

The Marriageable Man

Kay S. Hymowitz

THE TOPIC OF THIS ARTICLE IS MARRIAGEABLE MEN. It a phrase that not everyone is familiar with. A lot of experts and researchers posit that one of the reasons that we have seen a big decline in marriage, particularly among low-income folks, is that men are out of work and are thus not marriageable. They are not going to be decent husbands. You may be surprised to hear that in this case, some of the experts may be right. There is something to this theory, and that is what I am going to expound on. On a related note, singer Katy Perry told *Rolling Stone* when she was asked whether she was planning to have children, “I don’t need a dude. It’s 2014!”¹ By the end of this article, I think that will have more resonance for you.

Some of you might be old enough to remember when we were very big on girl power in this country. There were backpacks sporting the term “Girl Power,” and there were lunch boxes and T-shirts and hats and public service announcements and all kinds of government programs to try to promote self-esteem and ambition and motivation among girls who were said to be suffering from a lack of those things. There was something to worry about for sure with girls in those days. There still is, I suppose. Those who worked with the poor, especially, had very good reason to be concerned, because the teen pregnancy rates were high. Many teenagers were giving birth to children to whom they were unable to offer a very promising future, and all too often they had daughters who went on to

1. Madeline Boardman, “Katy Perry Wants Kids With or Without a Man,” *Us Weekly*, July 30, 2014, available at <http://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/katy-perry-wants-kids-with-or-without-a-man-its-2014-2014307>.

become teen mothers themselves. There really was an issue worth dealing with. A mere decade after Girl Power was all the rage, however, I began to notice something else that was going on in the popular culture. It made me wonder about whether we were talking about the wrong problem.

In the show *Sex and the City*, the four young women who were the protagonists were the toast of the town and were among the most highly educated and highly accomplished women on TV. For instance, we had a Harvard-educated lawyer, a Smith-educated gallery manager, a woman who owned her own public-relations firm, and a journalist. They were not lacking in self-esteem, these women, yet they were having problems. And some of that problem was a lack of marriageable men. Still, they were independent and very “together” women.

That was one image we were getting of women by the 2000s. Something else was happening with the popular image of men, however. Consider the blockbuster *Knocked Up*. In it a group of young men are living in this grimy apartment together; they are slackers, to use an easy term. “Basement boys” is another term that is sometimes used to describe young men who have not been able to get out of their parents’ house. These guys are able to get out of mom and dad’s, but they are lost, doing drugs and going to bars. They are just plain immature. Their only ambition in life is to start a porn website. These are the guys who are, in my theory, the counterpart of the young women we saw in *Sex and the City*, and they look very different. There are plenty other examples of what I call the “child man”—not quite a man, but not a child either. Many other actors have played that role. Seth Rogan in *Knocked Up* is probably the king of child men. Or maybe Adam Sandler. You get the idea. They are the best examples of the persona that started to become very prominent in the popular culture, which was not something we used to see, of this child man, this adolescent/adult who was not ready to grow up.

What I have begun to believe as a result of doing research after I began to notice all of this in the media is that what we actually have in this country is a boy problem. If you read the mainstream press, you might object to the idea that there is a boy problem. After all, boys have the advantage of being male, and as we often hear, this is a man’s world. The United States has yet to have a woman president; Congress is about

80% male; men are close to 96% of Fortune 500 CEOs²; men earn on average about 20% more than women (though that is a figure that has been highly misused). Men dominate senior management in every industry and in the academy, and they are the vast majority of workers in our powerful tech sector.³ Every day I get a Google alert on the gender gap, and it is packed with studies and reports showing that men rule everywhere and rule everything—every state, city, locality, country, every career, and every labor market.

So how can I say that we have a boy problem? Let's start with how boys are doing in school. Boys have far more behavioral problems in school; their reading scores are lower than girls' reading scores from a very young age, and the gap widens as they get older. In the United States, they are three to five times more likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability. Boys make up 83% of ADD diagnoses and 70% of special education students. They are 50% more likely to be held back a grade in school. They have lower grades and test scores than girls in just about every subject. It is true that they do score higher on math tests, but that advantage is not working for them since their math grades are actually lower than girls' grades.

In an interesting teacher survey done awhile back, kids were asked how they thought about their futures.⁴ In the responses we can see that there is a gender gap alright, but it is not in favor of men. Here are some of the results of the survey. For the statement "It is important that I go to school or college after high school," boys are not nearly as likely to agree as girls. It looks like women if anything are more confident than men. Consider the following responses. To "It is my responsibility to pay attention and do the work it takes to succeed in school," girls are far more likely to say yes than boys. To "I only do enough work to do as well as I need to get by in school," boys are far more likely to agree than girls.

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2. Catalyst, "Women CEOs of the S&P 500" (New York: Catalyst, February 1, 2016), available at <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-ceos-sp-500>.
 3. "By the Numbers," National Center for Women and Information Technology, March 10, 2016, available at <https://www.ncwit.org/resources/numbers>.
 4. "Collaborating for Student Success, Part II: Student Achievement," *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* (2009), available at https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/contributions/foundation/american-teacher/MetLife_Teacher_Survey_2009_Part_2.pdf.

These responses show a kind of attitude gap that is worth noting. It is only one survey, of course, but it indicates that something is wrong. It is no coincidence that in the midst of all this happening—this rise of girl power, this change in the image of women on television and in popular culture more generally—that this gender gap in ambition and attitudes emerges.

Let us return to the data on teen pregnancy. By 1990 we began to experience a big, big decline in teen pregnancy. Something was getting across to young women. One of the most remarkable numbers is the decline in black teen pregnancy. Blacks had a much higher rate to begin with; it is still higher, but it has now come down quite a bit and is about the same as that of Hispanics. Teen pregnancy has gone down another number of percentage points since 2006. And just since the last recession, it has gone down even more; in fact, it has gone down faster since the recession. That is excellent news, right? Well, yes, but not as good as it sounds on the surface.

At the same time that these trends were improving for girls, boys were continuing to drop out of school in the United States. In fact, more than one third of boys fail to graduate from high school on time.⁵ That is an incredible number. It follows that they are less likely to go to college. In the early 1980s, boys were the dominant sex on four-year college campuses and the dominant sex with college degrees. That was no longer the case in the mid-80s, and now women continue to outperform men when it comes to college degrees. Women make up about 57% of the campus population at most schools.⁶ This number varies a little bit: in tech schools for instance, there are more men than women, but for the most part nationwide, women are far more likely to be getting degrees than men. These numbers continue to rise. I think that the colleges have a vested interest in making sure they keep a lot of boys around because even though girls are doing so well in college, they do not want to be at

5. Marcus A. Winter and Jay P. Greene, *Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates*, Manhattan Institute, April 18, 2006, available at <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/leaving-boys-behind-public-high-school-graduation-rates-5829.html>.

6. Mark Hugo Lopez and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, "Women's College Enrollment Gains Leave Men Behind," *Fact Tank*, Pew Research Center, March 6, 2014, available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/03/06/womens-college-enrollment-gains-leave-men-behind/>.

schools where there are no guys. It is an open secret that many college admissions offices are practicing a reverse affirmative action to ensure a decent ratio of male to female students. We see the same kinds of numbers when it comes to community colleges.⁷ For every 100 women, there are 67 men earning associate's degrees. In fact, if anything, it is a worse ratio there. Women also earn 60% of master's degrees and more than half of all Ph.D. degrees.⁸ Between 1997 and 2007, the number of male full-time graduate students increased by 32%, which sounds like a lot, but it was a 63% increase for female graduate students.⁹ This gender gap in favor of women is actually particularly alarming among minorities. Black women are 69% of associate's degrees, 66% of bachelor's degrees, 72% of master's degrees, and 66% of doctorate degrees. When it comes to higher education, black women are doing far better than black men. It is the same among Hispanics, though not quite as much of a gap: 62.5% of associate's degrees go to women among Hispanics, 60.9% of bachelor's degrees, 64% of master's degrees, and 57% of doctorate degrees.¹⁰

Here is what is puzzling to experts about these numbers. People who have more education are not only more likely to find employment, but are also more likely to have stable jobs with benefits like health care, pensions, and vacation and sick days, and to make more money and to achieve a more solid middle-class life. Society is saying that if you get an education, you will be rewarded, and women seem to be hearing that message. Women get it; more and more of them are going for higher education. But that is not the case for men. MIT economist Michael Greenstone put it this way: "Women hear the labor market screaming out, 'You need more training and education' and they have been able

7. Adresse St. Rose and Catherine Hill, *Women in Community Colleges* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Women, 2013).

8. "Degrees Conferred by Sex and Race," Fast Facts, National Center for Education Statistics, available at <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=72>, accessed May 1, 2016.

9. Nathan E. Bell, *Graduate Enrollment and Degrees: 1997-2007, Revised November 2008*, Council of Graduate Schools, Office of Research and Policy Analysis, available at http://www.cgsnet.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/R_ED2007.pdf.

10. *Graduate Enrollment and Degrees, Fine Field Report: 2001-2011*, Council of Graduate Schools, November 30, 2012, available at <http://cgsnet.org/graduate-enrollment-and-degrees-fine-field-report-2001-2011>.

to respond to that, and men have not.”¹¹ What has happened partly as a result of this is a decline in male labor force and a rise in female labor force participation. There are more and more women in the labor force, and there are fewer and fewer men. This is particularly a problem among men with less than a high school degree. That is the bottom line. Only 67.1% of men with less than a high school degree are in the workplace, and only 76.7% of men with a high school degree are in the workplace. You can compare that to people who have a little bit of higher education and most of all to college graduates, even after the recession. With a college degree, over 90% of men are employed.¹² There has been a huge change in men’s attitudes, I am arguing, that leads perhaps—it is very hard to prove causation here—to this decline in jobs and in work. What we are seeing is a surge of men making a complete exit from the workforce over the past 50 years. Whereas fewer than 16% of men 20 or older neither had work nor were looking for it in early 1964, that number is now 28%.¹³ About 35% of women in the labor market have a bachelor’s degree; that is the case for only about 23% of men, which means that women are in a better position to earn more and have more stable jobs.¹⁴

To repeat, the market is demanding that future employees get themselves some education. Why aren’t men paying attention? I am going to propose one possible answer: the growth in fatherlessness. We have considerable research demonstrating that fatherlessness has an especially harsh impact on boys. One example is research from University of Chicago professors Marianne Bertrand and Jessica Pan, and they found that by fifth grade, fatherless boys were more disruptive in class than their

11. Michael Greenstone, quoted in “Study of Men’s Falling Income Cites Single Parents,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2013. Article by Binyamin Applebaum, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/21/business/economy/as-men-lose-economic-ground-clues-in-the-family.html?_r=0.

12. “Employment Rates and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment,” National Center for Education Statistics, last updated May 2015, available at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cbc.asp.

13. Rich Morin, “The Disappearing Male Worker,” *Fact Tank*, Pew Research Center, September 3, 2013, available at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/03/the-disappearing-male-worker/>.

14. David Autor and Melanie Wasserman, *Wayward Sons: The Emerging Gender Gap in Labor Markets and Education* (Washington, D.C.: Third Way, 2013), available at <http://economics.mit.edu/files/8754>.

peers from two-parent families.¹⁵ And by eighth grade, they had a substantially greater likelihood of being suspended.¹⁶ The authors controlled for income and race and various other factors. This is what their conclusion is: the gender gap between boys and girls is externalizing behavior. That is psychology talk for bad behavior in class in fifth grade and suspension in eighth grade. This externalizing behavior is smallest in intact families, and all other family structures appear detrimental to boys.

That is quite a statement. And Bertrand and Pan are not the only ones who have found this kind of discrepancy. Cynthia Harper and Sara McLanahan, controlling for income, race, and mother's education, also found, "Adolescents in father-absent households are more likely to be arrested and go to jail. Indeed, most of our very large prison population is comprised of men who don't see much of their dad."¹⁷ Other studies find that boys with absent fathers are less likely to complete their college degree than girls with similar backgrounds even when their high school performance was the same. There is something important happening to boys in single-parent homes.

We can speculate all we want about why that is, but the truth is that we do not know for sure. It could be that they do not have a male role model. That is one theory, but there is an argument against that theory because stepfathers who certainly could be role models do not do the trick. Studies show that boys who grow up with a stepfather are actually at greater risk for problems than those who grow up with a single mother who remains single.¹⁸ There could be neurological differences between boys and girls that make it harder for boys to adapt to the instability that often comes with fatherlessness. We know that from birth boys tend to be more physically active, and neuroscientists now believe that the frontal cortex, the part of the brain that is responsible for impulse control and

15. Marianne Bertrand and Jessica Pan, "The Trouble with Boys: Social Influences and the Gender Gap in Disruptive Behavior," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 17541, October 2011, 6, available at <http://www.nber.org/papers/w17541.pdf>.

16. *Ibid.*, 9.

17. Cynthia C. Harper and Sara S. McLanahan, "Father Absence and Youth Incarceration," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 14.3 (September 2004): 369-97.

18. Paul Amato, "The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation," *The Future of Children* 15.2 (Fall 2005): 75-96.

executive functions, is slower to mature in boys than in girls. Regardless of the reason, we have to conclude that family breakdown has had a disproportionate impact on boys' cognitive and emotional development. The answer to the question of why boys and young men are not responding rationally to market signals (that is the way economists think about these things) is that their upbringing is leaving them unable to adapt to changing social and economic conditions.

There are some, believe it or not, who secretly think to themselves, "So what? Men had their day, and now it is women's turn." But it should be obvious that the boy problem is not just a problem for boys. The boys who do not do very well in school, who are low in ambition, who are impulsive and unreliable and possibly even dropping out of the labor market, are not the sort women want to take home to meet the parents. They do not make especially appealing husbands. We find ourselves in a vicious cycle. Boys without a reliable residential father grow up to become men who are unmarriageable, ensuring us a future generation of husbandless women and fatherless sons who go on to become unreliable and so on into the future. Some very bad news is that the decline of marital birth has gone down. The fact is that the vast majority of educated women continue to get married before they have their children. That is less true for women with a high school education and just a little bit of college, two years or so. It is the least true for those with less than a high school education. For them, it is actually rather unusual to be married before having children.

Remember that I indicated that maybe the decline in teen pregnancy was not quite as good news as you might think? Teen pregnancy is indeed going down. In 1970, half of all non-marital births were to teenagers. That number has gone way down, but instead women in their twenties—between 20 and 29—are far more likely to have children outside of marriage.¹⁹ The irony is that although we have been able to bring the teen pregnancy rate down, we have not come close to bringing the non-marital birth rate down, and in fact quite the opposite. It is reasonable

19. "Recent Declines in Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States," National Center for Health Statistics Data Brief No. 162, August 2014, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db162.htm>.

to speculate that a lot of those women who might have had their babies when they were 17 are now waiting until they are 22. That is a good thing, perhaps, but the main problem remains: they are still not married. It is true that many mothers in their twenties are actually in a relationship and are living with the father of their child, but those relationships tend to be very fragile. The chance of breaking up within five years of the birth of a first child are much higher among cohabiting couples than among married couples. Children who are born to married parents are far more likely, then, to see those parents together by the time they are five. The discrepancy remains similar as you go to nine years old as well. What we do know is that the children in these families that break up do not do anywhere near as well as the children who are born to and grow up with married parents. Controlling for race, income, mother's education, *etc.*, children growing up with a single parent are at greater risk of a host of problems. They are more likely to do drugs, to abuse alcohol, to have early sexual activity; they are less likely to go to college, they are more likely to become single parents themselves, and the list goes on. Of children living with a single mother, 36% are poor, versus 6% of those living with married parents. Only 20% of those children in households making under \$15,000 are living with both parents. Almost all of the rest are living with single mothers. As many different studies show, this rise in single mothers is also connected to inequality and poverty.²⁰

And so the boy problem is a woman problem, it is a child problem, and a huge social problem. Women understandably tend to marry men who are at least their equals in terms of education, motivation, and earnings, and yet they are not finding them. I want to share an example from two sociologists, June Carbone and Naomi Cahn, who published a book on marriage recently.²¹ They describe a guy named Carl, who sounds like the child man I mentioned earlier. Carl has a girlfriend, Lily, who is also the mother of his child. Here is what Carbone and Cahn say about this

20. Cf. Robert I. Lerman and W. Bradford Wilcox, *For Richer, For Poorer: How Family Structures Economic Success in America*, American Enterprise Institute, 2014, available at <http://www.aei.org/publication/for-richer-for-poorer-how-family-structures-economic-success-in-america/>.

21. June Carbone and Naomi Cahn, *Marriage Markets: How Inequality is Remaking the American Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

family:

Carl has quit more than one job because he got fed up with his boss. More recently, he was laid off because his construction work dried up during a particular cold spell during the winter. After the layoff, he hung around with his friends drinking and playing video games. Lily finally had enough when she found out that Carl had run up several hundred dollars in expenses on her credit card. Lily knows she will never be able to depend on him and particularly now that she has a child, she doesn't believe that she can afford the risk. She explains, "I can support myself. I always have. I can support myself and a kid. I just can't support myself, the kid, and him." In her mind, Carl would get in the way of her ability to raise her child.²²

As a quick aside, the writers who described this story do not raise this question, but I think we can and should ask why women decide these men are worthy fathers. In Lily's case, it appears that she was choosier about whom she should marry than with whom she should have a child, and this is a very common situation in the United States today. Carl is an example of the child man I explained earlier. He happens to have a child himself, but that does not seem to have made him grow up.

I want to give you a summary of what has happened to the child man. There have been huge changes in the labor market, but young men have not adapted to it. That is partly an existential problem. Boys and young men find themselves facing a predicament that is really unique in human history. In the past, a boy grew up knowing he had a crucial role to play in society, that is in raising the next generation. Boys knew they had to become hunters or farmers or shoe makers or plumbers or lawyers because it was the only way for both them and their families to survive. That is no longer the case. "I can support myself," says Lily, "I always have." And now for another example of where this all takes us. Many single women are now using sperm donors to have their children, so many that we are now seeing a T-shirt with a disturbing slogan: "My

22. Naomi Cahn and June Carbone, "Just Say No: For White Working-Class Women, It Makes Sense to Stay Single Mothers," *Slate*, April 22, 2014.

daddy's name is Donor." Today's young men, instead of knowing they have a vital place in society, grow up with the distinct impression, often based on their own home life, that men are optional and possibly even superfluous in family life. These boys have to wonder where they fit in, who needs them anyway. You might forgive them for shrugging their shoulders, quitting their jobs or refusing to look for one in the first place, having another beer, and letting women handle things.

Kay S. Hymowitz is the William E. Simon Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a contributing editor of City Journal, and the author most recently of Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys.