Diverging Destinies?
Class Variations in Women’s Marital, Child Bearing, and Employment Patterns

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January 2009
Demographic Trends Reshaping Context for Marriage and Parenting

- Unprecedented change in family processes
  - Marital delay → But still forming relationships
  - Increase in cohabitation
  - Rise in non-marital childbearing

- Women’s labor force participation has reached a plateau – but at a high level.

- Experiences of female lawyers & academics differ widely from those of Administrative Assistants . . .
Outline of talk

1. Review of demographic trends:
   a. Marital delay
   b. Increases in cohabitation
   c. Rise in non-marital childbearing
   d. Class differences in marriage

2. Data on female labor force participation
   a. By Marital status
   b. Among women who had a child in previous year

3. Results from interviews with cohabiting women regarding family building desires
   a. Distinctions between the Middle- & Working-class:
      1. Ideal timing of children;
      2. Important prerequisites (e.g., Marriage? Career?).
Median Age at First Marriage, by Sex

- Men: 27.5
- Women: 25.5

While Americans are delaying marriage, they are not opting out of romantic relationships.

Number of cohabiting couples captured in the decennial census

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the U.S.
As cohabitation has become normative, its functions have changed

- As of 2002, 49% of men and 50% of women ages 15 to 44 had ever cohabited with a partner.
- As cohabitation becomes more normative, the likelihood that it leads to marriage has declined.
- Cohabitation has increased the most dramatically among those with a High School degree or some college education.
Changes in Shares Cohabiting, by Educational Attainment

Percent of Women 15-44 Who Have Ever Cohabited, by Educational Attainment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LTHS</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS/GED</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA or more</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increase in Non-Marital Births

Women are increasingly forming families within cohabiting unions

- Cohabiting unions often include children – either born to cohabiting parents, or children whose single parents enter into cohabiting unions following the dissolution of a marriage or a prior non-marital relationship.
  
  - About half of all non-marital births are to women who are living with their partner (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2000)
  
  - Estimates of the proportion of minor children estimated to live with a cohabiting parent range from one-quarter (Graefe & Lichter 1999) to a forty percent (Bumpass & Lu 2000) of all children.
Women in the middle education tier have experienced a large increase in single parenting.

**FIGURE 1.9** U.S. Mothers with Children Less Than One Year Old Not Living with a Husband, by Rank in the Educational Distribution, 1940 to 2000

Source: Tabulations by Andrew Clarkwest using Integrated Public Use Micro Samples from the decennial census.
The family behaviors of highly educated women have changed in recent decades.

- In the past, educated women were less likely to wed than their counterparts with fewer years of schooling.
- That trend has reversed.
  - In 2000, college educated women aged 25 to 34 were more likely to be married than women a high school degree or less (Lichter & Qian, 2004).
  - Divorce rates are also lower among college educated couples than among those with less schooling (Martin, 2004).
Marital Status of Women Aged 25 to 45, by Educational Attainment

Source: Author calculations using 2007 American Community Survey.
Percent of Women (25 - 45) in Labor Force, by Marital & Parental Status & Education

Source: Author calculations using 2007 American Community Survey.
Class Differences in Prerequisites for Parenting

- Working-class women are most often mention a desire for **financial security** before parenting.

  “I wouldn’t say that I can’t wait tables and have a kid, but I’d like to have more options professionally. I mean, I’m not living paycheck to paycheck, but I’m not getting as much money saved. . . . I was actually hoping to have a proportion of my loan’s paid off by the time I did have kids.”
  - Shelley, 28 year old waitress & student

- They also realize that financial stability is not easily attained, and are unwilling to forego children.

  “I see having a family as more solid in my mind than having a marriage, for some reason.”
  - Caitlin, 26 year old waitress & student
What do middle-class women mention as prerequisites for parenting?

- Wanting to defer until they were “ready,” with most mentioning late 20s/30 as the right time.
- Being married – mentioned by nearly half of those who wanted children (compared to 3 spontaneous mentions among WC women).
- Having a few years to spend with their spouse prior to becoming parents.
- Being established in their careers.
Stability – occupational & relational – prime concerns for middle-class women

- “I want to finish everything I started in my career because god knows that will NOT happen after kids, I don’t think.”  
  - Karen, 24 year old woman, engaged

- “Late 20s, early 30s for me . . . I will either be in a job or be able to secure a job with some degree of stability. And hopefully my partner, A, would have achieved a higher level of stability and satisfaction in his work as well.”  
  - Rachel, 25 year old grad student

- “Besides financially? We just need to have our freedom first together, I guess that newlywed freedom.”  
  - Ariel, 25 year old woman.
Other findings suggesting diverging outcomes . . .

- Middle class women emphasized expecting to be married prior to having children.
  - A third of the MC women reported they were engaged, had diamond rings, and wedding dates.
  - College educated cohabiting women were utilizing highly effective (hormonal) forms of birth control, and did not report experiencing pregnancy scares -- as did many of our working-class respondents.
  - They are also less likely to already have children.

- These reports are consistent with empirical data.
Conclusions

The work / family juggle for professional women is often substantively different from that of less educated women.

- Professional women are more likely to benefit from the institutional and financial benefits of marriage, as well as work-place supports.
- Women with less than a college degree are less likely to get married, stay married, or have children within marital unions. Their job prospects are also not rosy.

Take-away? It is imperative that more attention be focused on alleviating the family building challenges facing women that are neither the most nor the least advantaged.