

The secret to a happy marriage—flexible roles

September 6 2018, by Alimatul Qibtiyah And Siti Syamsiyatun



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Between 2005 and 2010, one in ten married couples in Indonesia got divorced, according to data from the Supreme Court. In 70% of the cases, the wife initiated the divorce. The trend has only increased since then, rising by 80% between 2010 and 2015.

Why are [women](#) twice as likely as men to seek a divorce? One assumption is that the idea of gender equality as promoted through feminism drives this divorce rate. But it's an assumption that's not supported by the evidence.

[Data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs](#), which administers marriages and divorces, identify at least three main reasons cited by those filing for divorce: marital disharmony, responsibility, and money problems. All three reasons relate to the [flexibility](#) of the respective roles of the [wife](#) and husband in a marriage.

Women's multiple roles

The involvement of women in the economic workforce and public life has not been reciprocated by a shift among men into domestic work and reproductive life. As a result, women assume multiple responsibilities as daughters, wives, mothers, workers and members of society.

As a daughter, a woman is traditionally responsible for taking care of her parents. As a wife, she is expected to serve her husband, preparing food, clothing and other personal needs. As a mother, she has to take care of the children and their needs, including education.

As a worker, she has to be professional, disciplined and a good employee. And as a member of society, she is expected to participate in community activities and volunteer work, both within her community and through social organisations.

By contrast, men have traditionally had just one role, as the [family's](#) breadwinner, and little obligation to be socially active within their community.

Some cultures and families still maintain those [gender roles](#) today. It is

understandable, therefore, that these multiple burdens of responsibility on women impose hardship on them and leave them vulnerable.

Flexible roles

Overcoming this inflexibility in women's and men's roles within marriage is therefore important.

Let's first posit that, by the very definition of role flexibility, both men and women have equal responsibility for domestic and caretaker tasks within the family, on the basis of fair agreement and commitment. Doing the dishes, laundry, ironing, cooking, feeding the baby and so on are not solely the wife's job, but also the responsibility of the husband. Equal doesn't mean similar. So different families might apportion tasks in different ways to each member of the family.

The second idea is that both men and women have equal responsibilities to earn money and to participate actively within the community. An example of role flexibility here is when the couple decide to have a child and the woman becomes pregnant. In many cases, the pregnancy will mean she will contribute less toward the family income.

In another scenario, when the woman obtains a better-paying job than the man, it should not matter that she earns more than her husband. The most important point is that the decision is in the best interests of the whole family and doesn't disproportionately burden one family member. A husband no longer has to earn more money than his wife or vice versa.

Flexible roles brings marital happiness

Empirical evidence supports the argument for greater role flexibility within the marital space.

In early 2018 we conducted a survey supported by the Ford Foundation of 106 married respondents in Yogyakarta. Some 54% said they were "very happy" in their family. Of those, nearly two-thirds described the gender role flexibility within their marriage as "high."

By comparison, of the 45% who said they were merely "happy," nearly three-fifths said the gender role flexibility in their marriage was only "moderate."

The more flexible the roles of men and women in the family, the happier they are.

The findings are interesting, especially for policymakers and religious leaders, as well as the wider community. The idea of flexibility in marital roles is in line with the characteristics of the millennial generation: dynamic, non-fixed and non-rigid.

Implementing a flexible arrangement for men's and women's roles in the household can contribute to the happiness of the family members and help reduce the number of divorces. Nobody, after all, dreams of having a broken family.

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