

## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## Unwed Women Needn't—and Don't—Despair

By JANICE HARAYDA

Pity the poor single woman of the 1980s. She's lonely. She's depressed. She lies awake nights listening to a biological clock that looms like Big Ben. And, no matter how successful she is, she's probably destined to remain unwed, because men are either too "threatened" by her accomplishments to approach her—or are too inferior to measure up to her even if they did.

That, at least, is the impression left by a rash of recent reports on single women in America. Most of these accounts have focused on a Harvard-Yale study that found, innocently enough, that never-married women over 25 have a roughly 50% chance of tying the knot, which drops to scarcely 1% or 2% over 40. The Ivy League researchers did little more than push some calculator buttons and come up with some numbers. Yet it was as though they'd identified an incurable disease afflicting only women. A news-magazine cover story called the statistic "traumatic news" for women. It added: "Within days, that study, as it came to be known, set off a profound crisis of confidence among America's growing ranks of single women."

Oh, really? Let's look at some of the assumptions that appear to lie behind such statements: First, that single women are in "crisis" while single men are not; and, second, that many single women would be happier married.

In reality, single men have far more physical and psychological problems than their female counterparts. Researchers have known for decades that, though single women tend to talk more about their emotions, single men manifest a greater number of concrete signs of physical and psychological distress. James J. Lynch, a University of Maryland psychology professor, has reported, for example, that single men are far more likely than single women to die as a result of homicide, car accidents, explosions or fires, cirrhosis of the liver, or suicide attempts.

Other studies have found single women to be happier than married women. Among the first to document this disparity was the sociologist Jessie Bernard, who in "The Future of Marriage" devastatingly por-

trayed the harmful effects of marriage on many women. She cited one study that found that "married more than unmarried women were troubled by ideas that people were watching them on the street, were fearful of falling when on high places, had their feelings easily hurt, were happy or sad by turns without apparent reason, regretted impulsive statements, cried easily, felt hurt by criticism, sometimes felt miserable . . ."—and the list went on. Another study cited by Ms. Bernard found that married women were three times more likely than single ones to be "passive, phobic, and depressed."

Of course, much of the research contrasting the happiness of the two groups was done before the women's movement spurred many of women's recent social and professional gains, and when the majority of American women were housewives. But studies done within the past five or six years have affirmed that singleness is far from a scourge for women, nor do they perceive it as such.

A few years ago, the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan released the results of an intergenerational study of 916 women and their children, including some 450 daughters. Seventy-one percent of those daughters did not believe it was "better" to be married than single. In 1983 and 1984, Judy Rollins, now dean of the School of Home Economics at East Carolina University, studied men and women between the ages of 21 and 64 who lived alone in Manhattan, Kan. She found that 85% of the respondents were satisfied with their lives and had no wish to rush to the altar.

The recent articles have also largely failed to mention the realities single women would face if they married, including that 50% of their marriages would only end in divorce, anyway. And if they remarried, 57% of those marriages would fail. Even those lucky enough to stay married would have to live with the chilling knowledge that one out of every two husbands will one day be unfaithful. However fervently they may wish to wed, many single women would, by doing so, merely trade one set of problems for another.

Perhaps the most unfortunate result of the recent spate of articles is that it has come at the expense of more important stories about single women. One out of every three households receiving such benefits as food stamps or Medicaid, for example, is headed by a woman with children under 18 and no husband present. And that's not surprising: In 1983, women living alone had a median income of \$9,140, while men living alone had one of \$14,120.

But, some might say, such statistics aren't "sexy." Nor are they particularly new; the term "the feminization of poverty" has gained wide use.

All right, there are some statistics that are both new and sexy. The public has just gotten its first glimpse of a study of the sexual habits of 1,314 never-married women, commissioned by the National Institutes of Health. As reported in the Dallas Times Herald, one in three of these women in their 20s has been pregnant at least once. One in six habitually risks pregnancy by engaging in intercourse without contraceptives, and one in five did not begin using contraceptives until after her first pregnancy.

Those statistics are among the truly "frightening" or "depressing" facts about single women today. And those numbers are much more deserving of cover stories than the tribulations of affluent, college-educated women who, in the absence of Mr. Right, console themselves only with condos, BMWs and memberships in high-priced video-dating services.

*Ms. Harayda is the author of "The Joy of Being Single," recently published by Doubleday.*

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