

THE DEVALUATION OF MARRIAGE IS COSTING SOCIETY

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There is a disconnect in our national discussion about marriage. On the one hand we have had a very strong movement for same-sex marriage rights but on the other hand, there exists a general silence on the value and function of marriage in society. If we are fighting for the right for all individuals to partake in an institution, is it not also critical that we discuss the inherent worth of that institution? Marriage in Australia is on the decline as it is elsewhere. Social inequality is also increasing - now approaching the highs of the 1920s, according to Labor MP Andrew Leigh's *Battlers and Billionaires*, published recently.

Paediatric epidemiologist Fiona Stanley says: "If you want to have a future that is secure, successful and productive, you must invest in healthy mothers, healthy children and young people." One in six Australian children live below the poverty line, and one third of babies are born out of wedlock. The social justice argument for marriage is yet to be made however. One reason for this is that high-quality de facto partnerships between men and women give the same benefits for children as traditional marriage does. But it's difficult to generalise about the effects on children of cohabiting relationships because

results are entirely dependent on whether relationships are long term and stable, or fragile and part of a series.

But the fact that so many people are invested in the right to marry for same-sex couples suggests that marriage itself is still highly regarded. People are not fighting for the right of same-sex couples to cohabit or enter into civil unions, but to marry, indicating that the cultural significance in the social "fact" of marriage remains. Despite this, media conversation around heterosexual marriage is generally coloured by cynicism and 1970s feminist-negativisms. Progressive public commentators do not like to admit that marriage is actually good for women and children, or that a happy marriage is associated with better well-being, longevity and lifetime health.

In February, Jill Filipovic of *The Guardian* wrote a piece condemning "outdated" notions of marriage, citing the "male as breadwinner myth" as central to her argument. Filipovic writes that "marriage confers tangible benefits to men, and far fewer to women . for women, it means more work and less pay, or the financially tenuous position of staying home full time and hoping your marriage (and only source of income) lasts". Filipovic's argument is based on the premise that a woman's economic position should always be independent from others. A woman's wealth should not be shared with her husband and vice versa,

because independence and autonomy should at no point ever be compromised.

As a young woman about to have a baby, this argument does not compute. In the first few months of his life, my baby will be dependent on me, which means that I will be dependent on others, including my husband. That women are dependent at different times in their lives should not be stigmatised. Healthy interdependency in family relationships should not be constructed as the antithesis of feminism. Filipovic argues that our society suffers from the "male as breadwinner myth". This "myth" reinforces an outdated gender role where a man works in order to provide for his family. Such a myth is believed to reinforce gender roles, and allows men to shirk their housework duties.

This "male as breadwinner myth" is not just a product of popular journalism, however, it is echoed by serious feminist scholars such as Cordelia Fine, who argues in *Delusions of Gender* that "hard-wired accounts" portraying men as being intrinsically motivated to provide for their families are not only inaccurate, but harmful to women. They exist merely as an excuse for men to get out of doing childcare, cooking and cleaning. This "myth" might be relevant in marriages between two university professors, who squabble over who gets to take the next

research sabbatical overseas, but what Fine and Filipovic fail to acknowledge is that for a lot of women and children, having a male breadwinner around actually makes life a great deal easier.

Whether such provisioning is hard-wired or not is irrelevant. Although some women do not like to admit it, men give up a lot to be married, especially in an era of commitment-free sex. Internet forums are awash with men who voice grievances about the state of contemporary heterosexual marriage, but it has taken female advocates to bring this message to mainstream audiences. So for progressives who champion same-sex marriage but not male-female marriage, it may be timely to consider evidence which suggests that marriage may actually be conducive to health and well-being for both men and women. It may also be timely to consider that marriage may actually be a good thing for our children too.

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