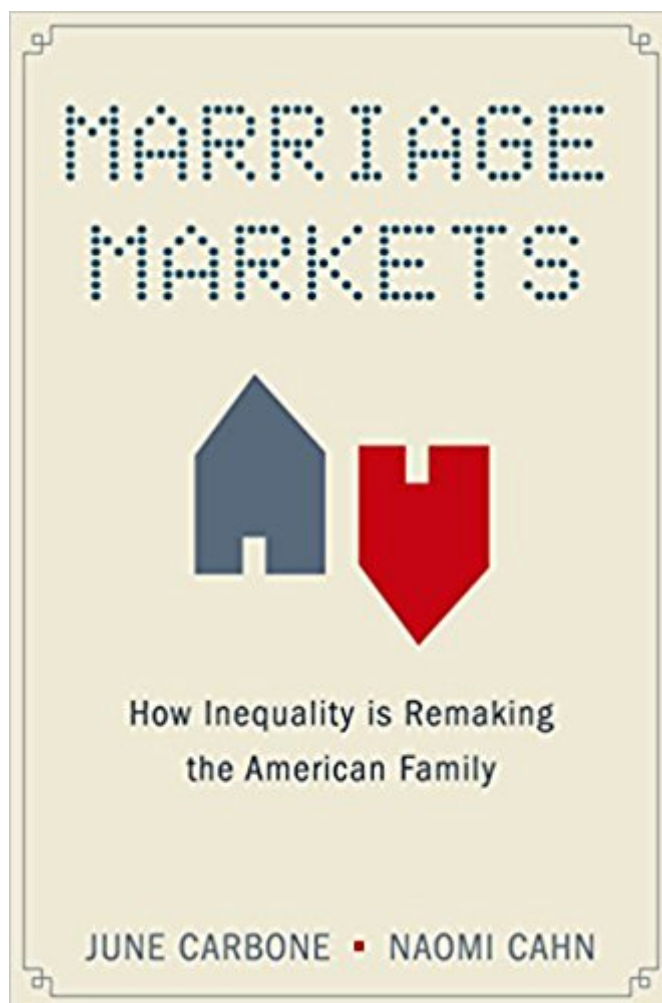


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# Marriage Markets: How Inequality Is Remaking The American Family



## Synopsis

There was a time when the phrase "American family" conjured up a single, specific image: a breadwinner dad, a homemaker mom, and their 2.5 kids living comfortable lives in a middle-class suburb. Today, that image has been shattered, due in part to skyrocketing divorce rates, single parenthood, and increased out-of-wedlock births. But whether it is conservatives bewailing the wages of moral decline and women's liberation, or progressives celebrating the result of women's greater freedom and changing sexual mores, most Americans fail to identify the root factor driving the changes: economic inequality that is remaking the American family along class lines. In *Marriage Markets*, June Carbone and Naomi Cahn examine how macroeconomic forces are transforming our most intimate and important spheres, and how working class and lower income families have paid the highest price. Just like health, education, and seemingly every other advantage in life, a stable two-parent home has become a luxury that only the well-off can afford. The best educated and most prosperous have the most stable families, while working class families have seen the greatest increase in relationship instability. Why is this so? The book provides the answer: greater economic inequality has profoundly changed marriage markets, the way men and women match up when they search for a life partner. It has produced a larger group of high-income men than women; written off the men at the bottom because of chronic unemployment, incarceration, and substance abuse; and left a larger group of women with a smaller group of comparable men in the middle. The failure to see marriage as a market affected by supply and demand has obscured any meaningful analysis of the way that societal changes influence culture. Only policies that redress the balance between men and women through greater access to education, stable employment, and opportunities for social mobility can produce a culture that encourages commitment and investment in family life. A rigorous and enlightening account of why American families have changed so much in recent decades, *Marriage Markets* cuts through the ideological and moralistic rhetoric that drives our current debate. It offers critically needed solutions for a problem that will haunt America for generations to come.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Amazing analysis of the socioeconomic changes about marriages in America. It explains why higher earning women are more likely to be married, and why lower earning men have become undesirable in marriage( one reason: the unemployed men do even less housework than their employed counterpart). It also compares the laws in different states on how to define a 'parent': biological or practical. An eye opening book!

Excellent analysis of the marital divide and legal ramifications in America and an interesting analysis together with Charles Murray's " Coming Apart."

I was prompted to read this book by the rather provocative title: imagining marriage to be an economic transaction, devoid of romantic, intimate love and hormonal chemistry. The very analytic, scholarly presentation by the authors, with facts and inferences drawn from a wide range of academic studies - reinforced by a dry, expository style - reaffirms the emotion-free, rational view of the institution. I must say, however, that it is worth the effort to get through the 200 pages of relatively small font and consider the impressive amount of evidence gathered leading to the conclusion that here in America over the past 50 odd years, marriage has become a more pronounced marker for those with better educations, incomes, and other resources. And, as marriage goes in this direction, so goes trends in better childrearing and family stability. And for those moving in the other direction, just the opposite. Becoming more aware of this trend is the first, necessary step to understanding what possibly might be done to change it to improve the prospects of perhaps two-thirds of the young adult (20's-30's) population, who - as trends seem to indicate -

will fall further behind the economic attainment curve, with resulting negative consequences for their children's upbringing and family unity. The author's principal conclusion that greater economic inequality - particularly among men - has produced this marriage market divisible into segments that seem to be growing more and more apart. They use educational attainment (i.e. college grads, high school grads, and less than high school education), as the basic building block to then explore the variables (e.g. gender ratios, women's emancipation into the workforce, contraception, secularization, changes in legal interpretations of marriage and parents, changes in social taboo's/restrictions/lifestyles, et. al.) that have moved in tandem with increasing economic inequality, and building a case that the segments are becoming divided classes based mainly, though not exclusively on income differentials. And, as mentioned, decisions regarding marriage have moved in different directions based on this reality. The authors propose various prescriptions to remedy this imbalance and help strengthen marriage (or at least cohabitation), children's upbringing and family stability for those at the lower income scales via various reforms to private practices and public policies which would require government action and private sector reforms. Chief among these are increased job opportunities, training, better safety net protections, maternal health, early childhood education, enhanced educational opportunities for lower income adults, and better work/family life balance opportunities in the workplace. This is a systemic, complex situation, and obviously, changes to reverse current trends are going to be a long time in coming (decades), even if all these recommendations were endorsed and implemented by the responsible institutions. What left me somewhat puzzled (and ultimately somewhat unsatisfied with the author's presentation), however, is an understanding as to the root causes of how we evolved into the current state of greater economic inequality and class division from that of the 1950's and 1960's. I mean, where do we assign the chief responsibility for these changes? The authors try to show that both left and right political factions lack a full understanding as to how this came about and use their own self-serving arguments to assign blame without offering a sustainable resolution to the issue. Nonetheless, I do not find the author's diagnoses or prescriptions fully credible either. The world is going to continue to evolve in directions that we can't fully control as a nation, much less as an individual. Competition among countries for human and physical resources, for educational attainment, for revenues produced by private sector investment, for inventions/innovations in science and technology, for increased interdependence among their societies brought about by migration and resource sharing, for increased mobility among their citizens in search of better opportunities; none of this is discussed in the book. The authors act like the United States is an entity unto itself, without need to examine what is happening in the world beyond our shores. Finally, there is the overarching

question of individual drive and ambition, the striving to overcome limitations and better oneself. Society, much like the parent(s), can try and encourage young adults towards behaviors via various incentives (or disincentives) that will give them the motivation to seek education, economic opportunity and security. But, ultimately, regardless of current economic standing, the responsibility for taking the actions necessary and the perseverance required to achieve this must rest primarily with the young adult. I can buy the argument that it is much tougher for the young adult lacking a stable family and living in a substandard economic environment to attain these goals. I can also believe that it is possible to overcome these conditions if there is the will to do so. Perhaps, the instilling of this mindset and giving a young person the practical tools and techniques to enable this - "living skills" (which is more than just verbal and math skills, for example, dealing with people, learning the technologies demanded today, dealing with stress, nutrition, building of self-confidence, becoming independent, among others) should be considered a priority in primary and secondary education.

Really through research on the topic. At times goes too much into data and statistics, which was unavoidable, yet hurt the overall reading experience. Could have gone for more testimonials and personal stories to beef up the stats. Nevertheless, good educational read.

This is the kind of change in thinking that could eventually effect families globally. We often hear the gee-whiz news, but often it is the grand stories that affect our daily lives very little if at all. However sometimes it is the under-reported news that changes more lives, the quiet, unnoticed changes in circumstances, thinking, and attitudes. In just 40 years it has become acceptable to consider not marrying and/or not having a family. There are also financial reasons playing into the decision. The research is interesting and compelling. The only thing I have against the book was that some sentences were so constructed that I had to read them several times to understand the meaning. But this could be my fault, not the writer's.

Economic class divisions matter in the formation of families. *Marriage Markets* details the ways in which patterns of marriage and birth are different for the highest and lowest economic classes. For the top twenty percent of couples, 80% are married; the percentages more than reverse for the bottom twenty percent - fewer than 20% are married. The mating preferences of men and women in the top and bottom echelons have changed in the past fifty years, with high earning men caring much more about the income potential of their wives, and women all along the economic

spectrum questioning whether marriage is a good deal for them, both in terms of money and control. The book is highly readable and sprinkled with stories that make the class issues come to life. It is an important book about marriage, family patterns, and class inequality, as well as the roles that laws play in the personal choices people make.

Unfortunately I didn't finish reading this book since I got bored.

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