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Marriage and Women Over 40

By [TARA PARKER-POPE](#)

In the mid-1980s, a now infamous Newsweek article declared that a single, college-educated 40-year-old woman was more likely to die in a terrorist attack than ever walk down the aisle. The claim, repeated in movies and sitcoms, convinced generations of women that if they weren't married by 40, it probably wasn't going to happen.

Wedding Cake by Ron Ben-Israel

The debate was revived again last week when [a study from the Pew Research Center](#) reported that high earning, college-educated women have a dwindling pool of like-minded marriage partners.

Now, [a briefing paper from the Council on Contemporary Families](#) is trying to set the record straight about marriage, education and women. For college-educated women who hope to marry someday, the news is good.

In the paper, the economists Betsey Stevenson and Adam Isen of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School analyze marriage data from the Census and the 2008 American Community Survey. They note that historically, women with a college degree have been the "least likely" group of women to ever marry, but those numbers have been changing with each passing decade.

In 1950, 90 percent of white female high school graduates had married by age 40, but fewer than 75 percent of college-educated white women had tied the knot by that age. By 1980, college-educated women began marrying at higher rates and closing the education-marriage gap. That year, 92 percent of 40-year-old white female college graduates had married, compared with 96 percent of similar high school graduates.

Since then, marriage rates have fallen for all women, but now the chance of marriage by 40 is about the same with or without a college degree. In 2008, 86 percent of 40-year-old white female college graduates were married, compared to 88 percent of those with only a high school degree. Women who drop out of high school are the least likely to marry, and college educated women are the least likely to divorce.

The report also shed light on the marriage-over-40 question. It found that college-educated women who are unmarried at age 40 are twice as likely to marry in the next 10 years as unmarried 40-year-olds with just a high school degree. Among 40-year-old white women who had never married in 1990, 20 percent of the college graduates went on to marry within 10 years, compared to just 10 percent of those with a high school degree.

Educated women are also more likely to report being happy in their marriages than less educated women, the report concluded.

The story is different for African-American women. Overall marriage rates are lower among African-Americans, but black women don't incur a "marriage penalty" when they pursue college degrees. Among black women, 70 percent of college graduates are married by 40, whereas only about 60 percent of black high school graduates are married by that age.

Notably, whether a man marries is less influenced by education, and men show similar marriage rates across all education groups. However, from 1980 to 2008, white males with any college education were more likely to marry than those who had never gone to college. Among black men in 2008, 76 percent of black male college grads were married by 40, compared to just 63 percent of high school graduates.

Dr. Stevenson said the shifts in marriage are occurring at a time when couples are less likely to marry for financial security or economic benefits and more likely to choose partners based on the "companion benefits" of marriage. She calls it the rise of the "hedonic marriage."

"That's marriage where you're together for the joy of having another person to share your life with," Dr. Stevenson said. "That's where marriage is headed — couples who are together because they enjoy life more when they're together."