

# 1 How Marriage Became An Outdated Concept – 2 Sorta

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5 Three years ago, Jamie Lincoln's boyfriend proposed after nearly a decade in a  
6 relationship and two children.

7 "He surprised me and proposed in front of our families," Lincoln says.

8 "It was exciting, and we thought maybe we'd have a wedding.

9 But then, once we realized how expensive that would be, we turned around and bought a  
10 home instead."

11 While Lincoln isn't totally opposed to marriage in the future, for her and her partner, it's  
12 just not a priority.

13 "Our children know that our family is exactly that, a family," she says.

14 "There isn't any paper that would change that."

15 Today, only half of American adults are married, compared to 72% in 1960.

16 The marriage decline has happened slowly but steadily, with marriage rates dropping 8  
17 points between 1990 and 2019.

18 Those who do get married are tying the knot later – the average age for first marriages is  
19 28 for women and 30 for men, compared to 20 for women and 23 for men in 1960.

20 And while same-sex weddings are on the rise, an increasing number of Americans are  
21 opting out of marriage altogether.

22 Cue the predictable headlines: millennials are killing marriage.

23 But in 2019, what does marriage mean, anyway?

24 "Marriage was once considered the most legitimate way to be in a relationship, to have  
25 sex, and to have a family," Kristin Celello, PhD, Associate Professor of History and Director  
of the American Studies Program at Queens College CUNY and author of Making  
Marriage Work: A History Of Marriage And Divorce in The Twentieth-Century United  
States, tells Refinery29.

26 And though there are communities where that still applies, in 2019, it's increasingly no  
27 longer the case.

28 It's become more common to live with a partner and have children without marriage;  
29 women have become increasingly financially independent; divorce has become easier  
and less stigmatized; and the price of weddings has skyrocketed while income inequality  
has increased.

30 In 2019, for many, marriage is not a priority – or even something they want at all.

31 "There's been a social change and a cultural change," Dr. Celello says.

32 "Marriage is still important, it hasn't gone away, but there are now other legitimate ways  
33 to make families and be in relationships."

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27 That social and cultural change is in large part thanks to the feminist movement.

28 In the 1960s and '70s, marriage laws still contained some vestiges of coverture – the idea that once a woman got married, her entire legal identity was subsumed by her husband's.

29 "[In the 1960s], there was still the assumption that when you got married, your husband was the primary breadwinner, and any money women made was an addition, so it was very difficult for women to be financially independent," Dr. Celello says.

30 "Marriage circumscribed what their role in society was.

31 The feminist movement recognized there were real problems in that regard and worked to try to fix that."

32 By 2000, women's rights had changed so much that Gloria Steinem felt safe to get married – and she did, tying the knot for the first and only time at age 66.

33 "By that point, the women's movement had worked for 30 years to equalize the marriage laws," she said on the podcast *Death, Sex and Money* in 2016.

34 "So no longer would I lose my name and my credit rating and my legal domicile and all my civil rights, as I would have had I got married when I was 'supposed' to."

35 For some, the history of marriage is enough of a reason to avoid it.

36 Earlier this year, the anonymous woman behind the financial blog *A Purple Life* wrote a post titled "Why I'm Never Getting Married" that spelled out her reasons for avoiding marriage despite being in a committed relationship for a decade.

37 One reason: "Marriage also comes with a lot of baggage and a sordid history that fills me with a lot of gross feelings."

38 Along with mentioning marriage's constraints on women's financial independence and the fact that same-sex marriage was not legal across the U.S. until 2015, the blogger points out that as a Black woman, she wouldn't have been legally allowed to marry her partner, a white man, a generation ago.

39 "We wouldn't have been allowed to get married in most states until my mom was eight years old," she tells *Refinery29*.

40 "This weird tradition of trying to keep people out of this institution makes me feel like it's not just about love, which is why I'm not jumping up and down to get married."

41 Others don't get married simply because they can't afford it – or, like Lincoln, they have other financial priorities.

42 As marriage has undergone a cultural shift, the cost of a wedding has skyrocketed, more than doubling since 1990 to an average cost of just under \$34,000 in 2018 – meaning that wealthier couples are more likely to tie the knot.

43 A 2017 study found that 26% of poor adults and 39% of working-class adults are married, compared to 56% of middle and upper-class adults.

44 The study led the *New York Times* to ask, "When Did Marriage Become A Mark Of Privilege?"

45 The racial marriage gap has also grown since the 1960s, with one 2015 study finding that Black women are marrying later and less often than white women, with Asian, Hispanic, and Native American women falling somewhere in between.

46 The authors found that there's no simple explanation for this, but socioeconomic differences, structural disadvantages, and the legacy of legal discrimination all play a role.

47 Although marriage has become separated from many of its former legal advantages, the  
institution retains some privileges that make a wedding more than a very expensive party.

48 For couples in which only one person is an American citizen, marriage makes it possible  
to legally live in the same country.

49 One Brazilian woman (who asked to remain anonymous) tells Refinery29 that she never  
imagined that she would get married until her work visa expired.

50 She was living with her boyfriend at the time, and he suggested they get married.

51 "I didn't feel good about depending on someone to have a visa," she says.

52 "Even though I love him and I trust him, I felt like I should get my visa on my own.

53 But it was way easier to get it that way, so we just decided to do it."

54 She was also able to join her partner's health insurance after marriage – a major perk.

55 However, if neither of those benefits applied, she says she likely would not have gotten  
married, although she would have remained in a committed, loving, cohabiting  
relationship.

56 "I don't think I would have felt the need to sign a paper," she says.

57 "I prefer to keep our relationship as something between the two of us."

58 Access to health insurance – and therefore, health care – is often tied to marriage.

59 Over a dozen states require that employer-sponsored health insurance plans include  
domestic partners as well as spouses, and some employer-sponsored health insurance  
plans include domestic partners even if they're not legally required to.

60 But in many cases, marriage is still the only way to get on a partner's health insurance.

61 One 2017 study found that 86.1% of employed married women ages 27-64 had access to  
employer-sponsored health insurance (either through their employer or their spouse's),  
compared to 72.2% of unmarried women in the same age range.

62 Of those married women, 16.8% were only able to access health insurance through their  
partner's employer.

63 For Shirley Tittermary, health care coverage was a major reason to get married.

64 She and her husband had been together for three years when they decided to have a  
child.

65 "At the time, I was working a job with no insurance, and my husband's job had really good  
insurance," she says.

66 "We found out we were pregnant, and we were like, 'okay, this is the next step,' in order to  
cover doctor's appointments and hospital bills and the delivery.

67 The word 'formality' sounds so clinical, but it was to make sure the baby was covered and  
healthy and got seen."

68 For same-sex couples, marriage can be a safety measure.

69 The fight for marriage equality is tied to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and '90s.

70 According to POZ, a magazine and online brand for those living with and affected by HIV/  
AIDS, "Hospitals would not allow gay men to visit their dying partners, who were also left  
out of important medical decisions and excluded from wills and other legal documents."

71 Additionally, same-sex couples who have a child together may need to complete a  
"second parent adoption" to establish parental rights for the parent who does not have a  
biological connection to the child – something that marriage can make easier.

72 "When I was in high school, I remember reading a news story about a lesbian couple where one of them got sick and then the other wasn't allowed to visit her in the hospital, apparently because they weren't married," writer and comedian Kristin Rowan tells Refinery29.

73 "So one of my reasons for caring about being married was to make sure my wife and I could see each other in an emergency."

74 There are other reasons, too.

75 She adds, "I do really like the 'wife' title.

76 That feels like the right thing to call her.

77 'Girlfriend' is what middle aged women call their female friends and 'partner' doesn't sound like family to me.

78 I think we would've gotten married anyway, even if we could be considered a family and co-parent without it."

79 So, what is the future of marriage in the United States?

80 Dr. Celello points out that many countries with low marriage rates also have universal healthcare, indicating that if marriage becomes increasingly separate from practical benefits, marriage rates will continue to decline.

81 However, she doubts that marriage will ever truly become obsolete in the U.S. Only 23% of Americans say legal rights and benefits were a motivation for marriage – for 88%, the reason is simply love.

82 Americans are still marrying at significantly higher rates than our nearest neighbors, Canada and Mexico, not to mention all of Western Europe.

83 And for Americans who are divorced or widowed, re-marriage is on the rise.

84 "The joke is that Americans are the most marrying people in the world," Dr. Celello says.

85 "We love marriage, we love weddings, and some of that is because of rights, but some say it's because we love love."

86 \*HOW MARRIAGE BECAME AN OUTDATED CONCEPT – SORTA ORIGINALLY  
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