

Study finds couples' division of paid and unpaid labor linked to risk of divorce

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A new study suggests that financial factors, including couples' overall resources and wives' ability to support themselves in the event of a divorce, are not predictive of whether marriages last. Rather, it is couples' division of labor—paid and unpaid—that is associated with the risk of divorce.

"My results suggest that, in general, financial factors do not determine whether couples stay together or separate," said study author Alexandra Killewald, a professor of sociology at Harvard University. "Instead, couples' paid and unpaid work matters for the risk of [divorce](#), even after adjusting for how work is related to financial resources."

Titled, "Money, Work, and Marital Stability: Assessing Change in the Gendered Determinants of Divorce," the study uses nationally representative data on more than 6,300 different-sex couples, both spouses age 18 to 55, from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) to examine what effect, if any, couples' division of labor, their overall financial resources, and [wives'](#) economic prospects following divorce have on marital stability.

As part of her study, which appears in the August issue of the *American Sociological Review*, Killewald compared couples married in 1974 or earlier with couples married in 1975 or later to explore whether the effects, or lack thereof, of these factors changed over time. Killewald found that, in both the old and new cohorts, financial factors did not play a role in divorce. On the other hand, while the division of labor did

affect marital outcomes in both cohorts, there was some variation in terms of what division of labor was better for marriage stability.

For couples married before 1975, the higher the percentage of housework a woman did, the less likely her marriage was to end in divorce. For the more recent cohort, however, that was no longer the case. "For couples married more recently, expectations for the division of housework between spouses appear to have changed, so that men are expected to contribute at least somewhat to household labor," said Killewald, who noted that, even in the more recent marriage cohort, wives do more than 70 percent of the housework, on average. "In general, men seem to be contributing a little more than they used to, and these contributions may now be expected and appreciated by wives."

Killewald found that, for couples married after 1974, neither wives' full-time employment nor sharing the housework more evenly was associated with the risk of divorce. In this cohort, husbands' full-time employment was an important factor in marital stability, with the risk of divorce higher for men who were not employed full-time.

"For contemporary couples, wives can combine paid and unpaid labor in various ways without threatening the stability of their marriage," according to Killewald, who said that while the gender revolution and the feminist movement have allowed women to take on traditionally male-dominated roles and responsibilities, men's roles and responsibilities have not expanded or diversified proportionately.

"While contemporary wives need not embrace the traditional female homemaker role to stay married, contemporary husbands face higher risk of divorce when they do not fulfill the stereotypical breadwinner role, by being employed full-time," Killewald said.

Regarding financial factors, by finding that couples' overall resources

and wives' economic prospects following divorce did not determine whether marriages lasted, Killewald's study dispels the theory that attributes the spike in divorce rates to women's increased financial independence. "The fact that divorce rates rose during the second half of the 20th century at the same time when women were moving into the labor force has prompted some speculation that marital stability has declined because women no longer 'need' to be married for financial security," Killewald said. "For some, this implies that women's entry into the work force has come at the expense of stable marriages. My results do not suggest any tradeoff of that kind."

Though changing gender roles have afforded women greater flexibility in terms of labor without jeopardizing their marriages, the study indicates that men have not been granted similar freedom. "Often when scholars or the media talk about work-family policies or work-family balance, they focus mostly on the experiences of women," Killewald said. "Although much of the responsibility for negotiating that balance falls to women, my results suggest one way that expectations about gender and family roles and responsibilities affect men's lives, too: men who aren't able to sustain full-time work face heightened risk of divorce."

In terms of the study's policy implications, Killewald said her research may help guide policymakers who are considering the societal impact of policies that provide financial support to unmarried women. "Because I do not find that [couples](#) are more likely to divorce when women are better able to sustain themselves financially in the event of a divorce, public financial support—to divorced women and other groups—such as the earned income tax credit (EITC) or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), is unlikely to heighten divorce rates," Killewald said.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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