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Asking More from Matrimony

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In 1986, a much-discussed study contended that a woman over 40 had a less than 1 percent chance of getting married—or, in the words of Newsweek, she was more likely to be "killed by a terrorist."

It was a vivid phrase but an inaccurate one, it turned out. Other researchers quickly corrected the study. Women were getting married, they were just getting married later.

Now comes a new study from the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University claiming that the marriage rate has declined by roughly 43 percent since 1960. According to this report, the marriage rate of single women 15 years old and older declined to 49.7 per thousand in 1996, from 87.5 per thousand in 1960.

Once again, the demise of marriage is being exaggerated. How? Age 15 is the wrong cut-off for comparing marriage rates in 1960 and 1996, because people now just don't wed at such an early age. Since 1960, the median age of women getting married for the first time has increased by four and a half years, to 24.8 from 20.3.

To measure marriage rates accurately, most demographers today calculate the percentage of women who are "ever married." Assuming that one should not count teen-agers because so few marry, in 1960 the proportion of women 20 and older who had ever been married was 90 percent. Thirty-six years later the proportion of women who were then or had at one time been married stood at 83 percent—only about 8 percent lower.

That's the statistic for women who get married. What about staying married? Here, the situation has worsened. Divorce rates rose sharply through the 60's and 70's. Although divorce is down slightly since its 1980 peak, about 1 marriage in 3 still fails. Moreover, remarriage after divorce or a spouse's death is way down, partly because the stigma attached to cohabitation has been substantially reduced and partly because more women can survive financially on their own.

To measure these combined trends, demographers calculate the percentage of women "currently married." Here, by my calculations, we can see a big change. If one accounts for later marriages and longer life spans by counting only those Americans between the ages of 20 and 74 (after age 74, too many husbands are dying to get a fair count of marriage), only 64 percent of women were currently married as of 1996, versus 76 percent in 1960.

Yes, marriage bonds are weaker than ever. And people now divorce for what, to many, seem like insubstantial reasons. Out-of-wedlock birth rates remain high, and cohabitation rates continue to climb. But this does not mean that young people have rejected marriage. If anything, they want more from marriage than ever before.

These days, young people tend to marry later, after they have completed their education and have a better idea of who they are. Because they have seen so much divorce, many want to be very sure before making such a big decision. Studies show they want marriage to be a partnership, with equality between men and women, and to be emotionally satisfying in ways never dreamed of by their parents, let alone grandparents. And they think that a bad marriage is worse than no marriage—so they are more willing to divorce even if they have young children. Young women are also less willing to wed just because they are pregnant.

One does not have to sympathize with all these lofty aspirations (or ignore their inconsistencies) to recognize that young people aren't giving up on marriage; they are just modernizing it.

So, instead of exaggerating the death of marriage, and instead of making obsolete assumptions about when young people should marry, we should try to understand this seismic change in their behavior and attitudes.