

Thriving in the sexual economy

By Andrea Mrozek, Published June 3, 2011

Statistics show roughly 90 per cent of young people say they'd like to marry, but that fewer Canadians actually are. The fastest growing relationship form in Canada is cohabitation.

So what gives? One theory suggests the price for sex may dictate how marital aspirations play out -call it sexual economics, where there's a supply, demand and a price for sex.

By price we mean what someone is willing to exchange for sex. The traditional view is that men, on average, desire sex more than women and are less discriminating about how they fulfil their "demand" for it. Women, on average, have sex for different reasons than men, "supplying" it in exchange for, among other things, commitment, communication and closeness.

In that case, when the cost of sex is very low, as it is today, the derived demand in the marriage market is not going to be very high. Marriage is the ultimate commitment -the highest price that could possibly be paid for sex, which women don't demand today.

This theory gets into some politically incorrect ideas about men and women. But as Mark Regnerus, sociologist at the University of Texas and author of *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think About Marrying* says, this is not about how life ought to be, but rather, about how it is.

"Women can have sex when they wish to; men can only hope for it," writes Regnerus in his book. In short, women are the gatekeepers of sexual activity and should, theoretically, be able to demand a high price for it -be it marriage, long-term commitment, or something else.

Typically, where there is high demand and controlled supply, the price will be high. So why is the price of sex so low, as it undoubtedly is? When we look around, we see sexual relationships all around us that don't end in marriage. They just end, says Regnerus.

This is where another economic principle comes in -the idea of a market price. Take real estate. You can certainly try to sell your semidetached house on the outskirts of Orléans for a million dollars. But because the going rate is about a quarter of that, it's unlikely someone will actually pay.

So why do women hold so much power and apparently not use it? Research shows women generally believe others are having sex earlier than they themselves are willing to. For example, the young women Regnerus surveyed in his book expected sex for themselves after 13 weeks in a relationship, but believed other women expected it in only four. The waiting women feel like they can't compete, so they stop waiting.

For the price of sex to rise, women would have to band together in a cartel of sorts and support one another in waiting longer. This might bring about desired outcomes for many women, like commitment, or marriage or simply a return to courtship, a now anachronistic idea that a man might woo a woman over an extended period of time to prove himself. A Waiting Women's Cartel might bring back the poetry and roses, so to speak.

The current sex economy does not harm women who are happy to have a liberal sex life. It harms women who have higher standards to start with, because suddenly they are competing in a marketplace where the price of sex is decidedly lower than they would ever pay, and men are aware of this.

Many will balk at the basic idea that sex should command a higher price. Others will balk at the idea that men and women have different demands in having sex. Still more will consider this economic assessment of relationships unromantic, even offensive. But the basic message is actually empowering to young women today, who feel pressure to bow to a quick and easy sexual culture, one that tells them that everyone is doing it, and they should too.

When more women place a higher price on sex, men will have to pay it and the result will be less short-term relationships, fewer relationship breakdowns and more marriages. And that's the relationship form so many of us claim to want.

Andrea Mrozek is the manager of research at the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (imfcanada.org).

*2001 – 130 rue Albert Street, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1P 5G4
T 613.565.3832 f/t 613.565.3803 1.866.373.4632
www.imfcanada.org*