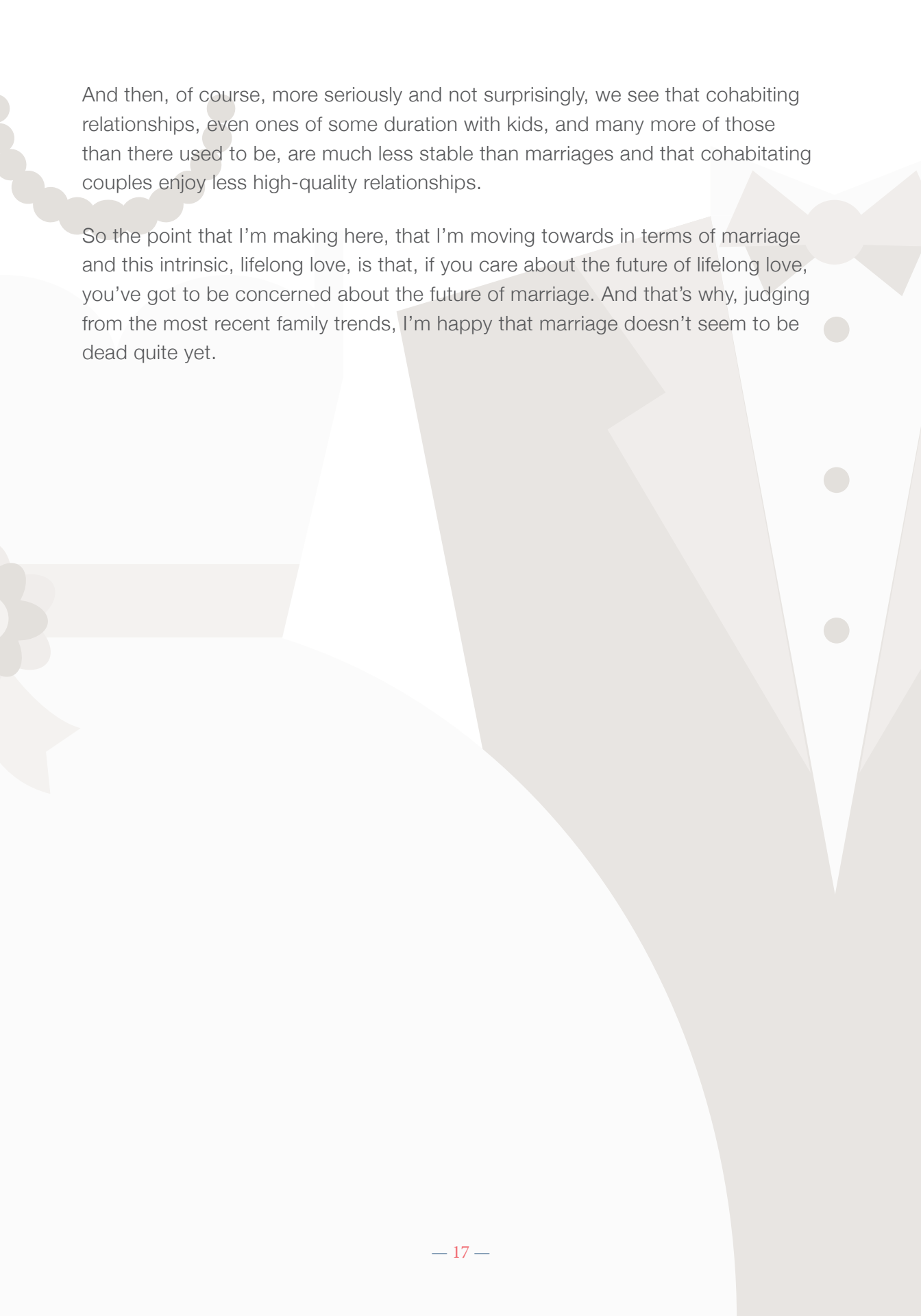
Women also benefit from marriage. They do not benefit in terms of their personal income and their personal careers, although we did find that there's no penalty anymore for married women compared to their single peers in terms of work. But in terms of their family, of course there are benefits of having a spouse in the picture compared to being single. And we're seeing also more evidence that people in their late 50s who are approaching retirement, both men and women, are in much better shape if they're stably married compared to their single and divorced peers, even those from similar backgrounds.

To wrap up this point about the benefits of marriage, I want to underline the fact that I don't think about marriage in simply instrumental terms—that it's good for kids' educational outcomes, or good for adults' financial outcomes. I think about it also as intrinsic and as connected to our sociability as creatures. We're social animals, we're pair-bonding animals. And the fact remains that marriage is typically the best way in which we can live out our aspirations, our impulses, if you will, for a deep and profound lifelong love.

We've got to be very clear here. And here I'd have to say I disagree with Bel and some writing she's done. Cohabitation doesn't really compare, not just in the United States, but also in Europe. Many scholars, many journals will say, "Well, yeah, in the United States marriage is more stable than cohabitation, but in Europe it's different." Well, even in Europe cohabitation is much less stable than is marriage.

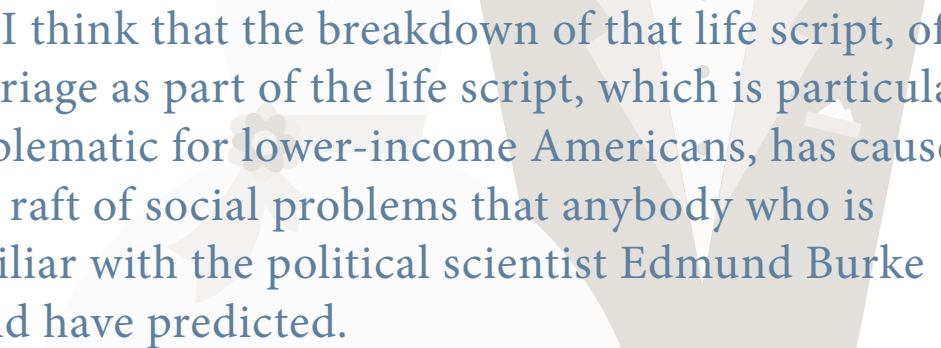
When you think about cohabitation, when you're moving in together, there's no ceremony with friends and family watching you, with glistening eyes that first night as you walk down the apartment hallway to live together. There's no music, there are no vows exchanged between cohabiting partners.





And then, of course, more seriously and not surprisingly, we see that cohabiting relationships, even ones of some duration with kids, and many more of those than there used to be, are much less stable than marriages and that cohabitating couples enjoy less high-quality relationships.

So the point that I'm making here, that I'm moving towards in terms of marriage and this intrinsic, lifelong love, is that, if you care about the future of lifelong love, you've got to be concerned about the future of marriage. And that's why, judging from the most recent family trends, I'm happy that marriage doesn't seem to be dead quite yet.

A faint, stylized illustration of a man and a woman in formal attire. The woman is on the left, wearing a white dress and a pearl necklace. The man is on the right, wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a bow tie. They are positioned behind the main text block.

But I think that the breakdown of that life script, of marriage as part of the life script, which is particularly problematic for lower-income Americans, has caused us a raft of social problems that anybody who is familiar with the political scientist Edmund Burke could have predicted.

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## KAY HYMOWITZ

I want to thank the IWF for putting on this wonderful event. I was listening yesterday to the poverty summit that was held at Georgetown. And E.J. Dionne, who was the moderator, was saying that David Brooks had said about him that he's the only person whose eyes ever glistened when you bring up the idea of a panel. And that's kind of the way I thought about this panel as well.

I share some of Bel's pessimism about the future of marriage, not that I want to, but I'm forced to by looking at various trends, although Brad was quite right that there has been some stabilizing in the last almost decade. I've been writing about the breakdown of marriage and its impact on not just the children and on society as a whole for almost 10 years. Still, because I'm getting old and stubborn, I'm not giving up.

I want to start by giving you three relatively uncontroversial facts. The first one in particular is uncontroversial, and it's this: Unless there is some kind of intervention, women of childbearing age who are sexually active will likely get pregnant, all right? We know—you know, nobody disagrees with that—that happens. That is a human biological fact.

Here's my second assumption: Every society has a very powerful interest in the conditions in which those children are born. That is, everyone—every society—

has an interest in family arrangements, right? If the child is being born to a single mother, that is of interest. If the child is born into a stable, two-married parents family, that is of interest. And we will begin to see why in a moment.

My third assumption is that every society has a powerful interest in attaching young men to the children that they have, the word that we used to use was “sired.” I don’t guess they use that word anymore. So why are they so interested in that? For several reasons. One is that for strictly economic reasons having the father involved was a matter of survival. In less-developed societies where there was no welfare state, if you didn’t have men involved in the upbringing of their children or attached to their children, you did not have somebody who could provide while women were busy with the children or pregnant or unable for a variety of reasons to work or to forage. So men became the providers, the hunters, the breadwinners. That was just a social fact driven by biological difference, in my view.

The other reason that societies have an interest in men becoming attached to their children was a little more subtle and I think less direct, shall we say, and that is this. That young, unattached men who tend to have some testosterone issues, often stir up trouble. They can be physically aggressive, they sometimes have sex with a lot of women. Now we know women want to have sex with men, too, but they, frankly, have more at stake, especially when there was no reliable birth control regime.

So society has an interest in channeling the energies of young men. So you’ve got those two reasons, you’ve got economic reasons—we simply need men to help support children in a more subsistence world—and two, you’ve got men who are otherwise possibly going to stir up some trouble.

So to solve these basic human problems, social problems, society came up with a brilliant idea that we’ve been arguing about for millennia and that we are arguing about today again, and that is the institution of marriage.

This is what marriage accomplished. It was kind of a fix-all really. It allowed men and women to have sex without creating unprotected babies. It allowed children to have two adults and two parents invested in their well-being. And it gave men responsibilities, but also more than responsibilities, it gave them a sense of purpose and meaning, not to mention a profound attachment to their children and their wives, at least ideally.

Marriage also, as Brad just mentioned, made them work extremely hard. And we’ve been finding for some time now in research that men who are married do work

harder. There's a lot of debate among scholars about whether that's self-selection. Is it because married men are more likely to be hard workers, or rather that the kinds of men who marry are more likely to be hard workers, or is it something about marriage? I would propose that it might be a little bit of both. At any rate, I also propose that marriage as an institution is set up in part to ensure that that happens.

Now for many centuries then, maybe even millennia, you then have a life script. Most human beings, most members of a society had a life script. Instead of just the biological script where you're born, you reproduce and you die, we had a social script that took off from that, and it said you're born, you grow up, you marry, and then you reproduce; you married for the reasons that I just explained and it's better for the kids, it's better for society, it's better for men, it's better for women to be able to have men helping them and so on and so forth.

And so you grow up, you marry, you reproduce and then you go to a nursing home.

That seems to be the way it is today.

But today, of course, the preconditions that I'm talking about have changed quite a bit, mostly through technology. We now have birth control that is reliable, and women really can control their reproduction so that they are not simply going to get pregnant every time they have sex, if they choose not to. And also, in part because of that fact, women can now provide for themselves. In part because of that fact and because and those changes having to do with technology liberated women—that's the word that we have used—have more control over not just their bodies, but their career, their life course, their life script, as I call it.

So that life script that used to determine most people's choices in life, or rather most people's fates really, has become much more ambiguous.

Now, it so happens that that script, you are born, you marry and then you reproduce, is still somewhat in the minds of a lot of educated women, not necessarily always acted upon, not necessarily always successful, but it's in the back of their minds, and it affects every part of their 20s, their 30s, in those single years that we've already heard about as we delay marriage so that women can succeed in the workplace.

But by delaying children as much as we have, we've also created some new problems, one of them being that there is an uncertainty about what is coming next—do I have to follow the life script that I sort of sense that's out there, even if I'm not actually fully

conscious of it? And there are a lot of decisions to be made that are not just automatic anymore. And that is, in many respects, a very wonderful thing. It gives us freedom, gives us a lot of choice, and it gives us all kinds of opportunities to pursue.

And you can certainly understand why some women, more women perhaps than in the past, are attracted to the choice of not marrying and having children. There are many, many pleasures to be had out there, not just in interesting careers, but in the wonderful, fantastic travel and wonderful urban life that many of you in this room are probably enjoying.

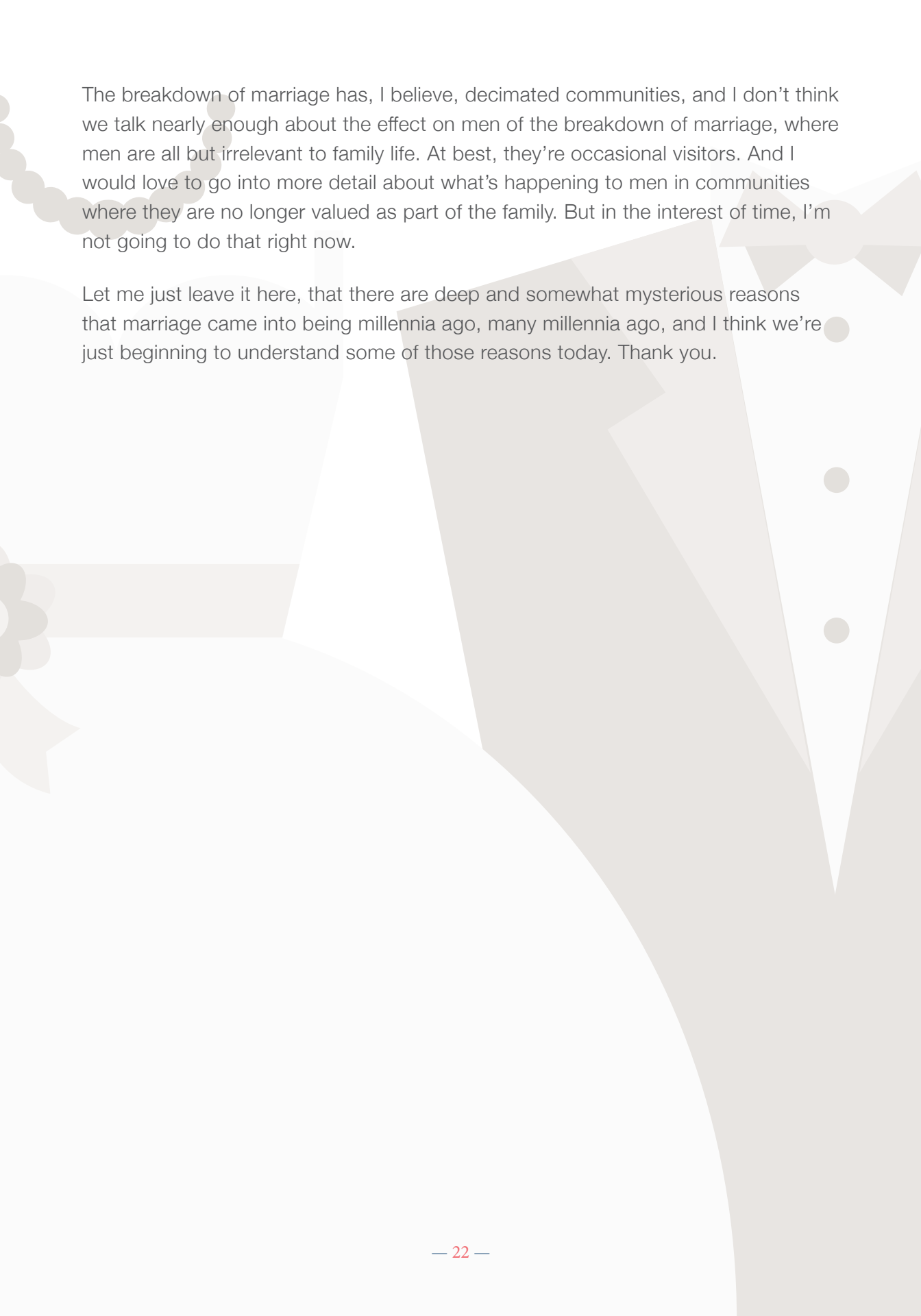
But I think that the breakdown of that life script, of marriage as part of the life script, which is particularly problematic for lower-income Americans, has caused us a raft of social problems that anybody who is familiar with the political scientist Edmund Burke could have predicted.

Burke argued that social institutions are the product of complex, historical forces that come to being through trial and error. And they often have hidden purposes that we do not completely understand. And I think that that's what we're seeing now, those hidden purposes whose results have been quite problematic on an individual level and on a social level.

On an individual level, we find that most women still want to have children. In fact, demographers some years ago were predicting that about 20 percent of women would remain childless mostly out of choice. That no longer seems to be the case. Actually, we reached about 20 percent in the mid-2000s, and the most recent research that just came out, I think it was last week, says, that actually it's about 15 percent of women not having children. That women are making that choice to have children for the most part.

So women still want to have children. And on an individual level, they have a lot of choice how to do that. But on an individual level then when we talk about the children, the results have not been nearly as beneficial. And as Brad has talked about, there's abundant research at this point, on the effects on children of growing up in much more unstable circumstances, which is inevitably the case when a young woman has a child and is not stably married.

But on a social level, and that's what I really think we need to be thinking a little bit more about, because we're a very individualistic society, we think more about "What do I want?" and "What's good for me?" and it is a wonderful thing that we can do that. But we also need to remember the social level.



The breakdown of marriage has, I believe, decimated communities, and I don't think we talk nearly enough about the effect on men of the breakdown of marriage, where men are all but irrelevant to family life. At best, they're occasional visitors. And I would love to go into more detail about what's happening to men in communities where they are no longer valued as part of the family. But in the interest of time, I'm not going to do that right now.

Let me just leave it here, that there are deep and somewhat mysterious reasons that marriage came into being millennia ago, many millennia ago, and I think we're just beginning to understand some of those reasons today. Thank you.



**SCHAEFFER:** I'll get the ball rolling with a few questions before we open it to the floor. This is a question for Brad. Kay mentioned the idea of hidden purposes in our social institutions. If marriage becomes obsolete that doesn't necessarily eliminate the functions that marriage serves, right? What about the stability needed for raising children, uninterrupted companionship, and financial security? If marriage is over, who or what will step in to fill its void?

**WILCOX:** That's a great question. And again, as I said, the decline of the marriage rate seems to have stopped so I'm not convinced marriage is over.

In fact, one of the most fascinating things for me in the most recent Bob Putnam book *Our Kids* is the figure showing that, generally speaking, while more kids are being raised in single-parent homes, the trend actually has reversed course for kids whose moms are college educated.

I'm not convinced that the game is up. But, if we do continue to see a retreat from marriage unfold apace, I think one of the things that we'll continue to see is the government having to step into the breach and address the economic, social and, in some sense, psychological fallout, we see with kids and also with adults when people don't have as much access to the institution of marriage.

We've talked about kids, and Kay's also touched on men as well. And I would say men are more likely to work and work more when they're married, but they also

are less likely to run afoul of the criminal justice system, when they are married. So there are a variety of ways you can think about how, when marriage breaks down, the state has to step into the breach.

There's a relational piece that I think is unfolding, certainly it was articulated well in Kate Bolick's "All the Single Ladies" piece in the *Atlantic*. I see that when I celebrate the virtues of marriage on Twitter, and I get a lot of pushback from some women who complain about the lack of marriageable men in their social world. Their sense is that there is not a good pool of guys from which they could find a spouse.

I think the irony here is that as marriage becomes less common, less salient, women are experiencing more frustration in finding good partners, who are capable of making long-term commitments.

If marriage becomes obsolete that doesn't necessarily eliminate the functions that marriage serves, right? What about the stability needed for raising children, uninterrupted companionship, and financial security?

If marriage is over, who or what will step in to fill its void?

—Sabrina Schaeffer

**SCHAEFFER:** There is also a trend in our popular culture of constantly putting down men. Arguably this has created a social norm that makes men less likely to assume responsibilities. Kay, I would love for you to talk about this. I know that you and I have both benefited from marriage. But in proclaiming the benefits of marriage, are we just trying to impose our values on other people, who perhaps don't see the value of marriage as we do?

**HYMOWITZ:** I think the research would say absolutely not. [Our emphasis on the importance of marriage] is not just a paternalistic attitude. We're seeing the effects of the difference in marriage rates among educated and non-educated Americans. We are seeing, whatever this audience feels about it, increased inequality in society, which I believe is very much connected to family breakdown among the less-educated, and questions about social mobility. There is still upward mobility in this country, but it is more common among children growing up in stable homes. Children who are growing up in a stable, married home are much more likely to move ahead from poverty. For the reasons that I've mentioned, marriage has been good for society.

**SCHAEFFER:** A number of years ago Justin Wolfers, the economist, wrote that you don't just look at the costs as an economist, you also have to look at benefits.



Are we too focused on the costs of marriage, when we should talk more about the benefits? Isabel?

**SAWHILL:** Let me be very clear. I think the benefits of marriage are very strong. My book talks a lot about all the research that both Brad and Kay have mentioned, about the benefits of marriage both for adults and for children. I don't think there's much disagreement about that anymore. I think all three of us would agree on the research that shows that.

The question is not whether it's beneficial, the question is whether it's going to come back again. If we're at a stage where millennials are choosing half the time to have children outside of marriage, how do you bring marriage back?

There's been a move especially in the Bush administration to launch and fund what were called "healthy marriage" programs, taking young couples and counseling them, trying to encourage them to marry, and, if they were married, trying to help them with their relationship so they wouldn't split up. Those programs were pretty carefully evaluated and it was found that they did not move the needle very much.

I think Brad would say that we shouldn't give up just because we failed the first time; we should try some new programs. And I can't disagree with him. But it's really hard for government to influence marriage.

So when I became somewhat pessimistic from looking at all this data, I said, "Well, what else could we do?" The old social norm used to be "don't have a baby outside of marriage, if you do it will be stigmatized." We used to in my day--I hate to admit it--call children born outside of marriage illegitimate children. But that stigma has gone away now. And I'm not sure we can bring that back.

But I think the new social norm needs to be "don't have a child until you and your partner are both committed to each other and ready to be parents." That social norm would transform the circumstances of children's births because of the reasons I cited earlier, which is most of these births are unplanned.

I think I forgot to say, and so thank you for letting me supplement here, that we now have long-acting, reversible forms of contraception that basically guarantee for 10 or 12 years that you will not get pregnant until you want to and then you have to go to the doctor and have the IUD or the implant removed. And that changes the default.

And after five years—let me give you statistics, I love these statistics--the probability of getting pregnant using a condom, 63 percent. So probability using the pill, 38 percent. The probability using one of these long-acting forms of birth control such as an IUD or an implant, 2 percent.

So it makes a huge difference. When people got married really early, before they started having sex or only shortly after they started having sex, we didn't have all of these unplanned pregnancies, or if we had them, they were inside marriage. Now if you're not married through most of your late teens and 20s, you're going to be sexually active probably for five years easily.

Most young people don't even know those statistics. When I have put them up there for people to see, they come running up to me. The *New York Times*—sorry, I'm getting on my soapbox here—The *New York Times* didn't believe those data. And when I used them in an article for them, they started calling around to other demographers—I'm not a demographer, I'm an economist—but they started calling population demographers around the country, and those demographers said “Yeah, she's exactly right.” And they said, “Well, how come we never knew this before?” And I said, “Well, I don't know, maybe it's because nobody ever did the calculation.”

**HYMOWITZ:** Can I just clarify one point? When we talk about those numbers, condom use and the use of the pill, are we talking about people who are using them conscientiously?

**SAWHILL:** Good question, Kay. I should clarify. These are the averages, okay? These are the averages for everybody using them. If you're a really good contraceptor, then your probability is going to be much, much lower than that. And if you're casual about it, then it's going to be much higher than that. So that's just the average. But the average matters for how often this occurs in the population at large.

**QUESTION:** I realize we're having a conversation about marriage without a definition of marriage. You could define a marriage as a lifelong, committed, loving relationship. You could define marriage by religion or a legal contract, which is probably the easiest way to define it. By that definition, I and a lot of my friends would not be married. Yet I have a life partner. We exchanged vows, though we never made it legal. How do you define marriage?

**WILCOX:** Well, I would talk about marriage in terms of sociology as an institution that encompasses a lot of things. I would think about it primarily in terms of two different things. One is having that ceremony in a purely sociological sense, where

you are signaling to your partner and to your friends and family that you embarked on this commitment together. This is a signal to one another and the larger community that you are a couple and that your intention is to be together for life. That is the intention anyway.

The second piece that I would add is that there is a legal dimension to your partnership that is acknowledged by the state and signals not only to you and your partner and your friends and family, but to the larger society that you are, indeed, an enduring partnership, if you will.

There's been a move especially in the Bush administration to launch and fund what were called "healthy marriage" programs, taking young couples and counseling them, trying to encourage them to marry, and, if they were married, trying to help them with their relationship so they wouldn't split up. Those programs were pretty carefully evaluated and it was found that they did not move the needle very much.  
—Isabel Sawhill

I think it's important, too, for all of us here in this place inside the Beltway with the education that we have, most of us anyway, [to acknowledge] that we are, compared to the average American, pretty unusual. And the bigger point that I would want to communicate is that, again, as Kay pointed out, most cultures have come up with something like marriage as an institution that channels adult relationships and childbearing in stable, structured ways for the benefit not only of those adults and kids but for the broader society.

And so for me it's these two things. There are exceptions in terms of how people actually do this thing, but the broader point is that the institution serves important social purposes by providing pretty clear norms about how people get together and stay together.

**QUESTION:** My question is for Dr. Wilcox. I know that you're a researcher, you're the messenger, but if you were to advocate for early marriage, what would you say are your top three reasons you would tell somebody it's okay to marry at a young age? I wanted to hear more about your position on that.

**WILCOX:** I wrote a piece for the *Washington Post* called "Don't Be a Bachelor." Of course, I didn't call it this, the *Washington Post* editor called it this. "Don't Be a Bachelor"—they like to put sort of cryptic kinds of headlines on pieces you write for them.

One of the points that I made in the piece is that if you want to maximize your odds of being happily married and also having more sex and of forging a life together, and if you're in a good relationship in your early 20s, there's no reason not to get married, if marriage is your objective. There is recognition that the odds of divorce decline if you get married in your late twenties. It makes sense to reduce the divorce risk by waiting a bit until your late 20s.

What people are not cognizant of is that studies by different scholars show that, at least on average, getting married in your mid-20s is linked to the highest rates of marital happiness.

And it's important to notice that, when we shift our focus away from women and towards men that we men, on average, even today, tend to do better in a wide range of areas--drinking, psychological well-being, performance at work--when we marry in our mid-20s versus putting it off until our 30s.

I'm not convinced that the game is up. But if we do continue to see this retreat from marriage unfold apace, I think one of the things that we're continuing to see is the government having to step into the breach and to address the kind of economic and social and, in some sense, psychological fallout we see with kids and also with adults when people don't have as much access to the institution of marriage.

—Bradford Wilcox

We need to think, too, about how this idea of delayed marriage and delayed parenthood may play out to some extent differently for women and also differently for different types of people. If your aspiration as a woman is to maximize your professional performance, then I would advise you to wait until your 30s to get married and have kids.

But if you have different kinds of aspirations in terms of having a larger family, sharing some of those traditions with your spouse or other kinds of goods, then it looks like getting married in your 20s is a better way to do that.

I would be careful on this issue of delayed marriage and parenthood and recognize that it may affect men and women differently, and it may affect classes differently and it may serve the interests of certain types of people more than other types of people. So that's how I'd respond to that question.

**QUESTION:** I think you've all agreed that children thrive in stable families. And I wonder if there's any research that differentiates between parents who are married in the traditional legal way we've heard described here and more informal ways that are perhaps are just as committed.

**SAWHILL:** Let me say a little more because it also addresses the issue you raised earlier, and that is that we now have increasing numbers of people who are, as the literature calls it, cohabiting. And there are different forms of cohabitation. There's the form which is long-term, durable, very committed. It's like marriage without the piece of paper or the religious ceremony and the legal trappings.

But that's not what most cohabitations in the U.S. look like right now. What most of cohabiting couples look like right now is that they are not stable. That is the biggest thing about them. This is very well documented. And I think we would all agree about that.

I'll give you one statistic. By the time a child in a cohabiting relationship reaches the age of five, about 50 percent of those relationships have broken up. Now there's a selection issue here. People who cohabit tend to be different from people who actually marry.

I think Brad probably doesn't entirely agree with me here, but he may agree halfway, that we are moving, as a society, in the U.S. towards more long-term cohabitation. And we do see more of that in Europe. I've argued that if we evolve to the kind of cohabiting relationships that they have in Europe, especially in the Nordic countries, it won't be very different for children or for adults, that it will be more that the only difference between cohabitation and marriage is a piece of paper certain legal rights.

And the legal system, by the way, is changing rapidly. I am the keynote speaker at the conference of the American Bar Association. I just had a phone call with them recently, and they're all atwitter about the need to make legal changes here. But we don't have a lot of long-term cohabiting relationships with children yet in the U.S. I think it's coming, but I could be wrong.

**QUESTION:** Sometimes the legal system seems stacked against men. I know a guy who says, "I'll never get married until we stop being unfair to men about alimony and child support laws?" What do you say to him?

**HYMOWITZ:** I'm not an expert on the law as related to child custody . But I know people who are in the business in New York, and alimony in New York is not for only

women: it's for whoever the primary caretaker is. And there are plenty of men who are getting some alimony these days in New York. I think these laws do vary quite a bit by location.

In addition in New York, whether the couple is married or not is no longer an issue with child support. They are no longer making distinctions between married and unmarried fathers.

**SAWHILL:** Can I just add a footnote on that? I did a review of the research recently on what's called marrying up versus marrying down. Well, I was really surprised. I thought I knew more about this than I did. After I looked at the research, I saw that there is a ton of marrying down going on. I'm talking about women marrying down.

It used to be that because men were overwhelmingly in high-status positions and women were in lower-status positions, we always assumed culturally and socially that a woman should marry up and a man should marry down. And now because women, as Kay said earlier, are so well-educated, in fact much better educated than men in the youngest generation, and in some cities in their 20s women are now earning more than men as well, so we're going to have to change that cultural assumption about marrying up versus down. And I was surprised how much marrying down is going on already.

**WILCOX:** Well, there are a couple of things I could push back on. Let me just take the issue of marriage versus cohabitation. We know from studies that kids in the U. S. who are born to married parents are about 40 percent less likely to see their parents part ways by the time they turn 12 compared to kids born to cohabiting couples.

But there is a difference between married and cohabitating partners even in Sweden where you have the maximum recognition of cohabitation, both legally and culturally, between marriage and cohabitation. Swedish couples often will get married between kid one and kid two, recognizing at some level that marriage is somehow different from just living together.

**SAWHILL:** But wouldn't you agree, Brad, that what matters is stability? And I think what you're arguing is that marriage has traditionally been the way you get stability, but it's stability that matters. Right?

**WILCOX:** Well, it's stability that matters in some ways. But I'm just saying, again, that we are social animals. We take culture as being important. And you would never find a liberal saying, for instance, that how we structure education culturally

doesn't matter. We have norms, common practices, common expectations about how we embrace or take up education.

People could theoretically just read a lot on Wikipedia, on Google, read books, maybe ever hire tutors with Ph.D.s to cobble together a college-type education, but we all know that that would be probably be, on average, a lot less successful than having people go to the institution where education is organized in ways that are comprehensible and sensible.

And this is applicable to marriage. And that's the whole point, it gives you a script, a set of norms, and a set of expectations that guide people through relationships and are linked not just to stability, but also to things like commitment and fidelity and whatnot to help sustain you and stabilize this relationship for the longer term.

And we're seeing the effects of the difference in marriage rates among educated and non-educated Americans. We are seeing, whatever this audience feels about it, increased inequality in society, which I believe is very much connected to family breakdown among the less-educated, and questions about social mobility. There is still upward mobility in this country, but it is more common among children growing up in stable homes.

—Kay Hymowitz

**QUESTION:** Do you think that in terms of our social history we're entering another period where marriage is declining but that this is part of a cycle and so will change again?

**HYMOWITZ:** I'll take a little bit of that, or I'll try to answer some of it. I think that it's a mistake for you to leave today's discussion and say marriage is dead. That's not exactly what's happening so far. I think we are very worried about trends. But the real problem at this point is that, while college-educated people still get married to raise their children, low-income people do get married to raise children less and less. And that's creating a big divide with regard to opportunities that the next generation is facing. That, I think, is the more apt takeaway than the idea that marriage is dead.

There are some disturbing signs. I think that even educated women might be going in a different direction than they have been going, which was to marry. There are some signs. We're seeing increases in the number of "single mothers by choice," as they call themselves. These are women who are older and have deliberately decided to have a child on their own.

But that is not where we are as a society right now. Where we are is a very bifurcated approach to childbearing and to child rearing that is, I think, a threat to our sense of equality.

**SAWHILL:** I really agree with that.

**WILCOX:** And I think it's important, too. I think there's an assumption on the part of some people out there that we're headed, on many different fronts, in a linear fashion. But students of history realize that major events, major transformations can introduce substantial changes into our social world, including with regard to marriage.

**SCHAEFFER:** This is a good thought upon which to end a very important discussion. Thank you all so much for tonight. And thank you everyone who came and asked questions. And I hope that you'll stay around and mingle a little bit and ask more. Thank you so much.





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