



Marriage Foundation

Press Release from Marriage Foundation

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Government told to fix “calamitous” marriage gap between rich and poor

- **Newborn children in the poorest households, 9 times less likely to have a dad living there**
- **Politicians criticised for “deafening silence” on marriage**
- **Chancellor urged to scrap “paltry” married couples’ allowance**

The Government is being urged to fix a "calamitous" marriage gap between rich and poor couples that has reached a staggering 51 per cent if it wants to reduce the country's ballooning welfare budget in a major new report.

The report from the Marriage Foundation, the UK's leading pro-marriage think tank, blames successive Governments for not supporting young couples who want to marry and failing to address the “disastrous” couple penalty in the welfare system that penalises poor couples who wed.

“What has been almost completely overlooked and ignored in discussion of the trend away from marriage – a 78 per cent drop among men and 73 per cent drop among women in marriage rates since 1972 – is the presence of a marriage gap between rich and poor. Quite simply, marriage is still the norm among the richest families but is increasingly the exception among the poorest families,” it says.

“In 2015, we documented the marriage gap for the first time, identifying that among parents with children under five, 87 per cent of those in the highest income quintile were married compared to 24 per cent of those in the lowest income quintile.”

Using data from Office for National Statistics the report shows how marriage gap has widened over the last decade, in part due to the impact of COVID restrictions.

“Among newborns in 2022, 71 per cent of parents in high-earning families were married compared to 35 per cent in low-earning families, leaving a marriage gap of 36 per cent. Among parents ‘not classified’, marriage rates were just 20 per cent, widening the marriage gap with the very poorest to 51 per cent.

“Since marriage provides such a strong buffer against poverty, politicians who embrace marriage in private should be enthusiastic promoters of marriage in public. Yet we cannot identify even one speech about marriage from any major politician in any party for more than a decade.

“Much worse, the ‘couple penalty’ in the welfare system remains the biggest barrier to marriage among the poorest, a social justice problem whose existence is barely acknowledged by politicians. It could be addressed by refocusing the existing marriage allowance on low-income married mothers with children under three. We urge the Chancellor to rectify this urgently.”

Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation's Research Director commented: "Over the last decade the marriage gap has worsened considerably. While a clear majority of rich couples continue marry, enjoying all the benefits it brings, among the poorest couples just one in five will marry. This is calamitous for their children and more broadly for society which must pick up the pieces of family breakdown.

“Marriage acts as a buffer to poverty, while children who grow up with both parents in the household, do better at school and generally have better mental health. Yet no senior politician has made a major speech about marriage since 2014 and the only acknowledgement of the institution in the tax and benefits system is a paltry £250 allowance that doesn’t even come close to closing the couple penalty that sees those on the lowest incomes or benefits lose significant amounts of money when they live together. Our research says that the couple penalty remains the biggest barrier to those in the bottom socio-economic groups from tying the knot.”

The report sets out three immediate policy solutions to help close the marriage gap. The first would see the Chancellor use the forthcoming Spring Statement to scrap the current “paltry” married couples’ allowance of £250 and instead target this money at the poorest married couples with newborn children.

“We recommend scrapping the poorly targeted marriage allowances, which costs the Treasury £700 million per year, and front-loading the money as a taxable Child Benefit worth £3,000 per year to married mothers with a first child under three. This would send an important policy signal about the value of marriage, offset a large part of the ‘couple penalty’ which is the single biggest barrier to marriage and stability among the poorest couples, and potentially increase births to married couples by 47 per cent,” it says.

“Second, we recommend a review of government’s neutral fiscal policy on marriage and the ‘Living together as a married couple’ rule. Tax and benefits policy should clearly work in favour of encouraging couples to marry. Family breakdown is significantly more common among couples who do not marry and is linked to poorer child outcomes, such as poverty and teenage mental health.”

Finally, the report urges senior politicians, the majority of whom are married, to stop being afraid and to start talking about marriage saying, “...the deafening silence on marriage is

strange given how very important marriage is for so many politicians in their own private lives. The last major public speeches by top politicians, so far as we know, were by then Work and Pensions Minister Iain Duncan-Smith at our own Marriage Foundation conference in January 2014 and by then Prime Minister David Cameron in August 2014 ahead of the introduction of a minor tax allowance for some married couples”.

Harry Benson continued: “There are some people, who prophesied that marriage as an institution is finished, that it doesn't matter and wrongly claim that this is evidenced by the UK's declining marriage rate - but that is not true and is not supported by the data. The real scandal here is that support for marriage remains consistent among all income groups and the vast majority (nearly nine in 10) of young people aspire to marry, but just one in five of the very poorest couples will ever tie the knot. This has got to change; it's a question of social justice and why we urge the Chancellor to take immediate and meaningful action to help mitigate the pernicious effects of the couple penalty so that more couples can enjoy the benefits of marriage.”

Sir Paul Coleridge, founder of the Marriage Foundation commented: “INSERT QUOTE”.

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Notes to editors

About Marriage Foundation

Marriage Foundation was founded in 2012 by Sir Paul Coleridge, a High Court judge who was moved by his personal experience in 40 years as a barrister and judge specialising in family law. The think tank seeks to improve public understanding of marriage and to reduce the numbers of people drawn into the family justice system – some 500,000 children and adults each year. It has established itself as a leading voice on marriage issues in the UK.

Sir Paul Coleridge, Harry Benson and Michaela Hyde from the Marriage Foundation are available for comment and for interviews linked to these new findings.

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