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THE MARRIAGE GAP

By **CHRISTINE B. WHELAN**

November 16, 2007 -- MAJOR news outlets are once again scaring smart, accomplished women into believing that they're doomed to be old maids because they intimidate men. This old saw makes great headlines - but it's dead wrong. It also distracts from the real problems facing the American family: Male or female, those with good educations and big paychecks do well in the marriage market - while those without degrees or career success are increasingly unlucky in love.

In 1970, women married around age 21; 68 women enrolled in college per 100 men - and the more education a woman had, the less likely she was to get married. Academic articles of the time routinely reported that women were more attracted to high-status men, whom they saw as "providers," whereas men were attracted to pretty and docile women, whom they perceived as "motherly" and fertile.

But then a historic shift began: Today, women marry around age 26, make up a significant majority of college classes - about 135 women will graduate for every 100 men - and a woman's educational achievements increase her chances of marriage. Recent studies show that today's young men find a woman's success to be an aphrodisiac.

This translates into positive marriage statistics for educated women. As part of the Current Population Survey, the Census Bureau looked at this issue in its March interviews of 50,000 U.S. households: Among 35- to 39-year-old women, some 88 percent with advanced degrees have married, versus 81 percent of women without college degrees.

Despite these changes, the conventional wisdom remains that men are less interested in educated or successful women - and the media fuel this concern by publicizing small studies that support out-of-date gender norms.

A recent speed-dating study from Columbia University garnered national attention for its finding that men prefer beautiful, smart women, but are less interested in women that they believe to be smarter than themselves. (Cue the old saw, "Men don't make passes/ At girls who wear glasses.")

Missing from all the attention was a key caveat: This research was conducted on 400 graduate students. In other words, its significance pales in comparison to the marriage data collected on the 50,000 Americans covered in the Current Population Survey - data that tell very much the opposite story.

Times have changed, but the reporting on the Columbia study once again played into the fears of ambitious women nationwide about their chances of career and personal success. The New York Times' Maureen Dowd devoted a column to it, perhaps because it confirms the (mistaken) thesis of her recent book.

All this hype sends the wrong message about women's prospects. Young women can pursue their education and career goals and stay confident in their odds of marriage.

Equally bad: All this media focus on the odds of marriage for college-educated women detracts from some real issues facing our families: America is rapidly becoming a nation of marriage "haves" and "have-nots."

The "haves" are college graduates, who are marrying at higher rates and divorcing at lower rates than the rest of the population. The "have-nots" are those with a high-school degree or less, who are more likely to cohabitate than marry, more likely to have children outside of wedlock - and stand a higher risk of divorce if they do take their vows.

It's high time we stopped making accomplished women worry for no reason - and focused our attention on educating the next generation about the value of a college degree, the importance of marriage and the possibilities for both men and women of a healthy combination of career and family life.

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