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## ROOM DEBATE

A Running Commentary on the News

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### For Women, Redefining Marriage Material

By [THE EDITORS](#)

Steve Brown/The New York Times

Women have outpaced men in acquiring education for a few decades now, with [185 women earning college degrees](#) at age 22 for every 100 men, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And [more women](#) are now employed because men are more likely to work in industries that are declining or cyclical. An [essay](#) by Don Peck in The Atlantic reported that in November nearly a fifth of all men between the ages of 25 and 54 did not have jobs, the highest figure since 1948.

How might these changes affect decisions to marry? Should women alter their expectations of what a husband brings to a marriage?

#### Different Incentives to Marry

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When men were the primary breadwinners in families and women stayed home, [women with a college degree](#) were the least likely group of women to marry. In 1950, less than three-quarters of college-educated women had married by age 40, compared to 90 percent of their contemporaries who quit school after high school.

As women earn more college degrees, potential husbands with lower earning power may not pose a problem.

If we simply projected these 1950s marriage patterns onto today's education data, this would suggest a dramatic drop in marriage rates. Instead, today more college-educated women marry and they are almost as likely to marry as their less-educated sisters. However, they tend to marry later in life, with only about a third of women with college degrees having married by age 25.

As marriage has changed over the past 50 years it has become more appealing for educated women. Many of the benefits of the old model of marriage in which women focused on the home have declined as the tasks of home production have been simplified or automated. Between 1965 and 2003, home production by women fell by 12 hours a week, while home production by men rose by 4.5 hours.

Why has marriage thrived among college-educated women in this era of declining household specialization? Because the incentives to marry and form a family today are shifting from the old model of specialized and separate roles — a model that was less appealing for career-oriented women — to a new model focused on a shared vision for how to live one's life.

In this new model, which I have called ["hedonic marriage."](#) couples who have similar preferences and desires for balancing work, fun, and family are well-suited. This new model of marriage thrives when households have the resources to enjoy their lives. Not surprisingly then, marital happiness is much higher among the college-educated and divorce has fallen most sharply for them.

So what should we expect as women increasingly garner the greater share of college degrees? The changes of the past have helped marriage thrive for women for whom financial security is not the main benefit of marriage. Thus, potential husbands with lower earning power may not pose a problem.

And, while the dating pool may be thin during college, most men and women continuing dating long past college, giving women plenty of time to meet men beyond the confines of the university.

The real question that remains is whether college-educated women will find enough in common with their non-college educated dates to form a shared vision for a lifetime together. If the growing gender gap in education leads to a shortage of men with compatible interests for college-educated women then we might just see the high modern marriage rates of college educated women retreat toward the lower rates of the past.