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An interview with Kay Hymowitz

By Andrea Mrozek, Manager of Research and Communications, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

*Kay S. Hymowitz, fellow at the Manhattan Institute, has written extensively on education, childhood and marriage. She is the author of the new book *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age*, where she examines the breakdown of marriage in the United States. Frequently published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *the National Post*, she recently spoke with Andrea Mrozek, Manager of Research and Communications, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, about her work.*

Institute of Marriage and Family Canada: How did you get to be interested in the issues you write about in *Marriage and Caste in America*?

Kay Hymowitz: There are two personal reasons I got interested, I think. I grew up in a family that was very focused on civil rights. My father and brother marched in Selma. [Editor's note: A civil rights march in Alabama in 1965.] My mother was extremely active in politics in Philadelphia, where I grew up. And so I've always been interested in racial progress, which, as you know, slowed down after the 1960s. It became clear to me that this was largely—not entirely—but largely a cultural problem and that it was intricately connected to the breakdown of the black family. So that is one reason.

The other reason was that I had been doing a lot of work on the changing nature of childhood in the United States when my children were young. A lot of the concerns I had about childhood, kids being pushed to grow up too fast, the sexualization of girlhood and childhood, the consumerization of childhood—a lot of that stuff that I wrote about in my first book called *Ready or Not* turned out to be not necessarily all that damaging based on how these kids are doing now. The truth is I don't think the data supports a declinist reading of our young people.

But there's an exception to that, I started to realize. And that was among low income people. They were not benefitting from the affluence that a lot of children were benefitting from. That also got me interested in this issues that I explore in *Marriage and Caste in America*.

IMFC: And that's why we're asking you to speak at our conference, for that social justice angle. Many would not view marriage or family stability as a poverty fighter. So what might you tell Canadians—why does the state of our families matter?

KH: What's becoming clear from several decades of social science research is that children seem to do better on a wide variety of outcomes when they grow up with their married two parents. That's a fact. Social science reveals that fact.

Now there are people who say that's correlation, not causation. And by the way, there is no way to finally resolve that question. You can't take the same kid and raise him twice. ...But the research has become quite sophisticated. Sociologists and economists have been able to control for enough variables that almost all social scientists will tell you there is a difference at this point. That's what the social science says.

What I notice is that marriage does a lot more than provide two incomes—as it so often does these days. That it helps kids avoid poverty and all kinds of needs isn't the whole story. And in fact there is enough research showing that if you compare low income kids with lone parents to low income kids with married parents—the kids with married parents are going to do better. All of those variables help us understand that there's something about marriage that changes outcomes for children.

IMFC: What is the situation for the American family today?

KH: The breakdown of the family that people usually refer to—50 per cent divorce rates and about 38 per cent of children being born to single mothers—does not affect Americans uniformly. It is low income couples who are far more likely to divorce and low income women who are far more likely to have children outside of marriage. In fact, college-educated middle class women are doing quite well on the family front. Their divorce rates started to go down in 1980 and they never went in for the Murphy Brown thing. In fact, middle class women and men want to get married before they have their children—and they are.

IMFC: We hear that where middle or higher income people engage in single parenting, income acts as a buffer against some of the detrimental elements of growing up low income and with a single parent. Does that ring true to you?

KH: Like I said, if you control for all kinds of variables, including income, children growing up with their married parents do better. Period. That is true also of women with money.

There is a new demographic, those who call themselves "choice mothers". These are college-educated women. Most had hoped to marry and weren't able to for various reasons and then have children on their own. And we don't have a way of looking at them separately. What we do know is that we can control for income and still find that children do better with married parents.

IMFC: Can you talk about the single most important finding from your book *Marriage and Caste in America*?

KH: I think it is that the breakdown of marriage has far more implications for inequality and poverty than we realize.

IMFC: For Canadians—what is the biggest takeaway—a word of advice you can give?

KH: The United States has an unusual and different situation because of our experience with slavery and the situation of African Americans. That has made the family breakdown a much trickier problem in some ways because it so disproportionately affects African Americans. Seventy per cent of all black children are born to single mothers.

Those mothers will not marry their children's fathers and those fathers will in many cases disappear from their children's lives.

That's a special, unique situation that doesn't apply to Canada.

Beyond that, I can still say that given how human capital—education in particular—matters to the future of children in advanced societies, it is impossible for me to imagine that marital status wouldn't matter for children in Canada. So much energy has to go into preparing children for this very complicated knowledge economy. And married couples are just in a far better position to focus their attentions on a child's development. I would be very surprised if that is any different in Canada.

One other thing I want to add is that a lot of Europeans assume that cohabitation and marriage are equally good.

IMFC: That's true in Canada.

KH: That's what I thought. Certainly in the United States, cohabiting couples are far less likely to remain together. We have a very serious divorce problem, but cohabiting is even worse. It makes sense—in marriage you are making a deliberate, mindful decision. Admittedly too many people are not mindful enough. Cohabitation often is a matter of falling into an arrangement and not seeing any reason to end it but not really making a vow to continue. We know there is a connection between stability and children's well being, which explains why cohabitation is not as beneficial an arrangement.

IMFC: Many Canadians look upon marriage as either being a religious phenomenon or for those who are religious. What's your take on that?

KH: There are a lot of people who argue that the reason Americans still marry at such high rates—and we do—projections are that something like 85 per cent of women and 80 per cent of men will marry—is because we are a religious country. I'm less impressed with that argument. It's possible. But it seems to me we exaggerate our religiousity. There are an awful lot of people out there who call themselves "religious" but never go to church. So I'm skeptical about that reasoning.

I think there is something about the wildness and rootlessness of American life that makes marriage a more desirable institution. It makes it seem more appealing. Because we move around more, our lives are more unpredictable, we don't have organic, intact communities, the social safety net is not as good—I think that promotes a certain expectation about families.

And I'm not just talking economically. I'm also talking about the emotional need for stability. People do look to marriage for something that the culture as a whole can't offer. So in a way that may be partly why our divorce rate is so high. We may expect more from marriage than it can provide.