

A Book Review of *Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood without Marriage*

Amanda Ekle

Department of Social Work, The University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD 57069, USA

Received
April 21, 2015

Accepted
May 24, 2015

Published
June 1, 2015

Citation: Ekle, Amanda. (2015). A book review of *Generation unbound: Drifting into sex and parenthood without marriage*. *The Advanced Generalist: Social Work Research Journal*, 1 (3/4), p 64-69.

Abstract

The book, *Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood without Marriage*, Sawhill advocates for a new line of thought when viewing the ways to reduce poverty caused by single motherhood. Essentially, she advocates for more reliable and accessible forms of birth control. Her prescription for this reduction is for the Affordable Care Act to include more reliable and long term forms of birth control, for Medicaid coverage for family planning services, for the use of social media to educate younger generations. Her goal is to change social norms towards sexual relationships, and to increase public discussion of the important role that birth control can play in reducing child poverty and improve social mobility. Sawhill wants to take the pregnancy out of sex by blending personal responsibility with increased access to and information about birth control.

Keywords: Social justice, poverty, book review

Copyright Amanda Ekle. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 3.0 (CC-BY-NC-ND) which permits you to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. You must give appropriate credit.

Isabel Sawhill is the founder of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy as well as the co-director of the Center on Children and Families. She is a senior fellow in Economic Studies at the Brookings Institution and has expertise in multiple areas including poverty, children, social welfare, the federal budget, and inequality among various socioeconomic classes. In her book, *Generation Unbound: Drifting into Sex and Parenthood without Marriage*, Sawhill advocates for a new line of thought when viewing the ways to reduce poverty caused by single motherhood. Essentially, she advocates for more reliable and accessible forms of birth control. Her prescription for this reduction is for the Affordable Care Act to include more reliable and long term forms of birth control, for Medicaid coverage for family planning services, for the use of social media to educate younger generations. Her goal is to change social norms towards sexual relationships, and to increase public discussion of the important role that birth control can play in reducing child poverty and improve social mobility. Sawhill wants to take the pregnancy out of sex by blending personal responsibility with increased access to and information about birth control.

The first section of the book emphasizes that children in single parent families are far more likely to be impoverished and not do as well as children in married families. Sawhill attributes the increase in the number of single parent families to the increase in choices and opportunities younger generations have been given regarding sexual behavior, education, gender roles, and career decisions to be made over the last few decades. These choices and opportunities are not always positive due to the fact that they can create challenges when deciding what course an individual chooses for his or her life. For many it leads to becoming a single parent living in poverty. Sawhill's research has shown that the reduction of unplanned pregnancies can significantly reduce the impact of poverty. Combining social policies and personal responsibility

may encourage the younger generations to plan for a pregnancy. Sawhill wants to create a new social norm of having to consciously make the choice to become pregnant, ideally, only after one is able to maintain a committed relationship with a partner. This insight can assist generalist and advanced generalist social workers and educators in developing comprehensive care plans regarding childbearing for clients.

The second section of this book examines how younger generations emphasize the importance of children over marriage. This trend leads to a decline in marriage and an increase of liberal views on premarital sex. Sawhill believes this trend is a result of the change in gender role attitudes. The status of women working outside of the home has changed, they are both educated and employed. As the role of women has changed, so to have family types. Many different types of families are already in existence. This type of diversity in family is good because those that marry later in life are likely to have a more stable marriage. The downside is that the influx of choices and opportunities women have from their changing roles may lead to behavior that ends in an unwanted pregnancy and, for the less privileged, economic strain. Ironically, expanded opportunities and choices lead to a reluctance to commit to marriage and an increased risk of single motherhood.

The third section of the book provides empirical evidence that marriage is the best institution for raising children. Not only are two incomes better suited for raising a child, but individuals who are married report greater happiness and personal responsibility. Single parent families when poor face difficulty in creating similar atmospheres for children because they face an excruciating amount stress. Sawhill stresses that not all single parent families face such poverty, but a staggering proportion of them do. Even with outside assistance, many in poverty cannot provide for their family. The cost of outside services to taxpayers is not acceptable to

many, and Sawhill believes that personal responsibility along with government programs can help reduce the class divide between the wealthy and impoverished.

The fourth section of the book focuses on arguments that children's early environments, such as income, family structure, and education, are the defining factors in the social divide. Sawhill attributes the family structure as the dividing line between classes. At one end are well educated couples having children within marriage. At the other end is the less educated having children as single parents. She also discusses the lack of high income jobs for men and the multiple children from different fathers as a source of instability for family structures contributing to the social divide. The financial insecurity and lack of a nuclear family creates a huge amount of stress for children. She believes that society can remedy this by individuals completing school, entering the work force with a degree, marrying after several years, and then having children at a time in life when you are able to provide fully for them. Even though each family is different, the economics of family life affect a child's life in similar ways.

The fifth section concludes that both conservative and liberal views can be utilized to reduce poverty. While conservatives insist on limited government spending, increased personal responsibility for parents, and marriage friendly social policies, liberals advocate for more spending on federal and state assistance programs and a community approach to childrearing. Sawhill agrees with both sides and wants a parent friendly work and social policy environment to be combined with government assistance to change social norms. Having children by design will improve child outcomes, household incomes, and social mobility.

The last two sections inform the reader on how Sawhill recommends changing the social norms. She would like private and public policy makers to change the message about contraception in order to make it more freely available and reliable, to enhance commitment

between partners to center around the wellbeing of a child while raising them, and to change the social norm to utilizing long-acting contraceptives such as an intrauterine device (IUD) due to their increased effectiveness. Various forms of social media could be used by policy makers to educate younger generations on the proper use of birth control, especially as a planned preventative. Simultaneously, social media should educate them on the limits of self-control. It is common that during sex many individuals do not behave in a manner that eliminates the risk of an unplanned pregnancy.

Sawhill's idea that a new social norm of waiting to have children when in a committed and stable relationship is a striking notion. Even though her research includes primarily relationships of heterosexual social classes throughout the country, there is a need for research to be conducted on homosexual couples in order to be inclusive of more family structures. Sawhill openly states this during her book and reiterates that since homosexual couples raising children is a relatively new trend, research is needed in order to be more comprehensive.

Many current policies, whether conservative or liberal in nature, could be modified to better accommodate the needs of poor families, and advanced generalist social workers should lead the way forward. Sawhill depicts a unique way to combine political ideologies to modify policies that may reduce poverty. As a BSSW student at the University of South Dakota, I believe that many generalist social workers and social work educators spend the majority of their career working with individuals facing situations as described in this book. Its message could be utilized to create service plans tailored to individual needs and beliefs when planning a family or examining one's own behavior regarding sexual relationships.

References

Sawhill, I. (2014). *Generation unbound: Drifting into sex and parenthood without marriage*. Washington, D.C: The Brookings Institute

About the Author

I am very passionate about Social Work, and I especially enjoy working in the mental health field. I currently attend the University of South Dakota and am earning an undergraduate degree in Social Work. I plan on earning a graduate degree in Social Work as well. I have a husband of almost 9 years, 3 step children, and a new puppy. I enjoy spending my free time with my family and vacationing in Huntington Beach, CA to surf and relax on the beach.