

Focus | IN DEPTH



CHAS METIVIER, THE REGISTER

WAIT AWHILE: Unmarried women Christie Brockhage, left, and Rane A. Spina attend an Irvine happy hour. Spina, who wrote "I Am Before 'I Do'," advises women to give themselves time to "discover who you are, who you want to become, how you want to live."

PAIRINGS OFF

With the majority of women living without spouses, marriage is losing its force as a societal institution, experts say.

By **SAM ROBERTS**
THE NEW YORK TIMES

More American women 15 and older are living without a husband than with one for probably the first time in U.S. history, according to a New York Times analysis of census results.

In 2005, 51 percent of women said they were living without a spouse, up from 35 percent in 1950 and 49 percent in 2000.

Coupled with the fact that in 2005 married couples became a minority of all American households for the first time, the trend could shape social and workplace policies, including the ways government and employers distribute benefits.

Several factors drive the statistical shift.

At one end of the age spectrum, women are marrying later or living

in a relatively small number of cases, the living arrangement is temporary, because the husbands are working out of town, are in the military or are institutionalized. While most women eventually marry, the larger trend is unmistakable.

"This is yet another of the inexorable signs that there is no going back to a world where we can assume that marriage is the main institution that organizes people's lives," said professor Stephanie Coontz, director of public education for the Council on Contemporary Families, a nonprofit research group. "Most of these women will marry or have married. But on average, Americans now spend half their adult lives outside marriage."

Coontz said this was probably unprecedented, with the possible exceptions of major wartime mobilizations and times when black couples were separated during slavery.

percent from 42 percent. Among 25- to 34-year-olds, the proportion dropped to 58 percent from 82 percent.

Irvine author and relationship researcher Rane A. Spina, 41, is single and advocates marrying later. In her book "I Am Before 'I Do,'" self-published in June, she encourages young women to remain single during their 20s, taking time to discover themselves and learn to stand on their own feet.

Spina speaks to women of all ages and says she hears from a lot of younger ones who plan to wait until their 30s to marry. But she also meets those who are upset if they aren't engaged by the time they leave college.

"Seeing women taking responsibility for their own lives is a wonderful thing," she says. "But it doesn't mean they don't want to get married and have families and be in a loving relationship."

She does not believe couples

tern with different partners.

"I don't like society saying it's OK to live with multiple partners and have children with multiple partners," Spina says. "The children have no foundation."

WIDOWS LIVE LONGER, DELAY REMARRIAGE

Among the older population, women do not remarry as quickly as men after divorce or death of a spouse. And since women tend to live longer as widows, the population of older single women is growing.

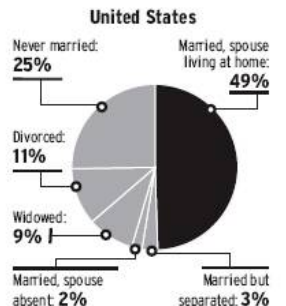
Nell Kenyon, 74, a widow from Orange, says she wouldn't mind having a gentleman as an escort and friend. She would tell him, to quote Katharine Hepburn, "Live close and visit often."

But marry again? No thanks. One experience as caretaker to an ailing husband was enough, she says.

Carolyn Burris 69 of Laguna

Women alone

Fifty-one percent of women in the U.S. and Orange County do not live with a spouse. The percentage was greater than 50 percent for the first time, according to a 2005 survey.



Orange County

women are marrying later or living with unmarried partners more often and for longer periods. At the other end, women are living longer as widows. And after a divorce they are less likely than men to remarry quickly, sometimes delighting in newfound freedom.

In addition, marriage rates among black women remain low. About 30 percent of black women live with a spouse, according to the Census Bureau, compared with about 49 percent of Hispanic women, 55 percent of non-Hispanic white women and more than 60 percent of Asian women.

MORE CHOICES FOR YOUNGER WOMEN

William H. Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution, a research group in Washington, describes the shift as "a clear tipping point, reflecting the culmination of post-1960 trends associated with greater independence and more flexible lifestyles for women."

The proportion of married people, especially among younger age groups, has been declining for decades. Between 1950 and 2000, the percentage of women age 15 to 24 who were married plummeted to 16

percent. Frey says that couples should live together as an alternative to marriage - something she regrets doing in her 20s.

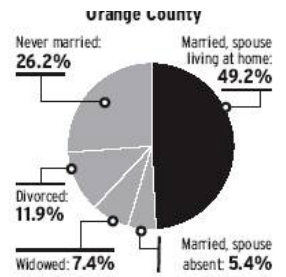
"My life was his life," she says of the man she lived with for seven years. "Then I spent my 30s doing what I should have done in my 20s. Take time to travel and grow in your career so you can say, 'I know who I am; I know what I want.' Then you can find the man who complements you."

She worries about the growing trend of cohabitation, what she calls "playing marriage," particularly when women repeat the pat-

tern. Carolyn Harris, 62, of Laguna Beach was divorced in 1979 and never remarried. "I was always caught in a shift - getting my career going because I hadn't done that when I was married. And then taking care of my mother and father."

Now she's ready for a companion, but not marriage. "I'm self-sufficient on purpose," she says. "I don't want to be dependent on anyone."

Register staff writer Theresa Walker and Jane Glenn Haas contributed to this report.



Source: Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 2005