



Gentlemen Prefer Brains

One smart woman's success story.

November 16, 2007

By Christine Whelan

Maureen Dowd is full of bad news for smart, successful women looking for love. For more than two years, she's been arguing that men are intimidated by accomplished women, and are looking for "relationships with women they don't have to talk to." This week, she suggested that Hillary Clinton should pretend to be a flight attendant to win the American male vote.

She's not the only one who predicts grim love prospects smart women: Forbes.com published an article titled "Don't Marry a Career Woman," warning that women who make more than \$30,000 per year, work 35 hours a week or more outside the home or have a university-level (or higher) education are less likely to ever marry more likely to get divorced.

Millions of women nationwide get high-anxiety migraines when they read articles like this. For many years, I did, too.

I graduated with honors from college, and had just finished my PhD. I envisioned a successful balance of career and family ahead of me. But I was single. Did my achievement doom me to spinsterhood?

If indeed, smart, successful women are at a disadvantage in the marriage market, a growing number of high-achieving women in their 20s and 30s would be facing the same dilemma I found myself in then. Women outnumber men on college campuses, and according to projections for 2010 estimate there will be 151 master's degrees awarded to women for every 100 awarded to men. These days there are lots of educated, career-oriented women (like myself) looking for that special guy.

To better understand this alleged disconnect between smart men and smart women, I spoke with dozens of successful single women. A young physician said she felt she needed to lie about what she does so men would get to know her: “It’s so smooth when I tell guys that I’m a nurse. They smile and that’s the end of it.” Stealing a page from *Sex and the City*, I even spent an evening masquerading as a stewardess, obscuring my doctoral training, to see if that would spark a man’s interest.

Do men really want to be with a docile helpmeet rather than an equal? Are we part of a generation of women that is so successful that we are overqualified for love?

As a social scientist — and a single woman in her late 20s — I had a professional and personal interest in these questions. I began to take a closer look at the statistics that were giving me and my colleagues nightmares.

Part of the gloom-and-doom headlines came from a U.K. study that followed nearly 900 men and women from age 11 through adulthood. With each uptick in I.Q. scores, the researchers found, women were less likely to have married by mid-life, but men were that much more likely to marry.

While there was nothing wrong with the methodology in the exhaustive study, those attempting to interpret it missed a crucial point: This study was conducted on men and women born in 1921 — men and women who would be 86 years old today.

The idea that the gender norms of Grandma’s generation are newsworthy and applicable to the lives of young, smart women today is ludicrous. Yet still, the media tout these statistics as gospel truth — and many of us gullible readers believe them.

But when you look at current data for women in their 20s and 30s, there is good news. Today’s smart, successful women marry at the same rates as all other women. They just do so a little bit older and a whole lot wiser.

On average, educated or career-oriented women marry for the first time at age 30. So among the twentysomething set, successful women may be feeling a little panicky. Then the tides turn: A smart, successful single 30-year-old has a 75-percent chance of walking down the aisle in the next ten years — significantly greater odds than her less educated or lower earning peers.

I created an acronym for these smart, single young women: SWANS: Strong Women Achievers, No Spouse. SWANS are powerful, driven professionals who flock to urban areas and high-status jobs. Many have graduate degrees and earn high salaries — young lawyers making a mark, professors vying for tenure, journalists building relationships with high-powered sources, consultants advising senior executives, or entrepreneurs starting a new business.

SWANS are worried that their career success is holding them back in their personal life. But instead of pouting with self-pity, it's time to celebrate: According to the 2006 Current Population Survey, among 35- to 39-year-old women, 88-percent with advanced degrees have married compared with 81-percent of women without college degrees. And once married, these smart, successful women may even be more likely to have children.

Plus, increased education and later marriage leads to more opportunities, better marriages, and stronger families. College graduates are less likely to divorce — and more specifically, families with highly educated mothers are half as likely to split. In fact, the real problem is not among women like me who have all the advantages, but that marriage is becoming a luxury: Healthy relationships are increasingly tied to educational and financial success.

Educated young men and women value an in-tact family, and in a Harris Interactive poll I commissioned on this topic, 71-percent of high-earning or graduate-educated men said a woman's career or educational success makes her more desirable as a wife, 68-percent report that smart women make better mothers and 90-percent of high-achieving men say they want to marry - or are already married to — a woman who is as or more intelligent than they are. Gentlemen prefer brains.

All my research led to a recent book, *Why Smart Men Marry Smart Women*, and because of my research, I became increasingly confident in my good fortune as one of the SWANS. The odds were that things would indeed work out for me in finding not just a husband, but the love of my life.

Shortly after starting my research, I went to a black-tie charity fundraiser in New York City and met a wonderful man named Peter. He was handsome and funny and six months younger. He wanted to be a public-interest lawyer, he read philosophy books, and spun house music as an amateur D.J. I was fascinated. And on the night we met, we closed out a local bar as we talked until 5:30 A.M. Ever the subtle seductress, I gave him my business card.

On our first date, he asked what kind of book I was writing, and, without thinking, I told the truth. The data looks good, I said. Smart women marry at the same or higher rates, but the media seems to say that women like me with smarts won't ever get married.

God bless him, he didn't run out the door right then and there in search of a less-threatening woman (or one who wouldn't bring up marriage on a first date.) He and I talked about the data and he encouraged me to go with the numbers, not the media reports. He also encouraged me to go out on another date with him.

This very smart man and I were married on June 16, just a few weeks shy of my 30th birthday. I'm living proof of my good-news message: Smart men do marry smart women, a little bit later in life. And gentlemen do prefer brains.

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