



# FocusFamilyINSIGHT

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**To:** Interested Students of the Family

**Re:** **Considering the Power of Women and the Formative Nature of Marriage**

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## Marriage as a Feminist Institution

*Students of the family must consider and appreciate how marriage operates as a formative institution and how this vital quality of marriage empowers women.*

### Marriage as a Formative Institution

Marriage is qualitatively unique from other relationships – particularly unmarried cohabitation – because it requires something of the husband and wife, demanding that we act toward the other in ways that our feelings and desires will not always produce. If feelings and emotion could sustain the durability of marriage and family, there would be no need for the public statement of commitment. The wedding vow anticipates and answers future unwillingness or dampened affection. And that clarity of intention matters.

Marriage ties us to others and others to us; asking and demanding that we become considerate of spouse and children, therefore turning us into different kinds of people, usually for the better. Marriage and parenthood are the most powerful and humanly universal antidotes to adult self-centeredness.

As a formative institution, marriage helps married adults look very different than their cohabiting or single peers in most of the important measures of personal and community attitudes and behaviors: living longer healthier lives, physically and emotionally; being and staying employed; missing fewer days of work; earning and saving more money; having fewer run-ins with the law; greater overall life happiness; less likely to abuse alcohol or illegal substances; being abusive or abused; volunteering in the community; attending museums, symphonies and cultural events at higher rates; being more involved in church life; and being actively involved in the lives of children, their own and others'.<sup>1</sup>

Marriage produces these important social and personal goods because of the commitment it requires, but also because it permanently and exclusively links men to women and women to men.

### Marriage, Men and Woman

George Gilder opens his book *Men and Marriage* (one of Dr. Dobson's favorite books on marriage) with this huge-thought sentence: "The crucial process of civilization is the subordination of male sexual impulses and biology to the long-term horizons of female sexuality." While there have been rare examples – such as the Flapper of the Roaring Twenties – female sexuality remains largely stable from culture to culture and age to age, requiring little cultural control. This is not true of the human male. His requires consistent control.

No society has found a more powerful mechanism than marriage to do this. And it is not just marriage that does it, but really women who do it through marriage. Gilder explains that when women have influence through marriage,

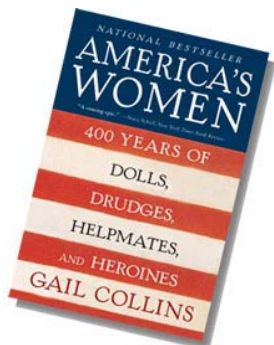
...women transform male lust into love; channel male wanderlust into jobs, homes and families; link men to specific children; rear children into citizens; change hunters into fathers; divert male will to power into a drive to create. Women conceive the future that men tend to flee... The prime fact of life is the sexual superiority of women.<sup>2</sup>

When marriage is strong in a culture, men improve and women's influence is best demonstrated. This is well evidenced in the social and economic sciences. Professor George Akerlof of UC Berkeley, awarded the 2001 Nobel Prize in Economics, presents compelling evidence on how marriage changes men in his celebrated 1997 Harry Johnson lecture:

There is no question that there is a very large difference in behavior between single and married men... that men settle down when they get married: if they fail to get married, they fail to settle down.<sup>3</sup>



History and human experience bears this out. Gail Collins, the current and first woman editorial page editor for *The New York Times*, wrote an important and deeply interesting book titled *America's Women*, which examines the influence of women in American culture. In an interview with National Public Radio on her key findings, Collins said "The most important implicit role women play in society was to make men behave."<sup>4</sup>



Among many examples, she refers to the 1607 founding of Jamestown by British investors. The new colony was not producing goods and profits as intended and when investigated, it was determined this was because the colony consisted primarily of men who were at "their daily and *usuall workes*, bowling in the streets."

Women weren't present, so the men did what they wanted which was pretty much goofing off. The work would be done *tomorrow*. The first women to come to the colony - sent by the British investors to become the wives and motivators of these men - found "tumbledown shacks" for shelter. Collins explains these women found themselves "marooned in what must have seemed like a long, rowdy fraternity party, minus food."<sup>5</sup> The women got the men working, planting, harvesting, hunting, building, etc and in a few decades, the new colonies became

something worth talking about and ultimately a nation that was worth fighting for; and because women influenced men.

Collins also explains that the battle launched by women for the right to vote was not motivated out of the lofty feminist ideals of power and equality, but something more domestic. In the 1890s, ten times as many women in New York belonged to the Women's Christian Temperance Union than all the suffrage groups combined. These wives combined to make a massive American social movement that eventually attained the right for women to vote so they could vote in Temperance, fueled by their desire to keep their men at home and out of the taverns.<sup>6</sup>

## Women are Born; Men are Made

Why is there this difference in the socialization of men and women? The answer is very interesting. Parental and social concern that a young girl grows to be a good woman is not as wide-spread and dynamic as the same concern that a young boy grow to be a good man. The female carries more fully within her being her destiny as a woman. The woman goes through more dramatic and prolonged physical and psychological changes as she matures. Nature gives her regular and consistent reminders of who she is and what she is about. The male's body does not send him as many such messages. He must be taught, made. *Being* defines the mature female; *learned action* defines the mature male. Margaret Mead observed:

In every known human society, everywhere in the world, the young male *learns* that when he grows up, one of the things he must do in order to be a full member of society is to provide food for some female and her young. ...[E]very known human society rests firmly on the *learned* nurturing behavior of men.<sup>7</sup>

And young men learn these behaviors both from their mother and wives as well as older men who learned them in their families. Men are made and all societies must find ways to do this and marriage is one. Ask any couple married twenty years or more whether she has made her husband a markedly better man. Note how much disagreement you won't encounter between the two. George Gilder illustrates how important this marital feminine influence is:

Women control not the economy of the marketplace but the economy of eros: the life force in our society and our lives. What happens in the inner realm of women finally shapes what happens on our social surfaces, determining the level of happiness, energy, creativity, morality, and solidarity in the nation. These values are primary in any society. When they deteriorate, all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put them back together again.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Steven Stack and J. Ross Eshleman, "Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60 (1998): 527-536; Glenn T. Stanton *Why Marriage Matters: Reasons to Believe in Marriage in Postmodern Society*, (Colorado Springs, Pinon Press, 1997); Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, (New York Doubleday, 2000); Robert Coombs, "Marital Status and Personal Well-Being: A Literature Review," *Family Relations* 40 (1991) 97-102; George A. Akerlof, "Men Without Children," *The Economic Journal* 108 (1998) 287-309; James Q. Wilson, *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> George Gilder, *Men and Marriage*, (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 1986), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> George A. Akerlof, "Men Without Children," *The Economic Journal*, 108 (1998): 287-309.

<sup>4</sup> Juan Williams, *America's Women*, NPR, "Morning Edition," Oct. 9, 2003. Audio at <http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=1459945&m=1459946>

<sup>5</sup> Gail Collins, *America's Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates and Heroines*, (New York: William Morrow, 2003), p. 3, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Collins, 2003, p. 316.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Mead, *Men and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World*, (New York: William Morrow, 1968), p. 189.

<sup>8</sup> Gilder, 1986, p. 18.