

Falling Back on Plan B

The Children of the Gender Revolution Face Uncharted Territory

Kathleen Gerson

Young adults today grew up with mothers who joined the workplace and parents whose relationships often departed from traditional marriage. Now facing their own choices, what do the women and men of this new generation hope and plan to do in their own lives? In contrast to popular images of twenty- and thirtysomethings returning to tradition, this chapter demonstrates that most young people want to create a lasting marriage (or a "marriage-like" relationship) and to find a personal balance between home and work. Most women and men are more alike than different in their aspirations, with both hoping to blend the traditional value of lifelong commitment with the modern value of flexible, egalitarian sharing. Yet, these children of the gender revolution are also developing strategies to prepare for "second-best" options. Fearful that they will not find the right partner to help them integrate work with family caretaking, most women see work as essential to their survival. Worried about time-greedy workplaces, most men hope to avoid the costs that equal sharing might exact on their careers. The differing fallback positions of "self-reliant" women and "neo-traditional" men may point to a growing gender divide, but they do not reflect this generation's highest aspirations.

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Chris recalled how his mother's job allowed his father to quit a dead-end job and train for a more satisfying career:

Between 7th and 8th grade, my dad had a business which didn't work. It was a dead-end thing, and he came home frustrated, so my mom got him to go to school. It was hard financially, but it was good because he was actually enjoying what he was doing. He really flourished. A lot of people say, "Wow, your mom is the breadwinner, and that's strange." It's not. It is a very joint thing.

Parental breakups that relieved domestic conflict or led to the departure of an unstable parent also helped caretaking parents get back on their feet. Connie recounted how her mother was able to create a more secure home after separating from an alcoholic husband and finding a job that offered a steady income and a source of personal esteem:

My father just sat in the corner and once in a while got angry at us, but [my mom] — I don't know if it was him or the money, but she didn't stand up for herself as much as I think she should. The tension with my dad never eased, and my mom had gotten sick with multiple bleeding ulcers. That was her real turning point. It was building inside of her to leave, 'cause she'd got a job and started to realize she had her own money. . . . [She] became a much happier person. And because she was better, I was better. I had a weight taken off of me.

More stable and egalitarian remarriages could also give children the economic and emotional support they had not previously received. Having never known her biological father, Shauna recalled how her stepfather became a devoted caretaker and the "real" father she always wanted:

At first, I was feeling it was a bad change because I wanted my mom to myself. Then my mom said, "Why don't you call him daddy?" The next thing I was saying "Daddy!" I remember the look on his face and his saying "She called me daddy!" I was so happy. After that, he's always been my dad, and there's never been any question about it. . . . [He] would get home before my mom, so he would cook the dinner and clean. My dad spoiled me for any other man, because this is the model I had.

When Isabella's parents divorced, her grandfather became a treasured caretaker:

It's not like I didn't have a father, because my grandfather was always there. He was there to take me to after-school clubs and pick me up. I was sheltered—he had to

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deteriorate. Sarah explains how her mother became increasingly depressed and "over-involved" after relinquishing a promising career to devote all of her time to child rearing:

When my sister was born, [my mom's] job had started up, career-wise, so she wasn't happy [but] she felt she had to be home. She had a lot of conflicts about work and home and opted to be really committed to family, but also resented it. . . . She was the supermom, but just seemed really depressed a lot of time. . . . [It came] with an edge to it—"in return, I want you to be devoted to me." If we did something separate from her, that was a major problem. So I was making distance because I felt I had to protect myself from this invasion. . . . She thought she was doing something good to sacrifice for us . . . but it would have been better if my mother was happier working.

Megan recalls her father's mounting frustration as his income stagnated and he endured the complaints of a wife who expected him to provide a "better lifestyle":

My mother was always dissatisfied. She wanted my father to be more ambitious, and he wasn't an ambitious man. As long as he was supporting the family, it didn't matter if it was a bigger house or a bigger car. Forty years of being married to a woman saying, "Why don't we have more money?"—I think that does something to your self-esteem.

Unresolved power struggles in dual-earner marriages could also cause problems, as wives felt the weight of "doing it all" and fathers resisted egalitarian sharing. Juggling paid and domestic work left Justin's mother exhausted, while a high-pressured job running a restaurant left his father with no time to attend nightly dinners or even Little League games. Justin describes the strain his parents experienced and its effect on him:

I was slightly disappointed that I could not see my father more—because I understood but also because it depends on the mood he's in. And it got worse as work [went] downhill. . . . [So] I can't model my relationship on my parents. My mother wasn't very happy. There was a lot of strain on her.

Harmful breakups, where fathers abandoned their children and mothers could not find new ways to support the family or create an identity beyond wife and mother, also eroded family support. Nina remembers how her father's disappearance, combined with her mother's reluctance to seek a job and create a

take me to the library, wait till I finished all my work, take me home. I call him dad. Nobody could do better.

And when Antonio's single mother lost her job, his grandparents provided essential income that kept the family afloat:

My mom and grandparents were the type of people that even if we didn't have [money], we was gonna get it. Their ideal is, "I want to give you all the things I couldn't have when I was young." My grandparents and my mother thought like that, so no matter how much in poverty we were living, I was getting everything I wanted.

Despite their obvious differences, the common ingredient in these narratives is the ability of parents and other caretakers to reorganize child rearing and breadwinning in a more flexible, less gender-divided way. Mothers going to work, fathers becoming more involved in child rearing, and others joining in the work of family life—all of these strategies helped families overcome unexpected difficulties and create more economically secure, emotionally stable homes. Growing flexibility in how parents met the challenges of earning needed income and caring for children nourished parental morale, increased a home's financial security, and provided inspiring models of adult resilience. While children acknowledged the costs, they valued these second chances and gleaned lessons from watching parents find ways to create a better life. Looking back, they could conclude that "all's well that ends well."

DECLINING FAMILY FORTUNES

For some children, home life followed a downward slope. Here, too, the key to their experiences lay in the work and caretaking strategies of those entrusted with their care, but here gender inflexibility in the face of domestic difficulties left children with less support than they had once taken for granted. Faced with a father's abandonment or a stay-at-home mother's growing frustration, children described how their parents' resistance to more flexible strategies for apportioning paid and domestic work left them struggling to meet children's economic and emotional needs. Over time, deteriorating marriages, declining parental morale, and financial insecurity shattered a once rosy picture of family stability and contentment.

When parents became stuck in a rigid division of labor, with unhappy mothers and fathers ill equipped to support the household, traditional marriages could

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arrangements have expanded their options, these changes also pose new challenges to crafting a marriage, rearing children, and building a career. Members of this new generation walk a fine line between their desire to achieve egalitarian, sharing relationships that can meld with satisfying work and succumbing to the realities of gender conflict, fragile relationships, and uncertain job prospects. The choices they make will shape work and family life for decades to come.

Social forecasters have reached starkly different conclusions about what these choices will be. Some proclaim that the recent upturn in "opt-out" mothers foretells a wider return to tradition among younger women.¹ Others believe the rising number of single adults foretells a deepening "decline of commitment" that is threatening family life and the social fabric.² While there is little doubt that tumultuous changes have shaped the lives of a new generation, there is great disagreement about how. Does the diversification of families into two-earner, single-parent, and cohabiting forms represent a waning of family life or the growth of more flexible relationships? Will this new generation integrate family and work in new ways, or will older patterns inexorably pull them back?

To find out how members of the first generation to grow up in these diversifying families look back on their childhoods and forward to their own futures, I conducted in-depth, life history interviews with a carefully selected group of young people between eighteen and thirty-two. These young women and men experienced the full range of changes that have taken place in family life, and most lived in some form of "nontraditional" arrangement at some point in their childhood.³ My interviews reveal a generation that does not conform to prevailing media stereotypes, whether they depict declining families or a return to strict gender divisions in caretaking and breadwinning.

In contrast to popular images of twenty- and thirtysomethings who wish to return to tradition or reject family life altogether, the young women and men I interviewed are more focused on how well their parents met the challenges of providing economic and emotional support than on what form their families took. Now making their own way in early adulthood, women and men share a set of lofty aspirations. Despite their varied family experiences, most hope to blend the traditional value of a lifelong relationship with the modern value of flexibly sharing work, child care, and domestic chores. In the best of all possible worlds, the majority would like to create a lasting marriage (or a "marriage-like" relationship) that allows them to balance home and work in a flexible, egalitarian way.

Yet young people are also developing strategies to prepare for "second-best" options in a world where time-demanding workplaces, a lack of child care, and fragile relationships may place their ideals out of reach. Concerned about the difficulty of finding a reliable and egalitarian partner to help them integrate work

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with family caretaking, most women see work as essential to their own and their children's survival, whether or not they marry. Worried about time-greedy workplaces, most men feel they must place work first and will need to count on a partner at home. As they prepare for second-best options, the differing fallback positions of "self-reliant" women and "neo-traditional" men may point to a new gender divide. But this divide does not reflect a new generation's highest aspirations for blending lifelong commitment and flexible, egalitarian sharing in their relationships.

GROWING UP IN CHANGING FAMILIES

Even though theorists and social commentators continue to debate the merits of various family forms, my interviewees did not focus on their family's "structure."⁴ Instead, I found large variation among children who grew up in apparently similar family types. Those who grew up in families with a homemaking mother and breadwinning father were divided in their assessments of this arrangement. While a little more than half thought this was the best arrangement, close to half reached a different conclusion. When being a homemaker and out of the workforce appeared to undermine a mother's satisfaction, disturb the household's harmony, or threaten its economic security, the children concluded that it would have been better if their mothers had pursued a sustained commitment to work.

Many of those who grew up in a single-parent home also expressed ambivalence about their parents' breakups. Slightly more than half wished their parents had stayed together, but close to half believed that a breakup, while not ideal, was better than continuing to live in a conflict-ridden or silently unhappy home.⁵ The longer-term consequences of a breakup shaped the lessons children drew. If their parents got back on their feet and created better lives, children developed surprisingly positive outlooks on the decision to separate.

Those who grew up in a dual-earner home were the least ambivalent about their parents' arrangements. More than three-fourths believed that having two work-committed parents provided increased economic resources and also promoted marriages that seemed more egalitarian and satisfying.⁶ If the pressures of working long hours or coping with blocked opportunities and family-unfriendly workplaces took their toll, however, some children concluded that having overburdened, time-stressed caretakers offset these advantages.

In short, growing up in this era of diverse families led children to focus more on how well—or poorly—parents (and other caretakers) were able to meet the twin challenges of providing economic and emotional support rather than on

its form. Even more important, children experienced family life as a dynamic process that changed over time. Since family life is best seen as a film, not a snapshot, the key to understanding young people's views lies in charting the diverse paths their families took.

FAMILY PATHS AND GENDER FLEXIBILITY

Families can take different paths from seemingly common starting points, and similar types of families can travel toward different destinations. When young adults reflect on their families, they focus on how their homes either came to provide stability and support or failed to do so. About a third of my interviewees reported growing up in a stable home, while a quarter concluded that their families grew more supportive as time passed. In contrast, just under one in ten reported living in a chronically insecure home, while a bit more than a third felt that family support eroded as they grew up. Why, then, do some children look back on families that became more supportive and secure, while others experienced a decline in their family's support?

Parents' strategies for organizing breadwinning and caretaking hold the key to understanding a family's pathway.⁷ Flexible strategies, which allowed mothers, fathers, and other caretakers to transcend rigid gender boundaries, helped families prevail in the face of unexpected economic and interpersonal crises. Inflexible responses, in contrast, left families ill equipped to cope with eroding supports for a strict division in mothers' and fathers' responsibilities.

RIISING FAMILY FORTUNES

The sources of expanding support differed by family situation, but all reflected a flexible response to unexpected difficulties. Sometimes marriages became more equal as demoralized mothers went to work and pushed for change or helped overburdened fathers. Josh, for example, reported that his mother's decision to go to work gave her the courage to insist that his father tackle his drug addiction⁸:

My parents fought almost constantly. Then my mom got a job. They separated for about five, six, seven months. Even though I was upset, I thought it was for the best. That's when (my dad) got into some kind of program and my mom took him back. That changed the whole family dynamic. We got extremely close. A whole new relationship developed with my father.

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essential. Flexible approaches to work and parenting help families adapt, while inflexible ones leave them ill prepared to cope with new economic and social realities.

CONVERGING IDEALS, DIVERGING FALLBACKS

How do young adults use the lessons of growing up in changing families to formulate their own plans for the future? Women and men from diverse family backgrounds share a set of lofty aspirations. Whether or not their parents stayed together, more than nine out of ten hope to rear children in the context of a satisfying lifelong bond. Far from rejecting the value of commitment, almost everyone wants to create a lasting marriage or "marriage-like" partnership. This does not, however, reflect a desire for a traditional relationship. Most also aspire to build a committed bond where both paid work and family caretaking are shared. Three-fourths of those who grew up in dual-earner homes want their spouse to share breadwinning and caretaking, but so do more than two-thirds of those from traditional homes, and close to nine-tenths of those with single parents. While four-fifths of women want an egalitarian relationship, so do two-thirds of men. In short, most share an ideal that stresses the value of a lasting, flexible, and egalitarian partnership with considerable room for personal autonomy. Amy, an Asian American with two working parents, thus explains that:

I want a fifty-fifty relationship, where we both have the potential of doing everything—both of us working and dealing with kids. With regard to career, if neither has flexibility, then one of us will have to sacrifice for one period, and the other for another.

And Wayne, an African American raised by a single mother, expresses essentially the same hopes when he says that:

I don't want the '50s type of marriage, where I come home and she's cooking. I want her to have a career of her own. I want to be able to set my goals, and she can do what she wants, too.

While most of my interviewees hope to strike a flexible breadwinning and caretaking balance with an egalitarian partner, they are also skeptical about their chances of achieving this ideal. Women and men both worry that work demands, a lack of child-rearing supports, and the fragility of modern relationships will undermine their aspirations to forge an enduring, egalitarian partnership. In the

face of barriers to equality, most have concluded that they have little choice but to prepare for options that may fall substantially short of their ideals. Despite their shared aspirations, however, men and women face different institutional obstacles and cultural pressures, which are prompting divergent fallback strategies. If they cannot find a supportive partner, most women prefer self-reliance over economic dependence within a traditional marriage. Most men, if they cannot strike an equal balance between work and parenting, prefer a neo-traditional arrangement that allows them to put work first and rely on a partner for the lion's share of caregiving. In the event that Plan A proves unreachable, women and men are thus pursuing a different Plan B as insurance against their "worst case" fears. These divergent fallback strategies point toward the emergence of a new gender divide between young women, most of whom see a need for self-reliance, and young men, who are more inclined to retain a modified version of traditional expectations.

Women's Plan B

Torn between high hopes for combining work and family and worries about sustaining a lasting and satisfying partnership, young women are navigating uncertain waters. While some are falling back on domesticity, most prefer to find a more independent base than traditional marriage provides. In contrast to the media-driven message that young women are turning away from work and career in favor of domestic pursuits, the majority of my interviewees are determined to seek financial and emotional self-reliance, whether or not they also forge a committed relationship. Regardless of class, race, or ethnicity, most are reluctant to surrender their autonomy in a traditional marriage. When the bonds of marriage are so fragile, relying on a husband for economic security seems foolhardy. And if a relationship deteriorates, economic dependence on a man leaves few means of escape. Danisha, an African American who grew up in an inner-city, working-class neighborhood, and Jennifer, who was raised in a middle-class, predominantly white suburb, agree. Danisha proclaims:

Let's say that my marriage doesn't work. Just in case, I want to establish myself, because I don't ever want to end up, like, "What am I going to do?" I want to be able to do what I have to do and still be okay.

Jennifer concurs:

I will have to have a job and some kind of stability before considering marriage. Too many of my mother's friends went for that—"Let him provide everything"—and

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they're stuck in a very unhappy relationship but can't leave because they can't provide for themselves or the children they now have. So it's either welfare or putting up with somebody else's c--p.

Hoping to avoid being trapped in an unhappy marriage or left by an unreliable partner without a way to survive, almost three-fourths of women plan to build a non-negotiable base of self-reliance and an independent identity in the world of paid work.⁹ But they do not view this strategy as incompatible with the search for a life partner. Instead, it reflects their determination to set a high standard for a worthy relationship. Economic self-reliance and personal independence make it possible to resist "settling" for anything less than a satisfying, mutually supportive bond.

Women from all backgrounds have concluded that work provides indispensable economic, social, and emotional resources. They have drawn lessons about the rewards of self-reliance and the perils of domesticity from their mothers, other women, and their own experiences growing up. They are thus seeking alternatives to traditional marriage by establishing a firm tie to paid work, by redesigning motherhood to better fit their work aspirations, and by looking to kin and friends as a support network to enlarge and, if needed, substitute, for an intimate relationship. These strategies do not preclude finding a life partner, but they reflect a determination to set a high standard for choosing one. Maria, who grew up in a two-parent home in a predominantly white, working-class suburb, declares:

I want to have this person to share [my] life with—[someone] that you're there for as much as they're there for you. But I can't settle.

And Rachel, whose Latino parents separated when she was young, shares this view:

I'm not afraid of being alone, but I am afraid of being with somebody who's a jerk. I want to get married and have children, but it has to be under the right circumstances, with the right person.

Maria and Rachel also agree that if a worthy relationship ultimately proves out of reach, then remaining single need not mean social disconnection. Kin and friends provide a support network that enlarges and, if needed, even substitutes for an intimate relationship. Maria explains:

If I don't find [a relationship], then I cannot live in sorrow. It's not the only thing that's ultimately important. If I didn't have my family, if I didn't have a career,

if I didn't have friends, I would be equally unhappy. [A relationship] is just one slice of the pie.

And Rachel concurs:

I can spend the rest of my life on my own, and as long as I have my sisters and my friends, I'm okay.

By blending support from friends and kin with financial self-sufficiency, these young women are pursuing a strategy of autonomy rather than placing their own fate or their children's fate in the hands of a traditional relationship. Whether or not this strategy ultimately leads to marriage, it appears to offer the safest and most responsible way to prepare for the uncertainties of relationships and the barriers to men's equal sharing.

Men's Plan B

Young men face a different dilemma: Torn between women's pressures for an egalitarian partnership and their own desire to succeed—or at least survive—in time-demanding workplaces, they are more inclined to fall back on a modified traditionalism that contrasts vividly with women's search for self-reliance. While they do not want or expect to return to a 1950s model of fathers as the only breadwinner, most men prefer a modified traditionalism that recognizes a mother's right (and need) to work, but puts his own career first. Although Andrew grew up in a consistently two-income home, he distinguished between a woman's "choice" to work and a man's "responsibility" to support his family:

I would like to have it be equal—just from what I was exposed to and what attracts me—but I don't have a set definition for what that would be like. I would be fine if both of us were working, but if she thought, "At this point in my life, I don't want to work," then it would be fine.

Because equality may prove to be too costly to their careers, seven out of ten men are pursuing a strategy that positions them as the main breadwinner, even if it allows for two working spouses. When push comes to shove, and the demands of work collide with the needs of children, this approach allows men to resist equal caretaking, even in a two-earner context. Like women, men from a range of family, class, and ethnic backgrounds fall back on neo-traditionalism. They favor retaining a clear boundary between a breadwinning father and a caretaking mother, even when she holds a paid job. This neo-traditional strategy stresses

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By making room for two earners, this strategy offers the financial cushion of a second income, acknowledges women's desire for a life beyond the home, and allows for more involved fatherhood. Yet, by claiming separate spheres of responsibility for women and men, it does not challenge a man's position as the primary earner or undermine the claim that his work prospects should come first. Although James's mother became too mentally ill to care for her children or herself, Josh plans to leave the lion's share of caretaking to his wife:

All things being equal, it [caretaking] should be shared. It may sound sexist, but if somebody's going to be the breadwinner, it's going to be me. First of all, I make a better salary, and I feel the need to work, and I just think the child really needs the mother more than the father at a young age.

Men are thus more likely to favor a fallback arrangement that retains the gender boundary between breadwinning and caretaking, even when mothers hold paid jobs. From young men's perspective, this modified but still gendered household offers women the chance to earn income and establish an identity at the workplace without imposing the costs of equal parenting on men. Granting a mother's "choice" to work supports women's claims for independence, but it does not undermine men's claim that their work prospects should come first. Acknowledging men's responsibilities at home provides for more involved fatherhood, but it does not envision domestic equality. And making room for two earners provides a buffer against the difficulties of living on one income, but it does not challenge men's position as the primary earner. Modified traditionalism thus appears to be a good compromise when the career costs of equality remain so high.¹⁰ New economic insecurities, coupled with women's growing desire for equality, are creating dilemmas for men, even if they take a different form than the ones confronting women. Ultimately, however, men's desire to protect work prerogatives collides with women's growing desire for equality and need for independence.

ACROSS THE GENDER DIVIDE

In contrast to the popular images of a generation that feels neglected by working mothers, unsettled by parental breakups, and wary of equality, these life stories show strong support for working mothers, a focus on the quality of a relationship, and a shared desire to create lasting, flexible, and egalitarian partnerships. The good news is that most young women and men had largely positive experiences

with mothers who worked and parents who strove for flexibility and equality. Those who grew up with a caring support network and sufficient economic security, whether in a single- or a two-parent household, did well. Young women and men both recounted how gender flexibility in breadwinning and caretaking helped their parents (and other caretakers) overcome such increasingly prevalent family crises as the loss of a father's income or the decline of a mother's morale. By letting go of rigid patterns that once narrowly defined women's and men's "proper" places in the family and the wider world, all kinds of families were able to overcome unexpected challenges and create more financially stable and emotionally supportive homes. And most, even among those who grew up in less flexible families, hope to build on the struggles and gains of their parents' generation by seeking equality and flexibility in their own lives.

The bad news, however, is that most young adults remain skeptical about their chances of achieving their ideals. Amid their shared desire to transcend gender boundaries and achieve flexibility in their own lives, young women and men harbor strong concerns that their aspirations will prove impossible to reach. Faced with the many barriers to egalitarian relationships and fearful that they will not find the right partner to help them integrate work with family caretaking, they are also preparing for options that may fall substantially short of their ideals. Reversing the argument that women are returning to tradition, however, these divergent fallback strategies suggest that a new divide is emerging between "self-reliant" women, who see work, an independent income, and personal autonomy as essential to their survival, and "neo-traditional" men, who grant women's "choice" to work but also feel the need and pressure to be a primary breadwinner.

While women are developing more innovative strategies than are men, the underlying story is one of a resilient but realistic generation that has changed far more than the institutions it has inherited. Whether they grew up in a flexible home or one with more rigid definitions of women's and men's proper places, their hard-won lessons about the need for new, more egalitarian options for building relationships and caring for children are outpacing their ability to implement these goals.

Yet, young men and women still hope to reach across the divide that separates them. Aware that traditional job ladders and traditional marriages are both waning, they are seeking more flexible ways to build careers, care for families, and integrate the two.¹¹ Convinced that the traditional career, defined by orderly steps up an organizational chart, is a relic of the past, most hope to craft a "personal career" that is not bound by a single employer or work organization. Most men as well as women are trying to redefine the "ideal worker" to accommodate the ebb and flow of family life, even if that means sacrificing some income for a more balanced life.¹² They hope to create a shared "work-family" career that interweaves breadwinning and caretaking.

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Growing up in changing families and facing uncertainty in their own lives has left this generation wary of rigid, narrowly framed "family values" that moralize about their personal choices or those of others. They are searching for a morality without moralism that balances an ethic of tolerance and inclusiveness with the core values of behaving responsibly and caring for others. The clash between self-reliant women and neo-traditional men may signal a new divide, but it stems from intensifying work-family dilemmas, not from a decline of laudable values.

Since new social realities are forcing young adults to seek new ways to combine love and work, the best hope for bridging gender divides lies in creating social policies that will allow twenty-first-century Americans to pursue the flexible, egalitarian strategies they want rather than forcing them to fall back on less desirable—and ultimately less workable—options. Whether the goal is equal opportunity or a healthy family landscape, the best family values can only be achieved by creating the social supports for gender flexibility in our communities, homes, and workplaces.

NOTES

1. Anecdotal but high-profile stories have touted an "opt-out revolution," to use Lisa Belkin's term (2003), although a number of analysts have shown that *revolution* is a highly misleading and exaggerated term to describe the recent slight downturn in young mothers' labor force participation (Boushey, 2008; Williams, 2007). Most well-educated women are not leaving the workforce, and even though the percentage of working mothers with infants has shown a small downturn from its 1995 peak, mothers with children over the age of one are still just as likely as other women to hold a paid job. Even mothers with children under age one show levels of employment that are much higher than the 1960s levels, which averaged 30 percent. Moreover, Williams (2007), Stone (2007), Bennetts (2007), and Hirshman (2006) also point out that the metaphor of opting out obscures the powerful ways that mothers are, in Williams's words, "pushed out."
2. Recent overviews of the rise of the number of unmarried adults can be found in studies by the Pew Research Center (2007a, 2007b) and by Roberts (2007). Prominent proponents of the "family decline" perspective include Blankenhorn (1995), Popenoe (1988, 1996), Popenoe, Elshtain, and Blankenhorn (1996), and Whitehead (1997). Waite and Gallagher (2000) focus on the personal and social advantages of marriage. For rebuttals to the "family decline" perspective, see Bengtson, Biblarz, and Roberts (2002), Coontz (2005), Moore et al. (2002), Skolnick and Rosencrantz (1994), and Stacey (1996).
3. Randomly chosen from a broad range of city and suburban neighborhoods dispersed throughout the New York metropolitan region, the group includes 120 respondents from diverse race and class backgrounds and from all parts of the country. In all, 54 percent identified as non-Hispanic white, 21 percent as African American, 18 percent as Latino, and 7 percent as Asian. About 43 percent grew up in middle- and upper-middle class homes, while 43 percent lived in homes that were solidly working class, and another

15 percent lived in or on the edge of poverty. With an average age of twenty-four, they are evenly divided between women and men, and about 5 percent identified as either lesbian or gay. As a group, they reflect the demographic contours of young adults throughout metropolitan America. See Gerson (2006, 2010) for a full description of my sample and methods.

4. Most research shows that diversity *within* family types, however defined, is as large as the differences *between* them. Acock and Demo (1994) argue that family type does not predict children's well-being. Parcel and Menaghan (1994) make the same case for different forms of parental employment.
5. In the case of one-parent versus two-parent homes, children living with both biological parents do appear on average to fare better, but most of the difference disappears after taking account of the family's financial resources and the degree of parental conflict before a breakup (Amato and Booth, 1997; Amato and Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Booth and Amato, 2001; Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991; Hetherington, 1999; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). In a recent study of the effects of divorce on children's behavior, Li (2007) shows that "while certain divorces harm children, others benefit them."
6. Decades of research have shown that children do not suffer when their mothers work outside the home. A mother's satisfaction with her situation, the quality of care a child receives, and the involvement of fathers and other caretakers are far more important factors (Galinsky, 1999; Harvey, 1999; Hoffman, 1987; Hoffman, Wladis, and Youngblade, 1999). Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie (2006) report that parents are actually spending more time with their children. Recent research on the effects of day care have found only small, temporary differences. Barnett and Rivers (1996) demonstrate a range of advantages for two-income couples, and Springer (2007) reports significant health benefits for men whose wives work.
7. Hochschild (1989) refers to dual-earner couples' "gender strategies," although she focuses more on how these strategies reproduce gender divisions than on when, how, and why they might transcend gender distinctions. See Lorber (1994), Risman (1998), and West and Zimmerman (1987) for discussions of the social construction of gender. Zerubavel (1991) analyzes the social roots of mental flexibility.
8. All of the names have been changed to protect confidentiality, and some quotes have been shortened or lightly edited to remove extraneous phrases.
9. About a quarter of the women concluded that if work and family collide, they would rather make a more traditional compromise. These women worried about inflexible workplaces and the difficulty of finding an equal partner. Yet, they still hoped to fit work into their lives. This outlook, too, reflects the dilemmas facing young women who lack the supports to share work and caretaking equally. (See Gerson, *The Unfinished Revolution*, 2010, for a full analysis of the variation in women's fallback strategies.)
10. About three in ten men stress independence over traditional marriage, but autonomy has a different meaning for them than it does for women. Poor work prospects leave them determined to remain single unless they find a partner who does not expect financial support. Unlike self-reliant women, who hope to be able to support themselves and their children, autonomous men worry about their ability to earn enough to support a family. (See Gerson, 2010, for a full analysis of men's varied strategies.)
11. Moen and Roehling (2005).
12. Williams (2000).

CCF Facts

WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND THEIR LIKELIHOOD OF MARRIAGE: A HISTORIC REVERSAL

Jonathan Bearak and Paula England | April 2012

Historically, women who graduated from college were far more likely than any other group of women—whether high school dropouts, high school graduates, or women with some college—to remain single their entire lives. As late as 1950, a quarter of white female college graduates forty years of age had never married, compared to only 7 percent of their counterparts without a college degree. But what has happened since women have been completing college and obtaining advanced degrees at much higher rates, and since divorce has become easier to obtain?

On the one hand, highly educated men and women often postpone marriage until college or even graduate school is finished. Many choose to establish themselves in demanding careers before they even consider marriage. These factors suggest that marriage rates of the well-educated should be lower.

On the other hand, poorer and less educated men and women are most apt to have children outside marriage, while men lacking high school or college degrees are sometimes seen by themselves and their partners as less “marriageable” because stagnating wages have made them less reliable breadwinners (see discussion below). The latter suggests lower marriage rates for the less educated.

The key to resolving this puzzle is to realize that education affects not only the timing of marriage among those who eventually marry, but also whether people ever marry, and whether they divorce. As we'll see, these effects come into play at different ages for men and for women at different educational levels, and they also vary by race.

Our Analysis

To show how the education differences in marriage rates vary by age, we have graphed marriage rates separately by age for each of four education groups—those who ultimately finished less than high school, just high school, some college, and four years of college. We show the education-by-age graphs separately for blacks and whites, as well as for all races combined, and separately for men and women. Our data come from a national sample of people who were born between 1958 and 1965 and therefore turned twenty between 1978 and 1985, a period of rapid cultural and socioeconomic change. These individuals were followed for many years,

allowing us to know their marital status at every age through forty-five. Most people who ever marry have done so by age forty-five, so, roughly speaking, we are able to see what percent of those in each group will ever marry.

Figures 1 and 2 show the percent of men or women who have ever married by each age, separately for each group by their ultimate education. In Figures 3 and 4, we look at the same thing except that we show what percent are "currently married" rather than what percent have "ever married." The difference between who is "currently" and "ever" married for any group is that those who have married but are now divorced or widowed but not remarried are included in the "ever married" but not the "currently married" figures.

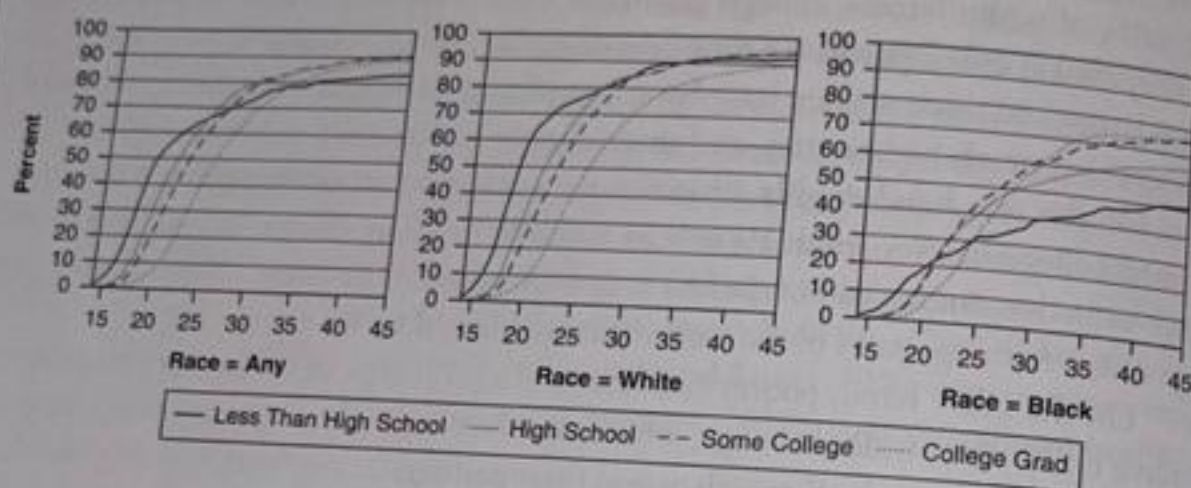


Figure 1 | Educational Differences in Percent of Women Who Have Ever Married by Each Age

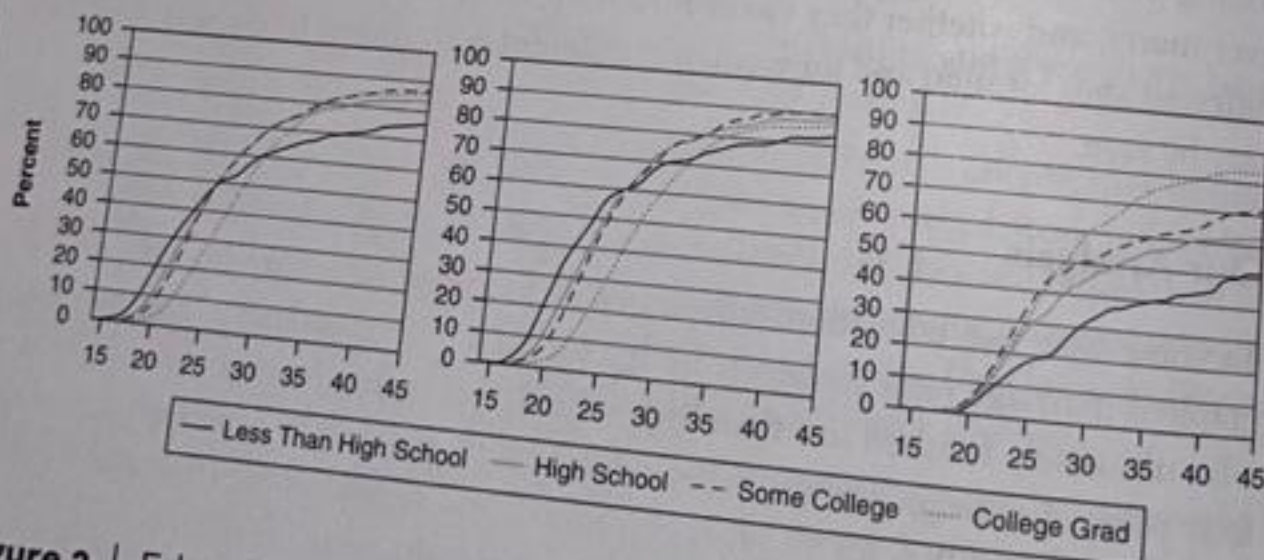


Figure 2 | Educational Differences in Percent of Men Who Have Ever Married by Each Age

Educational Differences

Getting a lot of education in 1958, unlike for women, just as or more likely to see that up into the late thirties and late thirties a category of more education typical of their marriages later, all education groups.

The patterns for women. But among black women, marriage rates of the less educated are lower odds of ever marrying, raises ultimate marriage rates for blacks than whites. By age forty-five is black.

The overall pattern of years of schooling and education for men and women can be seen in key ways. First, men are more likely to marry than women, the convention that men are more likely to marry. Second, higher-educated men and women are more likely to marry than lower-educated men and women. Third, women with some college are more likely to marry by forty-five than women who do not finish college. Fourth, black men with only high school education are less likely to marry than white men with only high school education.

Educational Differences in the Role of Divorce

On average, almost all men and women are lowest for college graduates in the recent decades. Men are more likely to marry at an earlier age than women, especially the lower income groups. Men are more likely to increase stress, and women are more likely to decrease stress.

Educational Differences in When or If Individuals Marry

Getting a lot of education delays marriage, but for women and men born after 1958, unlike for women born early in the twentieth century, the well educated are just as or more likely to ultimately marry as any other group. In Figures 1 and 2 we see that up into the twenties, the more education you have, the less likely you are to have married, with college graduates the least likely and those with less than a high school education the most likely. But somewhere between the mid-twenties and late thirties a catch-up of the more educated occurs. Although people who get more education typically wait till after they complete schooling to marry, making their marriages later, they are just as likely to ultimately marry by about age forty. In all education groups, roughly 75–90 percent will ever marry.

The patterns for whites look about the same as the patterns for the whole sample. But among black women, those with a college degree not only catch up to the marriage rates of the less educated, but far surpass them. Overall, black women have lower odds of ever marrying than white women. But getting a college education raises ultimate marriage rates by the thirties and forties much more substantially for blacks than whites. (The only group of women where a majority has not married by age forty-five is black women with no college education.)

The overall pattern for men is similar. Like women, men who complete fewer years of schooling are more apt to marry at young ages, but like women, higher-educated men catch up later. However, men's results differ from women's in three key ways. First, men typically marry a couple of years later than women, reflecting the convention that men in first marriages are slightly older than their wives. Second, higher-educated men catch up to lower-educated men sooner than higher-educated women catch up to lower-educated women. Finally, whereas black women with some college are as likely as black women who graduate from college to marry by forty-five, there is a notable difference between black men who do and do not finish college, with black college graduates much more likely to marry than black men with only some college.

Educational Differences in Who Is Currently Married: The Role of Divorce

On average, almost half of American marriages will end in divorce, but divorce rates are lowest for college graduates, and the education gap in divorce has increased in recent decades.¹ There are several reasons for this. Less educated individuals typically marry at an earlier age, which is associated with higher divorce rates. Additionally the lower incomes and greater economic insecurity of those with less education increase stress, affecting divorce.

In Figures 3 and 4, we look at the percentage of people who are currently married at each age, separately for each education group. These figures differ from the "ever married" percentages in Figures 1 and 2, in that those who have married but are divorced and have not remarried appear in Figures 1 and 2 as married but not in Figures 3 and 4 as currently married.² Thus, the "currently married" figures are influenced by educational differences not only in who marries, but also in who has divorced.

Looking first at women of all races, we see that after age thirty college graduates pull ahead in the percentage currently married. About 75 percent of college graduates are married at age forty, compared to about 70 percent of those who attained high school or some college and only about 60 percent of those who didn't

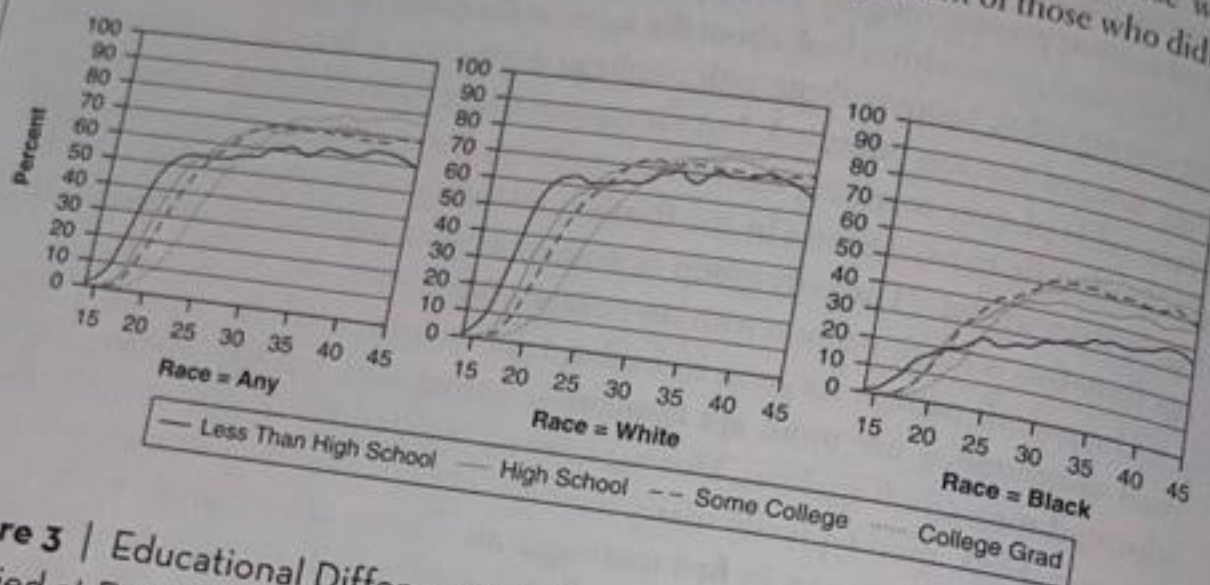


Figure 3 | Educational Differences in Percent of Women Currently Married at Each Age

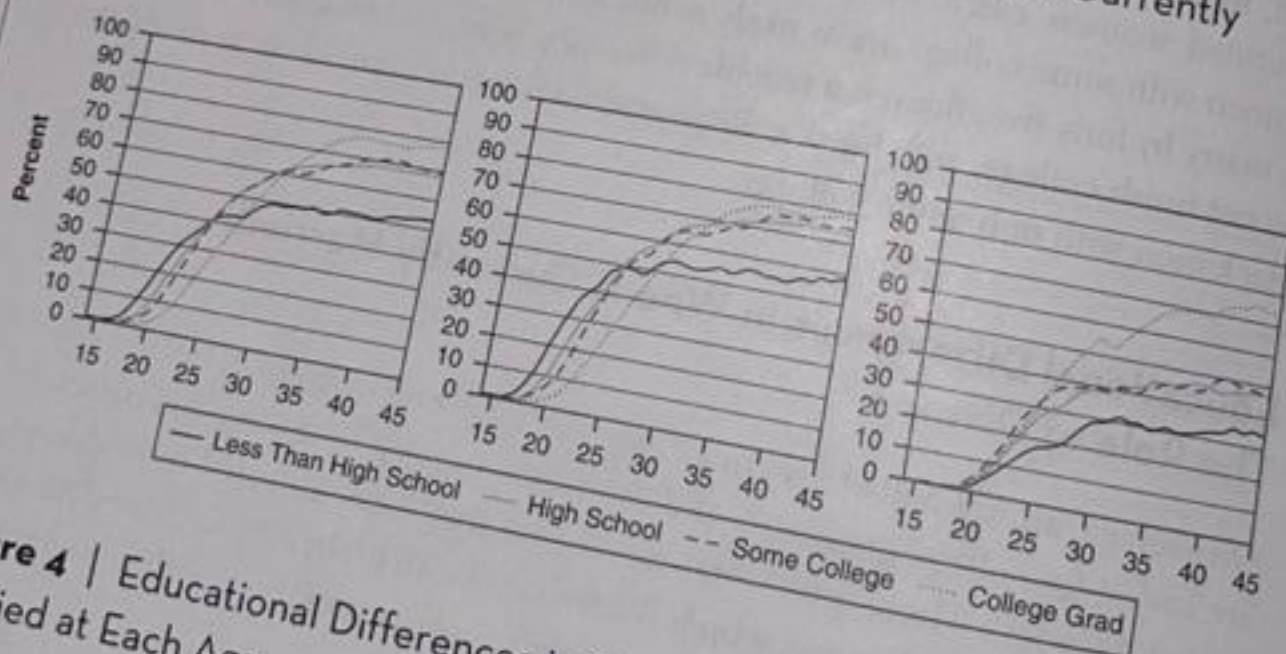


Figure 4 | Educational Differences in Percent of Men Currently Married at Each Age

complete high school. So even though female college graduates marry later, they are so much less likely to divorce that by age forty they are significantly ahead in the percentage currently married, while female high school dropouts fall even further behind. In yet another historical reversal, women with less than a high school education are the *least* likely to be currently married at all ages after thirty.

The figures for white women look quite similar to those described here for all women combined. But for black women, the percent currently married varies more dramatically by education than for whites. This is partly because, as we saw above, education differences are larger for blacks than whites in whether they ever marry by age forty. But there are also education differences in divorce for blacks, as for whites, so the higher divorce rates of less educated black women also contribute to the difference in how many are currently married.

Educational differences in the percent currently married are larger for men than women. Overall, as we saw for women, black men have much lower marriage rates than white men. The only exception is black male college graduates by age thirty-five. By age forty-five, about 75 percent of college-educated black men are married, whereas less than 55 percent of college-educated black women are married at the same age.

Men who attain less than a high school education are much less likely to be married than any other education group of men at most ages. Among white men, a similar percentage of all education groups except those who do not complete high school are married at age thirty, whereas among black men, college graduates have much higher percentages married, and high school dropouts much lower percentages married, compared to the middle education groups.

Summary of Education Differences in Marriage Patterns by Age

Early in the life cycle, those who ultimately get more education are less likely to have married than their less educated counterparts. This is because those staying in school longer also delay getting married longer. But by age forty, the well educated have caught up with the less educated and even surpassed them in the percentage that have married. Thus, ultimately the more educated are as likely or even more likely to marry as any other group. The education differences in whether people ever marry are small for whites, but quite large for blacks, owing partly to the very low marriage rates of the most disadvantaged blacks—those without high school or less.

If we look at who is *currently* married by age, educational differences get even more dramatic. Because the less educated divorce at higher rates, fewer of them are left still married as the decades go by. These differences are particularly pronounced for men.

In sum, if we focus on the early to mid-twenties, a higher percent of the less educated are married. The higher educated groups catch up and pull ahead in their late twenties and thirties, possibly because more of them have the economic resources that young people now consider a prerequisite to marriage. If we focus on the rest of life (represented in our data up to age forty-five), educational differences in those who are currently married are even larger once people move into their late thirties and forties because those at lower educational levels have higher divorce rates.

Why Do Less Educated Individuals Marry at Lower Rates?

One of the main reasons less educated individuals have lower rates of marriage is that rising expectations of marriage since the 1970s have been colliding with declining economic prospects for less educated workers. Interviews with impoverished individuals reveal that while they have high regard for marriage, they think that couples need to have stable jobs and be able to pay the bills for marriage to be appropriate, and those with the lowest education often can't meet this bar.

Data and Methods Used in This Fact Sheet

Our analysis makes use of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth that began in 1979. This study employed a national probability sample of youth ages fourteen to twenty-two in 1979 (born in 1957 to 1964).³ The cohort was interviewed every year or two; the study is ongoing, and we make use of the data through 2008 when the cohort was thirty-three to fifty years of age.

Notes

1. See McLanahan, Sara. 2004. "Diverging Destinies: How Children Fare Under the Second Demographic Transition." *Demography* 41(4): 607-627.
2. Those who are widowed are also counted as "ever married" but not currently married, unless they have remarried. However, in these data that only look at the life cycle to age forty-five, very few people have been widowed.
3. See <http://www.bls.gov/nls/>.

In the News

WOMEN SAY "I DO" TO EDUCATION, THEN MARRIAGE*

Study Highlights Historic Reversal: Women with Degrees
More Likely to Wed than Less-Educated Counterparts

Chicago Tribune, May 2, 2012

Leslie Mann

Vicki Rautiokoski married at age 29 after earning bachelor's and master's degrees in engineering. Now, the 39-year-old Chicago resident represents a new demographic to sociologists—the educated woman who got married and stayed married.

For the first time, women with one or more college degrees are more likely to be married by age 40 than their lesser-educated counterparts, according to a long-term study by Paula England, professor of sociology at New York University. "Women's Education and Their Likelihood of Marriage: A Historic Reversal" is a national study that followed women born from 1958 to 1964.

"They marry later, but they catch up," said England. "By age 40, 75 percent of college-educated women are married, compared to 70 percent of those who attend high school or some college and 60 percent of those who did not complete high school."

This represents a gradual shift from previous generations, said England, when fewer female college graduates married.

"Before the 1950s, you still had the image of the college-educated spinster," said England. "Women chose between education and family. Many women went to college only to get their MRSs. Now, women choose to have both education and marriage."

"I got my education and established my career, while dating my husband long-distance. Then, I got married," said Rautiokoski, a materials scientist who lives with her husband, Timo, on the city's Northwest Side. "My mom, on the other hand, got married at age 18, then went to college while she had four kids at home."

Although most of the women in the study are white, the shift is more dramatic among the black participants.

"Overall, black women are less likely to marry than white women are," said England. "For black women, a college education means they are even more likely to marry."

Because the study group began in the 1970s, it does not include as many Hispanic and Asian women as a current sampling of American women would, said England.

The study reflects a change in expectations of the women and their husbands, said England. While many husbands of the 1950s women expected their wives to stay home, she said, their sons expected their wives to work.

"And, they saw the benefits—a higher family income, better lifestyle, ability to buy a house and the insurance of still having an income if one spouse lost a job," she said. Meanwhile, the study also showed that lack of a college degree affected men's chances of marriage.

"They were seen as 'not marriageable' if they didn't have degrees," said England. "So they were less likely to marry if they didn't have a college education."

England said she sees a new reverence for marriage.

"You no longer need marriage for sex or to have kids," she said. "It's optional and revered. It's a choice and something women aspire to do when they and their partners can afford it."

"Now, marriage is an achievement women make after they are educated and start their careers," said Barbara Risman, professor of sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

As a result, said Risman, college is no longer a "marriage partner market. College girls look at the men they are dating as Mr. Right Now, not Mr. Right. They know they can always find Mr. Right in the job market after college. Marriage is not necessarily what they do automatically after college."

While some of their grandmothers got fired for getting married, today's college graduate is not discriminated against in the workplace for being married, said Risman.

"She is still discriminated against for becoming a mother," said Risman. "But marriage doesn't necessarily equal motherhood. She may have no children, have fewer or delay having them."

In addition to marrying, educated women are more likely than their lesser-educated sisters to stay married, added England.

"There are several reasons," said England. "They marry later, have better incomes and are less likely to have had children before marrying."

Down the road, England will revisit marriage statistics to study the effects of the poor economy.

"The recession is preventing many people from achieving the middle-class things they want before they can marry, so many young women may delay marriage even more," she predicted. "Attitudes toward marriage will continue to evolve too. It's a combination of the two."

"To me, marriage is about security and commitment," said Rautiokoski. "Instead of being 'my boyfriend,' even if it is long-term, being 'my husband' means it's for real and forever. It means I have someone to come to. When I get home from work, there will be someone there to give me a kiss."

"Women Say 'I Do' to Education, then Marriage," from Chicago Tribune, May 2, 2012. © 2012 Chicago Tribune. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States. The printing, copying, redistribution, or retransmission of this Content without express written permission is prohibited.

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