

You Don't Have To Settle

What Lori Gottlieb's new book gets wrong about successful single women.

By Jessica Grose

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In *Marry Him: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough*, Lori Gottlieb argues that if a hypereducated, ambitious woman is still single after age 35, it's because she's too picky. According to Gottlieb, these aging go-getters are sans man because they have "unconscious husband-shopping" checklists a mile long. When they were younger, these women rejected men for having red hair or saying the word *awesome* too much. Now they are paying for their excessive youthful pride: Their marital prospects—and their eggs—have dried up. To avoid this trap, she posits, women in their late 20s and early 30s should settle for the "8," instead of waiting around for the "10."

Gottlieb spends more than 300 pages trying to convince us that there is an unhappy army of spinsters just like her—lady lawyers, doctors, and graphic designers regretting their fussiness. And this army, she argues, is responsible for our national marriage crisis: Is this "why the percentages of never-married women in every age group studied by the U.S. Census Bureau (from 25-44) more than doubled between 1970 and 2006?" she asks.

Well, not really. Like many people who write about the marriage predicament of a narrow slice of America, Gottlieb is conflating her statistics. It's true that the percentage of married women has been declining since the '70s. But that decline has nothing to do with those unhappy lawyers and graphic designers. In fact, college-educated women—and Gottlieb's book is filthy with attorneys and screenwriters and executives—are still getting married at extremely high rates. And these days they are far more likely to stay married than they were 40 years ago. Marriage, in fact, has never been kinder to the professional woman. So while there may be a few holdouts, it hardly amounts to a crisis. It's a tiny problem for the very privileged picky few.

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what's troubling lately is the chasm that has opened up between the most- and least-educated women. About 80 percent of female college grads ages 30-44 have been married at some point, compared with 71 percent of women who did not graduate from high school, according to the latest Pew research. The marriages of college grads are also increasingly stable. From the 1970s to the '90s, rates of divorce fell by almost half among college-educated women, but they remained high among women with less than a four-year degree. If there's a crisis in marriage, it's because the least educated and poorest women are no longer getting married. And they are the ones who could most benefit from the institution.

Of course, Gottlieb is entitled to address any audience she wants. She wouldn't be the first woman writer to direct her argument to the middle- and upper-middle-class and pretend it was about an entire society (see Barbara Ehrenreich's *Fear of Falling*). But then she has to at least hone in on the correct set of problems. Educated women postpone marriage longer than they did back in the '70s, and Gottlieb writes, "The cultural pressure to marry later (but not *too* late) often hurts us more than it helps us." Though Gottlieb is certainly touching on the anxiety many educated women feel about having closets full of Manolos and

empty, empty wombs, this is another emotional revelation that turns out to be a statistical canard. According to the most recent CDC data, for women, "higher age of marriage is associated with lower probability of marital disruption." If you want a healthy marriage, the cultural pressure to wait only helps. Unless you are poor, in which case an increasing number of women wait too long and end up raising children themselves in circumstances much more precarious than Gottlieb's.

So what about those screenwriters and female execs? For them, Gottlieb is making a provocative argument: They will lose their last chance at happiness if they don't lower the bar. Built into her argument is the assumption that all women over 40 would be happier as part of a couple, even with a nice bore of a husband. In the *Atlantic* article upon which her book is based, Gottlieb writes,

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"Madame Bovary might not see it that way, but if she'd remained single I bet she would have been even more depressed than she was while living with her tedious but caring husband."

Here again, the statistics don't necessarily bear her out. Married women—and here we *are* talking about upper-class married women—are getting less, not more happy in their marriages. The percentage of college-educated white women who describe their marriage as "very happy" dropped from 74 percent in the 1970s to 68 percent in the 2000s, according to Brad Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project. Now, this doesn't mean that they would have been happier unmarried. But it does mean that marriage has become a whole lot more complicated for the upper-class woman than it was in the '70s, fraught as it is with time pressures and conflicted roles. Gottlieb talks about women who divorce and then remarry—and found that "most of them reported no increase in satisfaction or that they were less happy than they were in their first marriages." But she doesn't talk about the women who remain single in their 40s and beyond.

In fact, levels of well-being have gone down since the '70s for both married and never-married women, according to the happiness study by Wharton economists

Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers that got so much press last year. And as Elizabeth Gilbert points out in *Committed*, married women are more likely to suffer from depression than singletons. Marcus Buckingham, writing about women's happiness in the *Huffington Post*, notes, "Women's happiness with their marriage sinks below men's at age 39." Rather than settling in unhappily with her snooze of a spouse, this research indicates that modern Mme. Bovary might be better off setting up a bachelorette pad in Paris.

Marry Him is not devoid of useful relationship advice, though most of it you probably heard already from your mother. Good marriages take selflessness and humility, Gottlieb says. Don't be self-centered and don't throw men away on a technicality. This is all reasonable counsel, but it does not make Gottlieb the "new marriage guru" as *O: The Oprah Magazine* calls her. To paraphrase H.L.

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Mencken, nobody ever went broke underestimating the anxiety women feel about getting married. Gottlieb's merely capitalizing on that panic—even though all the statistics show that the women she's writing about probably get hitched eventually. Instead of buying Gottlieb's book, all those ambitious women should take the \$20 and buy a few cocktails before they're completely domesticated.

*Jessica Grose is an associate editor at **Slate** and the managing editor of **DoubleX**. She is the co-author of *Love, Mom: Poignant, Goofy, Brilliant Messages From Home*. Follow her on Twitter [here](#).*

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