

# The Washington Post

## A Longtime Proponent of Marriage Wants to Reassess the Institution's Future

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*Love and marriage, love and marriage*

*They go together like a horse and carriage*

*This I tell you brother*

*You can't have one without the other*

In the turbulent culture wars over sex, love, poverty and the future of the American family, Isabel V. Sawhill, a blunt, influential and formidable voice, has long come down squarely on the side of marriage.

Though she is a Democrat and a former Clinton administration official, Sawhill's staunch defense of marriage has often put the economist at odds with some thinkers on the left who have dismissed the institution as an oppressive vestige of patriarchy.

Unlike conservatives, who see marriage as sacred and the key to a society based on traditional values, Sawhill based her argument simply on the data, which shows that marriage promotion programs haven't worked and that children born to married parents tend to fare far better in life than do children in other family arrangements.

So it is no small thing that the 77-year-old author and editor of more than 19 books, papers and manuscripts, many of them on matrimony, is now saying that marriage — at least for a vast swath of Americans — may be dead.

In "Generation Unbound," a book released this past fall that has opened a new front in the culture wars, Sawhill, who works at the Brookings Institution, argues that it is high time we stopped trying to revive marriage. Instead, she says, we need to figure out what will replace it if we are to stem the rise in single-parenting that has done more in the past few decades to increase child poverty than some of the biggest social programs, such as food stamps, have done to decrease it.

"Maybe some people will be married, or have some kind of commitment to each other, but they'll live in separate places," she speculated in an interview. "Or maybe there will be marriages with upfront time limits. Not, 'We thought we were going to be married forever and decided in the middle to get divorced.' But marriages where you say to the other person upfront, 'How about a five-year contract to be committed to each other, and then reassess?'"

Sawhill thinks Scandinavian-style long-term cohabiting may be next.

Her new "marriage light" stance is grounded in data: Although marriage in the United States remains strong among the college educated, in the poor and working classes marriage rates have fallen precipitously, and divorce rates are high. Single parenthood is becoming the norm, as are serial relationships and fragile, complex families of stepsiblings and half-siblings. Half of all births to young women are now outside marriage, and 60 percent are unplanned.

And the data shows that this marriage gap between rich and poor, those with a college education and those without, is tied to increasing income inequality. The way we form families, Sawhill argues, has become the "new fault line" for the rise of a permanent class-based society and an end to the American dream of upward social mobility.

For centuries, Sawhill notes, the human need for close relationships was fulfilled by marriage, which guaranteed the survival of women, who, for the most part, were prohibited from making a living. For men, marriage was a cornerstone, signifying entry into adult life.

But as women have gained economic independence, marriage does neither of those things anymore. Even so, it's not as if people don't want to marry. Surveys show that the vast majority want to — eventually. They just aren't marrying right now, often for financial reasons.

"Marriage is disappearing," Sawhill says. "But I believe the institution will evolve, and must evolve with the times."

If for no other reason, she argues, than for the sake of the children. Her data on that is irrefutable. With the rapid and unprecedented rise in births to single mothers, one-third of American children are living in single-parent families, where child poverty rates are four times as high as in two-parent families.

So while the institution evolves, Sawhill offers a practical next-best thing. What if, instead of "drifting" into mistimed and unwanted pregnancies outside marriage, people had to consciously "plan" to have children by using long-acting reversible contraceptives, which are 40 times more effective than condoms and 20 times more effective than the pill?

What if, in place of traditional marriage, there was at least a new “ethic of responsible parenthood”? Would that at least reduce child poverty?

Sawhill’s new view is seen as either pessimistic or pragmatic, depending on which side among the culture warriors you talk to. Conservatives — Sawhill calls them “traditionalists” — blame the demise of marriage on culture, and many say that is what must be fixed in order to revive marriage. Liberals, or “village builders” to Sawhill, say the economy is to blame and that, rather than try to resuscitate marriage, it is better to accept family diversity and provide better education, jobs, wages and support for single parents to alleviate poverty.

Yet Sawhill’s changed position has taken many by surprise. Sawhill, after all, defended Vice President Dan Quayle’s 1992 attack on the TV character and unwed mother Murphy Brown, and she helped shape sweeping welfare reform intended to curb single parenting.

“It’s striking. She’s pro-marriage,” said Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins University who writes about the marriage gap, most recently in the book “Labor’s Love Lost.” “So this is like a general who’s lost several battles saying, ‘I’m not sure it’s worth continuing the war.’”

Kathryn Edin, a sociologist who studies fragile, low-income families, said the fact that Sawhill is saying it’s time to move on from marriage might actually lead to a thaw between warring factions. “Maybe now we can all actually engage in a more productive dialogue,” Edin said.

It’s not as if Sawhill doesn’t mourn the demise of marriage. And she even hopes that she — and the data — are wrong. But she writes that the genie is out of the bottle and that no amount of “wishful thinking” will put it back. Is this, then, the end of marriage for many Americans?

“I think I’m still wrestling with it,” she said. “I think I wrote the book as a way to wrestle with it, but also to start a conversation with other people about it. Because I don’t know the answer.”

*Love and marriage, love and marriage*

*It’s an institute you can’t disparage*

*Ask the local gentry*

*And they will say it’s elementary*

The sheet music to “Love and Marriage,” a song made famous by Frank Sinatra that ties the one as the preordained outcome of the other, sits on the piano in the living room of Belle Sawhill’s airy, one-bedroom Georgetown home, a former carriage house. Sawhill, whose stern, unsmiling

demeanor and command of the facts can intimidate critics and colleagues alike in public, plays mandolin in private. Her husband, John — they were married 40 years before he died in 2000 — was the one who played the piano.

In many ways, Sawhill is an unlikely messenger that the end of marriage is near. She came of age when girls went to college primarily to get an “MRS” degree. “Ring by spring or your money back,” was the phrase she heard as an undergraduate at Wellesley College in the 1950s.

After becoming engaged to John Sawhill at the end of her junior year, her father, a financial adviser in the District, offered to pay for her senior year — or for her wedding. Her grandfather Willis Van Devanter served on the Supreme Court from 1911 to 1937. But though a smart woman, her mother never graduated from high school. A woman’s life was supposed to center on marriage, raising children, playing bridge and volunteering. Sawhill chose a wedding.

She married in 1958 at 21. By 23, she had their only son.

“It absolutely shocks me now,” she says with a self-deprecating laugh. “I wonder, what in the world could I have been thinking?”

Sawhill worked as a secretary to help the young family pay the bills. She was supremely bored. “I was envious of my husband because he was doing such interesting things,” she says. John Sawhill was an economics professor and later a consultant, a government official and president of the Nature Conservancy. “He just said, ‘Don’t whine. Go do something about it.’”

So Sawhill went back to school to finish her undergraduate degree in economics, and she kept going. The dissertation she wrote for her PhD in 1968 at the age of 31 was one of the first substantive looks at wage discrimination against women.

Inspired to more fully understand the larger questions of the changing role of women, family structure, poverty and opportunity, Sawhill soon became both a pioneer and an outlier, a working mother with ambitious career goals at a time when most middle-class mothers devoted themselves entirely to their children.

When her husband, at 39, was in 1975 appointed the youngest president of New York University, the fact that Belle was not going to quit her job, move to New York and assume first lady duties caused enough of a national stir for a profile in People magazine.

“Belle has an important career,” John Sawhill told the magazine. “I can’t expect her to take her work any less seriously than I do mine.”

The two supported each other's passion for work, said their son Jamie Sawhill, a marketing professor at Washington University in St. Louis. And they spent hours hiking at a weekend home in the countryside of Virginia and hiking and skiing in Colorado. He said his parents' union was the "gold standard" for marriage.

Sawhill came to see that, as women's roles changed, what has helped "save" marriage among the educated is that marriage itself changed: from dutiful breadwinner-homemaker arrangements to raise the next generation to romantic partnership with more equal sharing of work and domestic duties.

Time diary research shows that women, even when working full-time, still shoulder more of the burden of child care and housework. That is even more true among the working class, where, she argues, the notion of the more traditional male breadwinner is still a powerful ideal.

In her calculus, then, the marriages that will survive will be more egalitarian. "If they aren't," she said, "then women are going to walk away from them."

*Try, try, try to separate them*

*It's an illusion*

*Try, try, try, and you will only come*

*To this conclusion*

*Love and marriage, love and marriage*

*Go together like a horse and carriage*

*Dad was told by mother*

*You can't have one without the other*

In a hushed conference room at the Brookings Institution, Belle Sawhill, dressed in her usual Washington uniform of boxy blazer and sensible shoes, is talking about sex. Just as the sexual revolution decoupled sex from marriage, she says, the marriage revolution must decouple sex from parenthood.

Her audience is rapt. Sawhill, as one of the founders of the bipartisan, nonprofit National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, helped set the audacious goal of cutting U.S. teen pregnancy, once the highest in the industrial world, by one-third in 10 years. By working with Hollywood to develop smart story lines on popular shows such as MTV's "16 and Pregnant" and using innovative videos and social media to change norms, the campaign has helped teen pregnancy rates drop by nearly 60 percent since 1991.

She makes her case to colleagues and critics on the right and left that perhaps the next best thing for marriage right now is to widen that target group by focusing on reducing unplanned pregnancies outside marriage — not only for teens, but for all women.

But Sawhill's argument leaves many unconvinced. Who are we, some village builders say, to tell a poor woman she can't have a child? And how, a traditionalist such as Kay Hymowitz, a scholar with the conservative Manhattan Institute, argues, does reducing unplanned pregnancy lead to stable relationships? Cohabiting couples in the United States break up sooner, the data shows, than in any other wealthy country.

Jonathan Rauch, a writer and Brookings fellow explains how he has watched with awe as same-sex marriage has become accepted. Sawhill, he said, is giving up too soon on marriage. "I will not do that without a fight," he says emphatically, his cheeks flushing red.

Like Hymowitz, Brad Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, has urged creating cultural messages to bring back marriage, much as Sawhill did to discourage teen pregnancy.

"I would argue that we haven't tried anything close to approximating what Belle did with teen pregnancy," he said in an interview.

At the end of the presentation, Ron Haskins, who co-directs the Center on Children and Families at Brookings with Sawhill, turned to her and nodded.

"Belle, once again you're stirring up trouble," he said. "Congratulations."