

Will – you marry me

By Stuart White
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Marriage rates have been dropping dramatically in the UK in recent years. By 2006 they had fallen a massive 37% in only 25 years and are now at their lowest level since rate statistics were first recorded in 1861. More and more couples are eschewing getting married in favour of co-habiting, so much so that it's fair to say marriage is looked upon as an outmoded institution by a younger generation who just doesn't see the point.

However, you wouldn't say marriage *isn't* in vogue as royal wedding fever grips the British nation this month. Newspapers speculate daily on what Kate Middleton's dress will look like, where the couple will be honeymooning, the wedding breakfast menu, and what time they will appear on the Buckingham Palace balcony for the obligatory kiss. There are wedding tea towels, wedding mugs, wedding t-shirts, wedding toilet seat covers and all sorts of other tacky memorabilia besides, and you can't pick up a newspaper or tune into a current affairs broadcast without yet another chapter or verse on the whole affair. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg has even begun looking into changing the rules on royal inheritance, so that should the couple's first child be a girl, she will automatically be next in line to the throne which does beg the question, does he know something everyone else doesn't? For a nation of avowed singletons it's all very puzzling but who knows, perhaps it will push the institution of marriage back up the popularity stakes again, at least temporarily. After all, it already seems to have had an effect on William's cousin Zara Philips who has also announced that she will be making an honest man out of long-term co-habiting partner, rugby player Will Carling in 2011. Expect a plethora of Looking for Mr. Right and Planning the Perfect Wedding reality shows on UK television over the coming year, till the epidemic finally fades away.

But married or not, there are still double standards on long-term live-in or live-out relationships. As a guy, to be single at my age is really not a problem, quite the opposite in fact. It's often seen as a source of envy. Guys in the bar joke that I have no ball and chain, I am as free as the wind and the term eligible is frequently used. Men are generally subject to less scrutiny as they age and can be acceptably single at all ages. But for woman it's a very different tale.

When you are single and in your 40s you are not 'unattached' but 'unmarried' – and as a recent article in the New York Times points out - it's a cruel distinction and terrifying crossover. Unmarried, old maid, spinster, on the shelf...

I am not sure that older and single is as much a problem for women in Botswana, but being a strong, successful and powerful woman might be. This is not peculiar to Botswana. We have stereotypes about career woman so strongly entrenched that even I caught myself acting on one recently. Interviewing a high-powered senior business woman I asked her how she would feel reporting to another woman similar to herself. I immediately brought myself up by realising how sexist my comment was. I would never challenge a male candidate with a similar question... so what was my underlying bias and where was it coming from? Was it that two strong powerful women can't work together, or that somehow this woman should not have been powerful in the first place?

I have on occasion seen powerful women be discriminated against in interviews – for being too competent, too good and too assertive. In a male-dominated world this doesn't always cut the mustard especially if the value system, although hidden, supports a belief that she should rather be at home baking and not cooking up strategies in the boardroom. I have also on occasion counselled women to tone down their strength of character for some interviews where I think a strong personality, confidence and assertiveness may be too much for the panel. Nothing new there! Powerful women have been toning it down for centuries to appease the egos of men. A few years ago on the US TV programme 60 Minutes, some female Harvard Business School students said they had hidden the fact that they went to Harvard from guys they met because it was the kiss of death with men who were threatened by more successful women. "The H-bomb" they called it. Does the male "macho" gene prohibit us from admitting, that deep down, the male gender has an instinctive fear of its female counterpart? Does it secretly make us feel emasculated?

And what would be the response if I asked a male candidate how he would feel reporting to a high-powered female superior? Times change! Marriage lost its popularity as women became more assertive and free-spirited. They no longer wanted to change their names or give up their freedom, and many found they preferred to live together on equal terms, rather than promise to love, honour and obey. The workplace too has to move with the times and there should be no barriers based on prejudice and gender, only ambition and ability. So whatever your sex, if you're married to your job, just make sure it's an equal partnership. And if you want to tie the knot, make sure it's not so tight that it'll choke you.

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