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MARRYING KIND: FAMILY, CLASS AND SUCCESS

By CHRISTINE B. WHELAN

December 31, 2006 -- A RECORD 37 percent of all U.S. births were to unmarried women in 2005. Despite the headlines about Hollywood single moms like Pamela Anderson, women who have children outside of marriage are five times as likely to live below the poverty line.

In a collection of essays originally published in *City Journal*, Kay Hymowitz argues that marriage lies at the heart of the increasing gap between rich and poor: The rich are marrying and having children within that union; the poor are not.

Her argument in brief: Historically, marriage was about bearing children and raising a family. Starting in the 1960s, however, it was seen more as an intimate relationship between two adults - with children an add-on, not the key feature. That separation of child-rearing from marriage led to the explosion of single motherhood - and also of child poverty.

Marriage orients men and women toward the future, asking them not just to commit to each other but to plan, save and invest in their children's prospects, Hymowitz explains. Without this orientation, it's a bleak picture.

The middle class quickly realized this and, in the 1980s, turned back toward traditional mores. But the number of poor women having out-of-wedlock births increased - and so marriage became a key feature of the class divide.

A generation of predominantly poor men and women, raised by one parent themselves, have grown up thinking that single motherhood - and early motherhood - is the norm. Now those kids are having their own children.

Taisha, a 14-year-old in a Bronx housing project, told Hymowitz many of her friends have babies already and she's thinking about having one soon, too: "Why do I need to worry about a father? My mother raised me and my sister just fine without one."

Educated and more affluent Americans, by contrast, have become increasingly marriage- and family-centered. More than 80 percent of college women say marriage is a "very important" goal in their lives; divorce rates are falling for women with college degrees. Only a small fraction of students at top universities come from single-parent homes.

Middle-class men and women understand this; they're devoted to "The Mission" - a term

Hymowitz coins to describe the modern process of shaping children into successful, educated, self-reliant adults. "The Mission" takes a lot of time and energy (witness all the recent books about hyper parenting and the plight of the Soccer Mom) not only to educate, but also to imprint the life script for a successful future. The rich are doing it; the poor are not.

It's not simply that two parents mean more economic and social resources, Hymowitz argues - married parents make the key difference in the future status of children. That's a broad claim - and she doesn't fully prove that point - the anecdotes and scattered studies she offers are only a first step toward that. Nor does she provide any answers or specific recommendations to fix the problems she outlines. But "Marriage and Caste in America" should provoke serious thought about how marriage has become a class issue - and what we can do about it.

Christine B. Whelan is the author of "Why Smart Men Marry Smart Women."