

How gender norms and job loss affect relationship status

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Pilar Gonalons-Pons is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology in the School of Arts & Sciences and a member of the Population Studies Center. Credit: University of Pennsylvania

In cultures that place a high value on conventional gender norms,

particularly those that prize men as the breadwinners in a family, their unemployment plays an outsized role in whether a romantic relationship ultimately succeeds or fails.

That's according to new research from sociologists Pilar Gonalons-Pons of the University of Pennsylvania and Markus Gangl of Goethe University Frankfurt. They published their findings in the journal *American Sociological Review*.

"This study is really about how the association between men's unemployment and divorce or separation varies across countries," says Gonalons-Pons, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology. "It also points to how much views about gender really shape the length of romantic relationships."

For the past five years, Gonalons-Pons has been conducting research on gender, labor, families, and public policy. Though the literature includes plenty of work on predictors of relationship longevity, most of it focuses on economic conditions like financial stressors or on the psychological, determining whether two people actually make a good match.

"There were no studies showing empirically how gender culture is its own important determinant," she says. So Gonalons-Pons and Gangl took on this question.

Given the data available, they chose to concentrate on [heterosexual couples](#) from the United States and 28 high-income countries in Europe. These fell on a continuum, from the most gender-conservative, where about a third of the population believes a man's role is as primary breadwinner, to more gender-progressive, where that number drops to about 4%. In total, the researchers followed couples for four years, looking for events of unemployment as well as separation or divorce.

They hypothesized that in gender-conservative countries, the stress of men's unemployment wouldn't be solely financial but also related to [cultural norms](#). "We thought that when a man loses his jobs and doesn't get another one right away it might cast this pressure, this feeling of failure or lack of a sense of status and [social identity](#)," Gonalons-Pons says.

The results played out as the researchers expected. Countries that place greater value on a man's role as breadwinner experience a stronger association between men's unemployment and relationship breakup, whether separation or divorce. In places where the idea of "man as head of household" isn't as pronounced, there's less criticism of masculine identity following a job loss.

The findings make sense to Gonalons-Pons. "In a more hostile context, a gender-conservative context, men's unemployment will leave a more negative psychological impact on the man, which reverberates within the couple," she says. "You'll have more friends, more family saying, "What's wrong with your partner? What's happening here?" That doesn't make either person feel any better and leads to this cultural pressure that can accentuate stress and ultimately result in a breakup."

Interestingly, the researchers didn't see the effect to the same extent for cohabiting couples, a finding that aligns with previous research on non-married couples who live together. Gonalons-Pons suspects this stems from the fact that the pressure to conform to conventional gender norms increases with marriage.

Though the work as a whole focused on a subset of high-income countries and on heterosexual couples only, the researchers say it potentially has broader implications for other places and other kinds of relationships—though the questions may be slightly different. For example, how do those beliefs affect the longevity of a romantic

partnership between two men or two women?

"These cultural ideas create support for those who conform to these norms," she says. "The flip side is they create pressure that can negatively affect people who do not."

Gonalons-Pons stresses that her work does not equate to a crystal ball for any single relationship. "None of this is to say that if you break a gender norm, you're destined to break up," she says. "It's to highlight that these norms do matter; they do influence a relationship. Social norms are part of what shapes the well-being of a couple."

More information: Pilar Gonalons-Pons et al, Marriage and Masculinity: Male-Breadwinner Culture, Unemployment, and Separation Risk in 29 Countries, *American Sociological Review* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/00031224211012442](https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224211012442)

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