

Testimony before the Joint Economic Committee

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Chairman Lee, Vice Chair Beyer, Distinguished Members of the Committee: thank you for this opportunity to testify today. I am the William E. Simon Fellow at the Manhattan Institute. Much of my research over the past 23 years has been on the decline of marriage, its causes, its impact on children, and its relationship to poverty and inequality. Today, I'd like to focus on what is perhaps an underappreciated part of this story, what some family scholars call the marriageable men problem.

The mass movement of American women into the workforce that began in the mid 20th century launched an extraordinary social revolution whose ripple effects we are still trying to fully understand. In 1950, about one in three women were in the labor force.¹ The numbers for prime age women rose dramatically over the following decades peaked at 2000 at 76.7%. Today after a moderate reversal during the Great Recession, it's returned to that historical high². Even more striking was the shift in the work patterns of women with children. In the past, women who worked almost always left the labor force when they gave birth. Today working motherhood is the new normal. As of 2017, 71.3% of mothers of children under 18 were in the labor force, including 63% of mothers with children under 3.³ In January the Labor Department announced that for the last quarter of 2019 women were a majority of those in the nonfarm payroll positions,⁴ something that could be said of no other OECD country.⁵

This revolution has brought countless benefits to women. In order to prepare themselves for the workforce, they've spent more years pursuing an education. This has given them the chance to use the full range of their talents and pursue their individual interests. It's been widely (and accurately) reported that women are now more likely to graduate from college than men are;⁶ as a result over 40% of women in the labor force have a college degree compared to only 36.4% of men.⁷ Women have also poured into graduate schools and now earn more Master's and Ph.D. degrees, than men do.⁸ Sixty percent of doctors under 35 are women⁹, more than half of law school graduates and associates are also women.¹⁰ They make up a quarter of the Senate and nearly a quarter of the House.¹¹ We hear a great deal about the injustice of our gender gap, but research that takes into account occupation, number of hours worked, seniority, and time away from the job, finds an unexplained gender income gap of only a few percentage points.¹²

I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge that there are still obstacles for women. There is still that income gap, even if it is far smaller than generally understood. As the #metoo movement reminds us on a regular basis, harassment and discrimination are an ongoing problem. Women still do more of the childcare in married couple homes; in single mother homes, which constitute the vast majority of single parent households, they often do all of it. Despite all of these impediments, the opportunities for American women to exercise their talents, to be financially independent, to leave an abusive marriage, to buy their own homes, and to build wealth are extraordinary and unprecedented.

The opportunities for them to find a desirable husband or partner, that is, a man with whom they might want to raise children, turn out to be another matter. The problem is especially acute for our lower-skilled population. In 1960, more than 90% of adult women over 35 had married. There was little difference between rich and poor women, high school drop outs and college grads; all married at similar rates.¹³ The numbers for all groups began to fall over the next decades, but the decline was especially dramatic for women with less than a college degree. As of 2015, 71 percent of college educated women were married; that was true for only 56% percent of less educated women, a difference of 14 percentage points.¹⁴ Surprisingly, the women who did not marry continued having children at a similar rate. As a result, nonmarital births in that population soared. Today, 54% of moderately educated women and 66 % of those with a high school diploma or less are unmarried mothers.¹⁵ The large majority of their children will live apart from their fathers for much of their childhood.

The most common explanation for the decline of marriage and mother-father families at the lower end of the income ladder is the moribund economic fortunes of low skilled men. There is some disagreement about just how much the earnings of these men have declined over the past decades¹⁶ or whether they have declined at all,¹⁷ and I won't elaborate on that debate here.

But there is little question that the economic fortunes of those men relative to women have worsened. According to a recent Pew Research study, between 1980 and 2018 the overall hourly wage rate rose by 45% for women. For men, the increase was only 14%.¹⁸ At the higher end of the skills ladder, wage growth was stronger than it was for lower skilled jobs. That was the case for both men and women, but the future may well be female at that level. Demand for workers with strong analytic, managerial, and social skills is growing, as are the wages for those jobs. Women excel in these jobs. By contrast, demand and wages for workers with mechanical skills where men dominate, are either stagnant or falling. With increasing education and labor market experience, "women made significant strides in moving out of lower-paying occupations and into higher-paying occupations from 1980 to 2018, says the Pew report; the same cannot be said for their male peers."¹⁹

Equally important for understanding the decline of married two parent family is what the demographer Nicholas Eberstadt calls "men without work."²⁰ As of October 2019, over 10% of the prime aged male population was entirely MIA from the labor market. Thanks to a relatively strong labor market, that represents a slight improvement over four years ago, but as Eberstadt notes, it's still close to Depression-era levels. The large majority of these workless men have only a high school degree or less; notably, almost none of them are immigrants though the latter are likely to have less well-established social networks and more limited English language skills than native born men. Prime aged men without work are not going to school, nor are they developing their skills in other kinds of training programs. Very few of them report they are interested in finding a job. And, despite an overall increase in male involvement in domestic responsibilities, they are not spending "work hours" caring for children. One well publicized 2017 paper theorized that improvements in "leisure technology," namely, video games, played a big role in keeping workless young men occupied.²¹ True or not, workless haven't found another way to make much money; more than a third of them lived below the poverty line, compared to 9 percent of prime-age men overall.²²

What does all of this have to do with marriage? After all, the traditional family model with a male breadwinner and homemaker wife has been in decline for more than five decades now. The proportion of dual earner married couples with children more than doubled from 25% in 1960 to over 60% in 2012. (Women are the sole earners in about 6% of married couples.)²³ Historically, because women did not have their own means of earning a living, they expected to marry men who were able to do so. It was reasonable to believe that once they had their own pay stubs and bank accounts, as they do today, men's earning power would be far less critical to their decisions about who to marry. In fact, with women's wages and education levels on the rise, it would make sense for more men to simply take on the roles of secondary earners or perhaps even become stay-at-home dads.

That's not what's happened. Instead, marriage, though not child bearing rates, plummeted. Why is that? To answer that question, consider Pew Research interviews with Americans about the qualities they think matter for husbands and wives. About seven-in-ten adults, both men and women, said that a good husband or partner should be able to support a family financially. Only thirty-nine percent of women and 25% of men held woman to the same standard. Traditional preferences for male breadwinners are even higher among those with less education. Eighty-one percent of those with high school or less and 71% of moderately education believe husbands should be able to provide financially for their families, while only 40% and 29% respectively said the same about wives. The demographer Yue Qian compared couples in the 1980 Census and in the 2012 American Community Survey and confirmed that men and women were following their stated preferences. Between the intervening decades, though wives grew more likely to marry down in terms of educational achievement, "the tendency for women to marry men with higher incomes than themselves persisted."²⁴ I've written recently about a study with very similar findings for couples in Sweden, one of the most egalitarian countries in the world.²⁵

The notion that men and women still prefer marriages where husbands earn at least as much as wives finds support in "Mismatches in the Marriage Market," a widely cited paper published in 2019 in [The Journal of Marriage and Family](#). The authors analyzed the socio-demographic characteristics of couples who married between 2008 and 2017. That data allowed them to create a profile of marriageable men for women with varying racial, economic and educational levels and compare them to the actual population of unmarried men at national, state, and local area levels. The already married men had 58% higher income than the men currently available and were 30% more likely to be employed.²⁶ To put it simply, the economically desirable men were already taken.

The "mismatch" between what women might want and the men available was larger for minority, and especially African-American, women than for their white peers. A Pew survey confirmed that "[N]ever-married women place a high premium on finding a spouse with a steady job," the authors write. Yet the number of never-married employed men between 25 and 34 per 100 women plunged from 139 in 1960 to 91 in 2012, even though there are more men than women in that age group. The ratio for black men and women is considerably worse: there are only 51 employed young black men for every 100 young black women. The share of blacks who have never been married has quadrupled over the past half century—from 9% in 1960 to 36% in 2012.²⁷ With these ratios, it's not surprising.

In short, despite women's extraordinary gains over the past decades in educational achievement, income, and occupations, both sexes still expect husbands to earn at least as much as their wives do. Women who can't find such men will choose not to marry. Judging from their behavior thus far, either they will become single mothers or not have children at all.

This leads me to the following conclusion: to ensure more children grow up in stable, two parent families, we have to focus our attention on young men, particularly less educated and minority men. I would suggest three areas of attention.

First, the nation's schools have to pay more attention to their boy problem. Boys are already behind girls when they enter school.²⁸ They read and write later than girls and the gaps widen over time. Educators often find boys lose interest in their classes by middle school as reading material becomes more challenging.²⁹ Relatedly, boys are two times as likely to be suspended as girls,³⁰ and 40 percent more likely to drop out of high school.³¹ Educators have been invested in improving the outcomes in science and math for girls over the past decades; they need to show the same commitment to addressing boys' lagging reading skills,³² testing out new approaches that might improve boys performance. To cite just one potential avenue, there's some evidence that boys benefit from more structured reading instruction than many schools offer.³³

The second change needed to improve boys' outcomes is increasing both the number and prestige of trade schools, apprenticeships, and career and technical training. The training offered in these schools should be holistic. They should be attending to students' "soft skills," their work ethic, perseverance, dependability, civility, and the like. I've included in the record an article about one such trade school that has successfully taught mechanical skills and social competence for generations of disadvantaged men.³⁴

The third area of attention is admittedly less amenable to government policy, but is no less crucial to addressing the marriageable men problem: a re-affirmation of the importance of fathers and male contributions to the household. These days, according to surveys, girls and young women have stronger career aspirations than men.³⁵ It sounds surprising at first but think about it. Society has come to accept single motherhood; in fact, it is the norm in many disadvantaged communities. I would propose that this seeming social progress has had unintended effect of telling boys and men that their contributions to family life and the household economy are of no great consequence. Why study, plan, show up for work on time, or go to work when you're sick of your boss if no one is depending on you, and no one cares?

Thank you for your attention.

Endnotes

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