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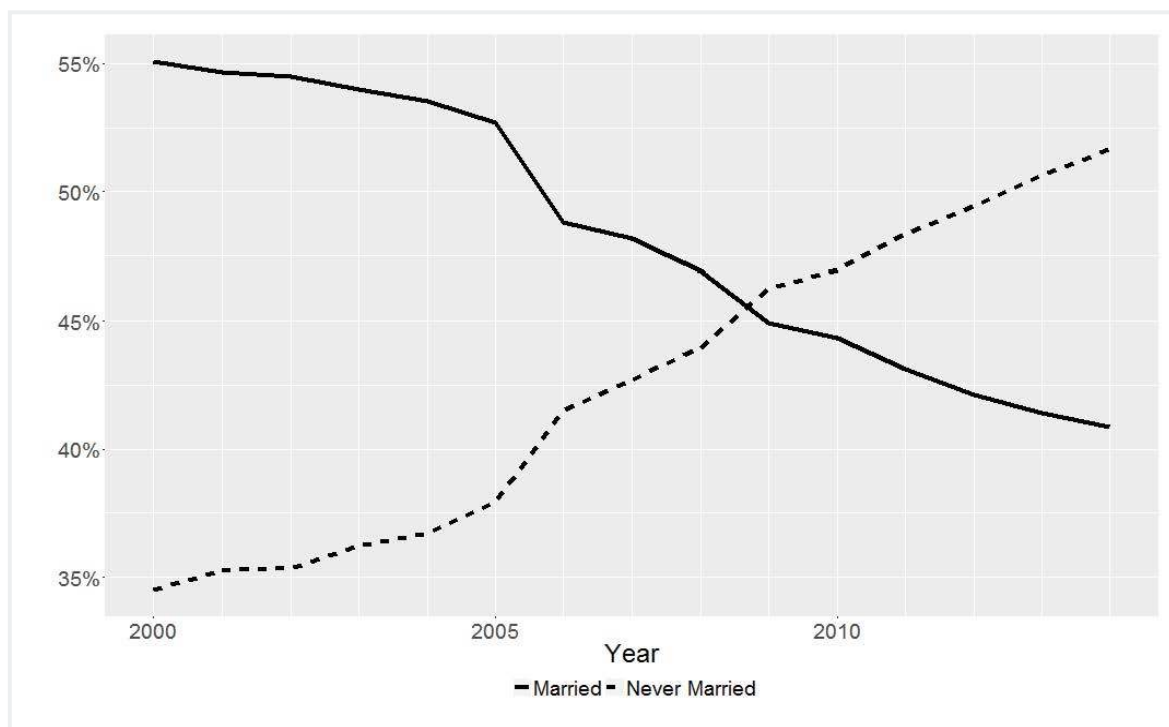
## THE DEATH OF EROS

by  
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Something strange is going on in America's bedrooms. In a recent issue of *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, researchers reported that on average, Americans have sex about nine fewer times a year than they did in the late 1990s. The trend is most pronounced among the young. Controlling for age and time period, people born in the 1930s had the most sex, whereas those born in the 1990s are reporting the least. Fifty years on from the advent of the sexual revolution, we are witnessing the demise of eros.

Despite all the talk of the "hookup culture," the vast majority of sex happens within long-term, well-defined relationships. Yet Americans are having more trouble forming these relationships than ever before. Want to understand the decline of sex? Look to the decline in marriage. As recently as 2000, a majority—55 percent—of Americans between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four were married, compared with only 34 percent who had never been married (see Figure 1). Since then, the two groups have swapped places. By 2014, 52 percent of Americans in that age group had never been married, while only 41 percent were married. Young Americans are now more apt to experience and express passion for some activity, cause, or topic than for another person.



*Figure 1.*

A decline in commitment isn't the only reason for the sexual recession. Today one in eight adult Americans is taking antidepressant medication, one of the common side effects of which is reduced libido. Social media use also seems to play a part. The ping of an incoming text message or new Facebook post delivers a bit of a dopamine hit—a smaller one than sex delivers, to be sure, but without all the difficulties of managing a relationship. In a study of married eighteen- to thirty-nine-year-old Americans, social media use predicted poorer marriage quality, lower marital happiness, and increased marital trouble—not exactly a recipe for an active love life.

If these were the only causes, the solution would be straightforward: a little more commitment, a little less screen time, a few more dates over dinner, more time with a therapist, and voilà. But if we follow the data, we will find that the problem goes much deeper, down to one of the foundational tenets of enlightened opinion: the idea that men and women must be equal in every domain. Social

science cannot tell us if this is true, but it can tell us what happens if we act as though it is. Today, the results are in. Equality between the sexes is leading to the demise of sex.

To understand why this is, we need to turn to Gary Becker, an economist who won a Nobel Prize for his study of the economic principles behind human interactions. He documented how the benefits of marriage receded as women's earning power rose relative to that of men. The years between 1973 and 1983 were decisive. In that decade, young women's wages climbed steadily while men's actually fell, never to recover. Women had less reason to marry, and they had less attractive mates should they nonetheless decide to. Though women had often entered marriages for financial reasons, many nonfinancial benefits followed, including the formation of a stable, intimate relationship with a spouse and the sense of purpose that comes with raising a family. These are things that no job—however lucrative—can deliver.

The introduction of the Pill has not changed what men and women value most, but it has transformed how they relate. The marriage market before the Pill was populated by roughly equal numbers of men and women, whose bargaining positions were comparable and predictable. Men valued attractiveness more than women, and women valued economic prospects more than men. Knowing that men wanted sex, but realizing that sex was risky without a corresponding commitment, women often demanded a ring—a clear sign of his sacrifice and commitment.

Not anymore. Artificial contraception has made it so that people seldom mention marriage in the negotiations over sex. Ideals of chastity that shored up these practical necessities have been replaced with paeans to free love and autonomy. As one twenty-nine-year-old woman demonstrated when my research team asked her whether men should have to “work” for sex: “Yes. Sometimes. Not always. I mean, I don't think it should necessarily be given out by women, but I do think it's okay if a woman does just give it out. Just not all the time.” The mating market no longer leads to marriage, which is still “expensive”—costly in terms of fidelity, time, and finances—while sex has become comparatively “cheap.”

For every one hundred women under forty who want to marry, there are only eighty-two men who want the same. Though the difference may sound small, it allows men to be more selective, fickle, and cautious. If it seems to you that young men are getting pickier about their prospective spouses, you're right. It's a result of the new power imbalance in the marriage market. In an era of accessible sex, the median age at marriage rises. It now stands at an all-time high of twenty-seven for women and twenty-nine for men, and is continuing to inch upward. In this environment, women increasingly have to choose between marrying Mr. Not Quite Right or no one at all.

For the typical American woman, the route to the altar is becoming littered with failed relationships and wasted years. Take Nina, a twenty-five-year-old woman my team interviewed in Denver. Petite, attractive, and faring well professionally in her position with an insurance company, Nina was nevertheless struggling when it came to relationships. She had a history of putting men she valued as confidantes in the "friend zone." With these men, a sexual relationship seemed too risky. If it went awry, she'd lose not only a potential mate but also a valued friend. On the other hand, if she didn't know the man well, she was willing to have casual sex while hoping for something more.

After several years, this approach had taken its toll: an abortion, depression, and a string of failed relationships. Nina now believed that a marriage ought to begin as a friendship, and for the first time in years, she had someone in particular—David—in mind. Though she had been raised by liberal parents to be open-minded about sex and wary of traditional household roles, she had come to see things differently. She was blunt: "I'm dead serious. . . . I would marry him, I would raise his kids, raise a family."

In her 2013 book *Hard to Get*, Leslie Bell, a sociologist and psychotherapist, tries to understand the lives of women like Nina. She laments that the skills they developed "in getting ahead educationally and professionally have not translated well into getting what they want and need in

sex and relationships.” When it comes to relationships, their “unprecedented sexual, educational, and professional freedoms” have led to “contradictory and paradoxical consequences.”

Nonsense, I say. The only contradictory and paradoxical thing here is the unrealistic expectation of so many that the financial independence of women would have wholly positive effects on the dance of the sexes. Women and men still want each other, but the old necessities that once brought them together have disappeared. Many are going it alone, apparently. Since 1992, there has been a 100 percent growth in the share of men and nearly 275 percent increase in the share of women who masturbate at least weekly.

Even those who marry are having trouble in the bedroom. According to the study, the frequency with which married couples had sex fell 19 percent between 2000 and 2014. An even steeper decline is evident in the just-released [2016 data](#). It’s not just married couples, either; cohabiting Americans are also reporting a drop in sexual activity. In their 1994 landmark sex study, University of Chicago sociologist Edward Laumann and his colleagues reported that 1.3 percent of married men and 2.6 percent of married women between the ages of eighteen and fifty-nine had not had sex within the past year. Twenty years later, 4.9 percent of married men and 6.5 percent of married women in the same age range report that it has been more than a year since they have had sex with their spouses. How do we account for this?

Here, too, equality is the enemy of eros. Differences between men’s work and women’s work—between breadwinner and homemaker, father and mother—are increasingly viewed as arbitrary and oppressive. And yet this loss of everyday oppositions between men and women has made Americans less, not more, attractive to each other. It was not supposed to be this way. Some sociologists have guessed—or perhaps hoped—that men who are willing to take on traditionally female household tasks might enjoy more active sexual lives with their wives—quid in the kitchen for quo in the bedroom. The authors of a recent analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households conjectured that women would use the promise of sex to convince men to do more domestic tasks. Despite the transactional way of framing the problem, the researchers

harbored a fond hope: that more equal relationships would also be more erotic ones. So, do men who do a greater share of the housework enjoy more sex? No. In fact, they're penalized in the bedroom. Husbands who do little or no housework had sex with their wives nearly two more times per month than did husbands who do all of it. Meanwhile, doing a greater share of traditionally male work around the house—mowing the lawn, fixing things—correlates with more sex. Men and women are not attracted to sameness, but to difference. We long for what is missing in ourselves. Needing each other makes us want each other.

Recognizing this doesn't mend everything between men and women, however. The cheap sex that was made possible by the Pill, further discounted by pornography, and made more efficient by Tinder has proven to be a bad bargain for women, leaving them (and, in turn, men) lonelier and less connected than they once were. I see it in the statistics and I hear it in their stories.

"Equality," Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz writes in her 2011 book, *Why Love Hurts*, "demands a redefinition of eroticism and romantic desire that has yet to be accomplished." Indeed. Egalitarianism promised the flourishing of eros, but by abolishing the difference between the sexes, it has made sexual acts self-referential—even those that are not performed alone. Men and women are not interchangeable, and our effort to make them so has only increased the loneliness and disaffection of American life. We cannot have both eros and strict equality between the sexes. Saving one requires sacrificing the other.

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