

Husband's employment status threatens marriage, but wife's does not, study finds

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A new study of employment and divorce suggest that while social pressure discouraging women from working outside the home has weakened, pressure on husbands to be breadwinners largely remains.

The research, led by Liana Sayer of Ohio State University and forthcoming in the *American Journal of Sociology*, was designed to show how employment status influences both men's and women's decisions to end a [marriage](#).

According to the study, a woman's employment status has no effect on the likelihood that her husband will opt to leave the marriage. An employed woman is more likely to initiate a [divorce](#) than a woman who is not employed, but only when she reports being highly unsatisfied with the marriage.

The results for male [employment status](#) on the other hand were far more surprising.

For a man, not being employed not only increases the chances that his wife will initiate divorce, but also that he will be the one who opts to leave. Even men who are relatively happy in their marriages are more likely to leave if they are not employed, the research found.

Taken together, the findings suggest an "asymmetric" change in traditional gender roles in marriage, the researchers say.

That men who are not employed, regardless of their [marital satisfaction](#), are more likely to initiate divorce suggests that a marriage in which the man does not work "does not look like what [men] think a marriage is supposed to," the researchers write. In contrast, women's employment alone does not encourage divorce initiated by either party. That implies that a woman's choice to enter the [workforce](#) is not a violation of any marriage norms. Rather, being employed merely provides [financial security](#) that enables a woman to leave when all else fails.

"These effects probably emanate from the greater change in women's than men's roles," the researchers write. "Women's employment has increased and is accepted, men's nonemployment is unacceptable to many, and there is a cultural ambivalence and lack of institutional support for men taking on 'feminized' roles such as household work and emotional support."

The research used data on over 3,600 couples taken from three waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. Waves were conducted in 1987-88, 1992-94, and 2001-2.

More information: Liana C. Sayer, Paula England, Paul Allison, and Nicole Kangas, "She Left, He Left: How Employment and Satisfaction Affect Men's and Women's Decisions to Leave Marriages." *American Journal of Sociology* 116:6 (May 2010).

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