

The Weakening of The Bahamian Family Unit

Is it really true that the traditional family unit is fading away? Sadly, but it's true. In fairness let me give some definitions and clarifications to understand better. It is good to understand that forty years ago and more the traditional family consisted of married parents with children. In countries like the Bahamas the family unit may have between four and ten children.

Today, the number of family units with a married mom and dad have decreased. Also, the number of children per family unit have also decreased to one or two per unit. That's not really bad. But follow along. Interestingly, the 2000 census for The Bahamas revealed these statistics: There were 87,742 Households in the Bahamas. There were 37,321 Bahamian homes where married parents live together. That is 42.5% of homes. There were 50,140 Bahamian homes where no married parents live together. That was 57.5% of homes. Since 2000 these statistics show that single parent homes in our country outnumbered homes where there were married parents. I am sharing these statistics to remove the false notion that the traditional family unit was the strongest and most prevalent more than 40 years ago. Sadly, it wasn't.

Here is another interesting fact the 2000 Census revealed. The more children in a home the lower the risk of divorce. The 2000 Census revealed that when there were one and three children, the number of divorces were the highest. When there were 4 to 10 children, the number of divorces were the lowest. Keep in mind that couples are having less children in 2025. Hence, the increase in divorce.

The Bahamas National Statistical Institute indicates that number of legally married people dropped by 2.5 percent in 2022 compared to 2010. Keep in mind that homes with legally married people only made up 42% of homes just two decades ago. Also when you take a closer look at the family structure fifty years ago it constituted a married mom and dad with children. Although promiscuity existed, many believed that the traditional family unit was stronger then compared to today's world.

Let's allow history to speak to us. In the book "Statistical Abstract 1968 to 1988 Special 20th Anniversary Edition for the Commonwealth of The Bahamas" it states the following: "During the period under review (1968 to 1987), there has been a steady decline in the marriage rate from 8.9 per thousand mean population in 1969 to 7.9 in 1987. . . The decrease in the rate of marriages has been accompanied by an increase in the rate of divorce. The earliest divorce statistics refer to 1975. In 1983 when the Divorce Act was amended to widen the grounds for divorce, the number of divorces more than doubled."

In spite of the historical facts about marriage and the family, many of us still believe that the family unit was more intact fifty years ago and simpler—mom, dad, and children. Today, the family is so convoluted it seem better to describe it as a cluster of living mates or household partners with dependents. Here is one type of this cluster of living mates: An unmarried man and women who both have children for several other partners (from one to five children or more)

they have never been married to. One or both of them might be divorced and have one or more children with the divorced partners. It is not unusual for this cluster of living mates to have between four to twelve children between themselves. Financially, it is extremely difficult to support all the children. Hence the extended family involving grandmother, grandfather, aunts or uncles, cousins, and sometime friends, who create more confusion about lifestyle rules which lead to the clusters becoming highly dysfunctional. Hence, a weaker family unit.

Another type of family unit on the rise is the single mother who has two to six children for different men who are not supporting the children financially. She struggles to make ends meet with lower paying jobs. Unable to pay rent, she is forced to live with a relative or a man who claims that he will support her. But it is not long before he dumps her.

Let us look closer at the number of marriages each year in our country. These figures are based on my analysis from Bahamas National Statistical Institute and can be found on my website www.soencouragement.org. You can draw your own conclusion. In 2000 there were 2,366 Bahamian marriage and 3,752 tourism marriages. This is a total of 6,118 during that year. In 2010 there were 1,939 Bahamian marriages and 1,989 tourism marriages. The total number marriages in 2010 was 3,928. The lowest number of marriages in one year was in 2020 with 1,301 marriages. This includes local and tourism marriages. Perhaps the decrease was due to the pandemic. In 2023 there was a total of 2,332 marriage in The Bahamas.

Note that around the world the number of marriages is decreasing and the number of children per family unit is decreasing. Wikipedia give the following for the changes. “1) A broader societal move towards modernity and technological advancements has changed perceptions and functions of the family. 2) Increased opportunities and autonomy for women have influenced marriage and family dynamics. 3) People are having children later in life, and family sizes are shrinking globally. 4) The Industrial Revolution and market economy shifted families from self-sufficient units to being more dependent on the market, making them more vulnerable to economic pressures.”

Although these are true, it is my view that we need to find ways to teach and promote the advantages of having simple, structural family units with little or no dysfunction. I have no concern about the size of the family or whether or not adults get married. I am more concerned about people becoming self-actualized, healthy, productive and wise decision-making individuals.

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