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On My Mind

The Smart Women Myth

Christine Whelan 11.13.06

Forget what you've been reading. Successful women are doing fine in the love-and-kids department.

If you've been reading Forbes.com lately, or *Newsweek*, or, for that matter, feminist Maureen Dowd's latest book, you probably think that high-achieving women have about as much chance of building a happy family as Carly Fiorina has of getting reappointed as Hewlett-Packard's chief executive officer.

I have good news for career women: The theory that they can't succeed as well with their families is hogwash. It is based on outdated information and misinterpreted statistics. The truth is that smart, successful women marry at the same rates as all other women, and once married, they have children at the same rates as well.

Look at data in the 2006 Current Population Survey, a nationally representative survey of 50,000 households commissioned yearly by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau. Among 35- to 39-year-old women living in medium-size cities, who earn more than \$75,000 a year and have a master's degree, 92% are married. By contrast, among less-educated, lower-earning women--women of the same age, in the same size city, who earn \$30,000 to \$35,000 a year and have attended some college--87% are married.

According to the same data, among married women who earn more than \$60,000 per year or have a graduate degree, 84% have kids under 18 at home by age 40 to 44. That's a higher percentage than their lower-earning married sisters (70%). It's important to note that high-achieving women are less likely to have children outside of wedlock, so the overall fertility rate among these women is lower. But those who bemoan the fate of childless female executives miss the mark for this generation.

Why the persistent ignorance? It may be that conventional wisdom is simply stuck in the past. As recently as the 1980 census educated, successful women were less likely to marry and much less likely to have children. A woman of 40 to 44 who had 19 years of education--college plus graduate school--had a 66% chance of being married, compared with a woman with 12 years of education, who had an 83% likelihood of being married at that age. And women with professional or doctoral qualifications were twice as likely to be childless at age 40 as women with some college.

Just after the 2000 census the tide began to turn. Prediction: By the 2010 census we'll have even more proof that smart men marry smart women.

Why the change? Men and women are studying and working side by side at ever-increasing rates. Women make up more than half of college graduates and are reaching parity in most professional schools as well. And this generation of men is thrilled with the idea that they can share financial responsibilities with equally capable women.

There's another piece to this picture that's getting increasing scrutiny as women become more successful earners. What happens to marriages where the woman makes more money than the man? I commissioned a nationally representative 2006 study with the polling company Harris Interactive and found that 82% of single high-achieving women--women who have a graduate degree or are in the top 10% of earners for their age group (\$50,000 for women 25 to 35 years old)--say they are open to marrying a man who earns less money than they do, and 61% of that same group report that they would be comfortable being the primary breadwinner in their family.

Men welcome this new partnership: 71% of men who earn in the top 10% for their age group or hold graduate degrees say a woman's career or educational success makes her more desirable as a wife; 68% report that smart women make better mothers; and 90% say they want to marry, or are already married to, a woman who is at least as intelligent as they are.

The bottom line: There's increasingly encouraging data to suggest a bright future, happy marriages and a balanced concept of career and family life for the current generation of American women, and for their daughters.

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