

Written evidence from Coalition for Marriage [HAB0289]

The Coalition for Marriage represents hundreds of thousands of UK supporters who desire to see marriage correctly understood as the 'gold standard' in our society. Legislative moves over recent decades have seen the public perception of marriage diminished from its rightful place as the bedrock of family life. This has enormous implications for society: from the economy to crime, addiction and health.

Studies continue to show married couples to have healthier lifestyles and better health outcomes. Smoking and recreational drug use is much lower among married women than among cohabiters. Married men benefit from marriage too, with better cardiovascular health, better cancer survival rates, a lower risk of depression and greater satisfaction in retirement.¹

The majority of these benefits stem from the extraordinary stability that marriage promotes. As a result, marriage has been given priority in British law, to encourage its uptake and mitigate against the damages of family breakdown. Seeking in any way to create a similarly enhanced legal status for couples who live together without making a public commitment undermines family life and neglects to recognise the many ways marriage enriches the lives of both adults and children.

Many studies have shown the benefits of marriage over cohabitation. Figures show, for example, that by the time they turn five, 53% of children of cohabiting parents will have experienced their parents' separation. This is a devastatingly high number, which reduces to 15% for five-year-olds with married parents.² The same study states that the cost to the public purse of family breakdown is over £50bn annually.³ Since enhancing the legal status of cohabitation would undoubtedly discourage yet more couples from marrying, a rise in the economic cost would be an inevitable consequence.

The legal protections of marriage are readily obtained by couples – through marriage. Civil partnerships are also available. It is nonsensical and entirely unnecessary to create a third category of relationship with similar status. The major public benefits of marriage should not be sacrificed to provide very limited protections which are already available to all – whether through marriage, legal agreements or writing a will. If there is any public misunderstanding that these protections automatically apply to cohabiters, awareness raising is the answer, not fundamental legal change. The Government should make the public aware of the risks of cohabiting, rather than profoundly undermining marriage.

However, a more fundamental question should be asked: why does marriage law contain certain rights and protections? The answer is simple – marriage is a public commitment for life, and this 'contract' has corresponding conditions. When a couple promises to be united 'until death us do part', it sets in place a permanent bond. Property is shared evenly between both parties, inherited by one when the other dies, and split evenly if the couple splits. These commitments are not made by cohabiting couples and so it is entirely illogical to transfer these terms of marriage to them. The law has always been consistent that marriage requires consent. Extending the financial implications of marriage to those who have freely chosen not to marry is akin to forcing it upon them – yet they would not have the public commitment so integral to making marriage work.

¹ *Family Structure Still Matters*, The Centre for Social Justice, August 2020, pages 16-17

² *Ibid*, page 3

³ *Ibid*, page 9

Marriage makes the key distinctions between family and non-family clear in law. Cohabitation, in comparison, blurs the lines. It is not clear how plans to increase the rights of cohabitantes would avoid giving the same rights to housemates, for example. And with such a vast array of living arrangements and relationship types in Britain today, it is exceedingly unlikely that any definition could sufficiently distinguish between lodgers and partners.

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