

Research: Even today, couples put more emphasis on husband's career

December 1 2007

Sociological research has shown that when couples move, the husband's career gets a boost, while the wife's career suffers. A University of Iowa professor investigated the reason behind the phenomenon and discovered that couples tend to put more emphasis on the man's career, even if the wife works full-time and is college-educated.

"This is bad news for people who are interested in men and women having equal success in the labor force," said Mary Noonan, associate professor of sociology in the UI College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. "Even for highly educated married women with prestigious occupations, employment still suffers when they move, while the husbands' careers benefit. These women likely share the role of breadwinner, earning a significant part of the family income, but their career is still seen as secondary within the dynamic of the couple."

Kimberlee Shauman, associate professor of sociology at the University of California at Davis, and Noonan reported the findings on their study on family migration in a recent issue of the journal *Social Forces*. Using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, an annual survey that tracks families over a 30-year period, they examined the experiences of 5,072 working men and 4,120 working women between ages 25 and 59, all of whom were married. They compared the employment status and salaries of those who moved from one metropolitan area to another (655 men, 371 women) to those who stayed put.

They found that a year after the move, nearly all of the men remained

employed, but the women who moved were 22 percentage points less likely to remain employed compared to women who didn't move. The men who moved boosted their salary by an average of \$3,000 that year, compared to an average increase of only \$700 for men who stayed put. But women who moved reported average salary increases of \$750 less than women who stayed put.

"Our results support the notion that families migrate to enhance husbands' careers," Noonan said. "Women are very unlikely to initiate the move. They're more likely to be the 'trailing spouse,' following their husbands in a move for his promotion, raise, or better opportunities down the road."

Sociologists have speculated that the type of jobs men and women choose could be the reason moving can help husband's careers but hurt wives' careers, Noonan said. Perhaps men are more likely to choose more specialized or in-demand positions, jobs for which they might be recruited and that have a steeper salary ladder. On the flip side, it's possible that women more often choose fields like teaching, secretarial work, or nursing, positions for which more workers are qualified and that typically involve a more gradual salary increase.

To test that theory, Shauman and Noonan developed a way to control for the characteristics of the occupation. They found that even when the playing field was leveled in regard to the type of job, moving still hurt women's careers.

"Whether you're a female nurse or secretary or a female CEO, you're facing the same negative consequences after the move," Noonan said. "Even today, when women are earning more money and are more likely to put an emphasis on their career, when it comes to marriage, gender roles are very entrenched. People still buy into the stereotypes of what it means to be a good wife. It means that caring for your children and

supporting your husband's career is viewed as a wife's main priority. Working is fine, but that's not really a wife's primary role."

In future research, Noonan would like to design a qualitative study to find out how couples weigh decisions on whose career matters more.

"It's not like men with professional degrees are marrying high school dropouts. Men with advanced degrees tend to marry women with advanced degrees. They're appealing to each other because they are ambitious, smart and motivated," Noonan said. "So what goes on when you have two people who both place importance on their career and a move is necessary to promote one person's career? How do they decide whose career takes the backseat? What goes into that decision?"

One limitation of the study was that the researchers were only able to track people who remained married, Noonan said, and the research did not include couples that were cohabiting. Also, the study only measured short-term damage, Noonan said. It's possible some of the women found employment or took better jobs once the family settled in more.

Source: University of Iowa

Citation: Research: Even today, couples put more emphasis on husband's career (2007, December 1) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-12-rresearch-today-couples-emphasis-husband.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.