

A PARTNERSHIP MARRIAGE: WHERE WOMEN FLOURISH

BY HELEN LAKELLY HUNT

A Radical New Agenda for the Women's Movement

Even as a young girl, I remember observing my parent's typical 1950s marriage with alarm. My father was the dictator of the house. Mom always called dad "Popsie" as she dutifully took on the roles of doting wife and devoted mother. Dad made the house rules: thus the only television show we were allowed to watch was *Father Knows Best*.

For centuries, women complied with this male dominator/female subordinator model of marriage, often losing their voice and their sense of agency in the world. In reflecting on why I became part of the women's movement, I now realize that my parent's marriage was a driving influence. I knew I absolutely could not live that kind of life. It made sense when I heard that, in the 70s, Gloria Steinem had pronounced: "Marriage is a dangerous place for women."¹

The purpose of this paper is to propose a radical idea. A new kind of marriage has emerged – one that shifts the dominator/subordinator model of marriage into a partnership model. Though I once would have been shocked to hear myself say this: marriage, if it is an equality-based model, is the place where a woman can thrive.

There was a time when a woman had to leave her home to find her voice. How could women expect to shed their June Clever-esque existence arm in arm with fathers/husbands who knew best? The fact is, we cannot hope to end ruptured connections in our society if we can't create healthy connection at home. To achieve this, we need to support relationship wellness worldwide, teaching skills that grow healthy marriages. And we have a new science in our culture that makes this not only possible, but far simpler, for the very first time.

Marriage's Shady Past...

My mother's experience was certainly not unique. Nor was it even close to the repression that many of her fore-sisters suffered at the hands of their "hubbies". History documents some of the reason behind feminists' reluctance to sing the praises of marriage.

Even a cursory look at the great philosophers paints a demeaning picture of women in society, which translated to how they were treated in marriage. Aristotle codified women as being inferior to men in all respects, providing only

a material body for the embryo, while the semen from a man contained the 'soul.' Women lacked reason, which further justified the male as ruler over the female.² History records the proliferation of the European salons in the 17th century, where the scholarly and the elite met to discuss the question of the day: were women fully human?³ The very foundation of our western laws today are built upon Sir William Blackstone's volumes, within which he states this legal opinion: "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything."⁴ Furthermore, in the 1880s women's biological inferiority became the reason to deny them formalized education.

For centuries the superiority of a man was a given – as obviously true as beliefs that the world was flat or the sun revolves around the earth. Men knew how the world worked; and women were expected to submit to their husbands. Anyone today would recognize this model of marriage.

But something is changing...

Hope in the Institution of Marriage Springs Eternal...

With the evidence stacked against marriage, one might assume I'd given up on it. Deep within me, however, a stubborn hope persisted. Secretly, I believed marriage could awaken the greatest in human potential, thus offering the deepest fulfillment found in life. Because of this, a very special Baptist minister from South Georgia caught my eye...

The Baptist minister turned out to be Harville Hendrix, a man obsessed with the mystery and conundrum of couplehood. The more he talked about his passion for creating a truly equitable model of marriage, the more starry-eyed I became. Eventually I proposed and he agreed, so we got married; and actively set about creating our own partnership marriage. Having a Masters degree in psychology myself, I was an ideal dialogue partner to Harville in the creation of Imago Relationship Therapy. We feel proud and humbled to be contributors to a new model of marriage developing in the world today – one based on mutual empathy and full equality.

Harville and I continue to travel the world delivering workshops on marriage. Together, we attempt to decode the mysteries of relationship and give couples the tools necessary to create truly fulfilling partnerships. There exists a myth in our culture: If you're struggling in your marriage it means you have chosen the wrong person. This myth must be dispelled. If a couple is struggling, it means growth is trying to happen. Our main message is two-fold. First: the true

purpose of intimate partnership is to become aware of how childhood issues impact a couple's relationship, so both can commit to growing and healing together. Second: living a conscious partnership grows psychological and spiritual muscle. Couples must learn to see their partner as an "other" – with an equal right to their own thoughts and feelings. Success depends upon each person's ability to develop a profound empathy for the other. Synergistically, the more couples cultivate empathy within their marriage, the more empathic they feel for the world at large.

Breakthroughs in neuroscience have greatly evolved the science of relationship health over the last two decades. There is now a relational science that can help couples shift from conflict to connection. The exercises are simple, and can even be seen as a spiritual practice. Marriages – and our culture – would benefit from these skills becoming mandatory. Just as people have to study, take a course, and pass a test to get a driver's license; society should require that people take a course and pass a test to get their marriage license. Further, marriage licenses should be renewed every 5 years!

The strength cultivated through the healthy resolution of conflict leads to a profound depth of wisdom. The building of a healthy marriage, therefore, empowers women within their primary partnerships, which empowers them in the world.

Flash Alert: what an "aha moment" for me! Women can now become empowered at home.

Too many women today distance from feminism, believing that the movement is outdated or reversely discriminates against men. This erroneous view entirely misses the goal of the women's movement: to create real equality for every woman *and* man on this planet. Feminist activists know that even those in the dominant role suffer in a society where many are subjugated. It is time for the women's movement – which has advocated many ways to support the empowerment of women – to add a sterling new point to its social/political agenda. Those of us working to strengthen the agency of women and girls need to focus on the crucial role of creating healthy relationships. What better way to ensure women's equality than through building it at home? Adopting this strategy is not only in keeping with the movement's overarching goal, it will take our work to a whole new level.

Marriage Vindicated!

Newly published statistics prove that marriage is a far safer option for women today. In fact, they cite divorce and being unmarried with children as far greater dangers to the safety and wellbeing of women and children. Patty

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Regarding domestic violence:

- Spousal, boyfriend, and domestic partner abuse is twice as high among women that have never been married then those who have been married.⁵
- Women who have been separated from their husbands are 25 times more likely to suffer victimization, such as rape and domestic violence, than married women.⁶
- When a woman chooses to live with a boyfriend who is not the father of her child/ren, the spousal and child abuse rate is 33 times higher than within an intact married family.⁷
- The lowest levels of domestic abuse occur in the intact married family.⁸

Regarding poverty:

- 75% percent of all women who apply for welfare benefits do so because of a disrupted marriage.⁹
- Approximately 80% of long-term child poverty in the United States occurs among children from broken or never-formed families.¹⁰
- After divorce the standard of living (for women and children) drops by 20% and home-ownership of women after divorce drops by 12%.¹¹
- Children raised by unmarried mothers are 7 times more likely to live in poverty, than children raised by their biological married parents.¹²
- And on average, never married or divorced mothers had much lower per-capita incomes compared to married mothers, regardless of their living arrangements.¹³

Regarding women's mental and physical health:

- Non-married women have a 50% higher mortality rate than married women.¹⁴
- Cardiovascular risk for women over fifty was 60% higher among divorced women and 30% higher among widowed women.¹⁵
- Girls with divorced parents were at higher risk to develop depressive symptoms during adolescence.¹⁶

However, there are two statistics that showed marriage as being unhealthy for women. First, married women who reported "keeping their mouths shut" during conflict had 4 times the risk of dying from heart disease.¹⁷ And women who had unequal decision-making power in marriage had a higher risk of

death.¹⁸ Neither of these dynamics are found within an equality-based model of marriage.

Couplehood: Now Empowering for Women!

Howell's research indicates, therefore, that the *quality of the marriage relationship* is the significant variable.¹⁹ Statistics prove that an emphasis on building an equality-based partnership will help prevent domestic violence, and has a tremendously positive impact on the physical, economic, and mental health of women and girls.

Empowering women at home to help empower women and girls in the world is not just an interesting idea to ponder. It is a statistically proven fact. Building healthy marriages is an under-acknowledged, but vitally important way to create a just and empathic world, one couple at a time.

These findings support what I've witnessed in the Imago Workshops that Harville and I lead. The work of building a truly conscious partnership demands each individual to show up authentically. They learn how to identify and speak their truth in clear and loving ways. This is the work of empowerment. And once learned in partnership, it impacts every facet of a person's life. Thus, the new relational science makes it the ideal time to call for advocacy efforts and policy shifts that lift up the building of healthy partnerships.

The Women's Movement: Time to Come Full Circle

In 1963, Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique" voiced a question asked silently by millions of married women: "Is this all?"²⁰ This was followed, in 1971, by the publication of Ms. Magazine. Originally planned as a one-time supplement to the December issue of *New York* magazine, it sold out in eight days. The first mainstream publication to openly advocate for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, one of the article topics was: "How to Write Your Own Marriage Contract."²¹

From its onset, the women's movement understood that the institution of marriage needed to be transformed. What these early trailblazers lacked was the relational science. The scarcity of research to realize such a transformation, combined with the challenges and backlash women faced, led to many women choosing divorce. The stakes were simply too high for a woman to find her own selfhood in the midst of a dominator/subordinator marriage model.

Because women were struggling to find their own voice, becoming empowered within the male-dominated society of the 60s meant becoming more like males.

Women practiced elbowing their way off of elevators, adding bullets to their resume, and forging their own weapons to break through the glass ceiling. While impactful, the irony of this approach is that it left much of what is unique and wonderful about women by the wayside. We are interconnected, social beings. Our sense of self is shaped and grows within the context of our relationships with others. For millennia, while the men were off hunting bison the women tended the villages, children, elderly, and each other. This shared responsibility for communal wellbeing fostered a deep commitment in and appreciation for cooperation. While we value speaking, we know the power of the sacred act of listening well. While we value creating impact, we also know the strength that comes with vulnerability.

Now that we have an equality-based model of marriage, the time for women to step outside of the home to find their selfhood has passed. The partnership model of marriage is, in fact, the essence of what I believe Ms. Magazine was calling for when they urged women to create marriage contracts with their husbands. Women have come full circle. As women, we can now flourish within our primary partnerships. This will add, both within our own lives and within the women's movement as a whole, the ultimate power – the power of love – as we do our work in the world.

The UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon stated that: “Equality for women and girls is ... a social and economic imperative. Where women are educated and empowered, economies are more productive and strong. Where women are fully represented, societies are more peaceful and stable.”²² A report from the World Bank focusing on the economic and social implications of gender proclaimed: “Gender equality ... strengthens countries ability to grow, to reduce poverty, and to govern effectively.”²³ Those in positions of power are finally recognizing that the quickest and most impactful way to evolve a society is to empower women. And the more time I spend with couples creating equality-based marriages, the more obvious it becomes to me that marriage is a ripe ground for women's empowerment.

Relationship science can finally match the vision of equality the women's movement has upheld for decades. Thus, we need to link arms with those husbands and male companions who are working alongside us to create equal partnerships and an equal society. As couples shift – one marriage at a time – into healthy, equality-based relationships, we will be modeling a true, inclusive partnership for those around the world. Accordingly, it is not only women – but the women's movement itself – that would come full circle by adopting the strategy: Healthy marriages = healthy, empowered women and girls, which = a healthy, safe and just society for all.

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- ¹ This was/is a common 'catch phrase' used by many in the women's movement (original source unknown)
- ² *The Enigma of Anna O: A Biography of Bertha Pappenheim* by Melinda Given Guttman (Moyer Bell, Wickford, Rhode Island), pg 43
- ³ *Disputatio nova contra mulieres, qua probatur eas homines non esse* [title translation - A new argument against women, in which it is demonstrated that they are not human beings], Anonymous tract, first published in 1595. The popularity of this pamphlet rapidly grew notorious, and was reprinted many times during the 17th and 18th centuries.
- ⁴ *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, by William Blackstone, (Oxford, 1803; reprint, 1967.) This multivolume treatise, is a standard for the study of British and early American law.
- ⁵ *National Crime Victimization Survey*, U.S. Department of Justice, 1992-2001.
- ⁶ *The Case for Marriage* by Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, New York: Doubleday (2000), pg 155
- ⁷ *Broken Homes and Battered Children: A Study of the Relationship and Child Abuse and Family Type*, Family Education Trust, London
- ⁸ *Broken Homes and Battered Children: A Study of the Relationship and Child Abuse and Family Type*, Family Education Trust, London
- ⁹ *Windows on Divorce: Before and After*, Thomas L. Hanson, Sara S. McLaugh, Social Science Research, vol. 27, 1998, pg. 328-349.
- ¹⁰ *Understanding the Presidents Healthy Marriage Initiative*, by Robert E. Rector and Melissa G. Pardue, The Heritage Foundation, March 26, 2004, www.heritage.org/research/family
- ¹¹ *Windows on Divorce: Before and After*, Thomas L. Hanson, Sara S. McLaugh, Social Science Research, vol. 27, 1998, pg. 328-349.
- ¹² *Understanding the Presidents Healthy Marriage Initiative*, by Robert E. Rector and Melissa G. Pardue, The Heritage Foundation, March 26, 2004, www.heritage.org/research/family
- ¹³ *Living Arrangements, Employment Status and the Economic Well-Being of Mothers: Evidence from Brazil, Chile and the U.S.*, by A. Light and M. Ureta, *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, vol. 25, 2004, pg. 301-334.
- ¹⁴ *The Impact of the Family on Health: Decade in Review*, by Catherine E. Ross and Karen Goldstein, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52 (1990), pg. 1061.
- ¹⁵ *Gender, the Marital Life Course and Cardiovascular Health in Late Midlife*, by Zhenmei Zhang and Mark D. Hayward, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol 68, no 3, pg. 639-657.
- ¹⁶ *Adolescent Adjustment and Well-Being: Effects of parental divorce and distress*, by Reysamb I. Storksen, T.L. Holmen and K. Tambs, *Scand J. Psychol*, Feb 2006, 47(1), pg 75-84.
- ¹⁷ *Marital Status, anxiety and the prediction of the 10-year incidence of coronary heart disease, arial fibrillation, and total mortality: The Framington offspring study* by, Sullivan Eaker, E.D., L.M., M. Kelly-Hayes, R.B. D'Agostino, and E.J. Benjamin, *Psychomatic Medicine*, pg. 67, 692-696.
- ¹⁸ *Patterns of Change, Disability and Well-Being*, by Lois Verbrugge and Donald Balaban, *Medical Care* 27 (1989) s128-s147.
- ¹⁹ *Marital Status: Links to physical and mental health* MIDUS - Midlife in the United States, A National Study of Health and Well-Being, 2004. www.midus.wise.edu
- ²⁰ Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, p.15.
- ²¹ <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3401802778.html>, 9-17-14
- ²² Statement by the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon on the creation of UN Women, July 2, 2010, www.unwomen.org
- ²³ *Engendering Development Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice*, A World Bank Policy Research Report, World Bank, Washington D.C. 2001, pg 7