

Money as the perfect partner: Marriage is a pointer to economic stability

Anastasia de Waal, May 2008, *The Guardian*

According to an IpsosMori survey commissioned by Civitas, 70% of 20-35 year-olds in Britain want to marry. Rather than having to marry because of social pressure, or even for tax reasons, today people are choosing to marry in order to make a personal commitment. This explains why 8 in 10 cohabitees want to get married - dispelling the idea that high rates of cohabitation herald the end of marriage.

Yet although the desire to marry evidently isn't dead, marriage *is* dying in the poorer parts of the country. Research based on the 2001 Census shows the way in which unmarried parenthood is concentrated in Britain's most deprived areas. Married parenthood, by contrast, is the norm in the affluent areas with high numbers of middle-class families. Behind this disparity is not that the commitment of marriage is less valued amongst those on lower incomes, rather that their circumstances impede its attainment. The significance of marriage today is what it *represents*: stable circumstances. The obstacles which poverty present to stability mean that for many of the less well-off marriage drops off the cards. In other words, marriage itself doesn't create stability, it signals it. What are missing for many of those on low-incomes are the prerequisites for this stability – employment and education.

Neither Labour nor the Conservatives, however, satisfactorily recognise the role of economics in family structure today. Both assume that people are not living in the married two-parent family through *choice*. 'Choices' signalling positive diversity to the government, and declined values to the Conservatives. Non-marriage is therefore something to be embraced by Labour, and remedied through a married-couple allowance by the Tories. Strikingly out of touch with reality, these interpretations fail to acknowledge thwarted aspirations.

The comparative instability of cohabiting partnerships relates directly to the prevalence of single-parenting amongst low-income women. Whilst 70% of children born within marriage will live with both parents until their 16th birthday, this is the case for only 36% of children born into a cohabiting union. The significance of single parenting, in turn, lies in the fact that child poverty is concentrated in single-parent households. In this respect, non-marriage and single parenting are directly connected to each other. As such, the government's disinterest in family structure under the nominally democratic 'families come in all shapes and sizes' stance, is highly problematic for their child poverty agenda.

To address the *causes* of single-parent poverty the government needs to support stability better – in both intact and separated families. Primarily through employment, but also by recognising the impact of public policy on families. As the Tories love to point out, low-income two-parent families are treated less favourably than single-parent families. Whilst the aim behind this is to support the poorest families, the effect is to risk creating *more*, by further undermining the stability of low-income two-parent households. The second cause of single-parent poverty is negligent non-resident fathers. The government's failure to enforce paternal responsibility,

defying their gender equality agenda, again goes back to Labour's squeamishness about 'structure'. Yet structure's relevance extends much further than advocating the intact two-parent family. The two-parent structure ought to refer as much to the parenting as the household structure. Treating fathers as optional extras is no longer liberating women; on the contrary, it is simply liberating men from their parental responsibilities.