





# Sharing the Load

Quality marriages today depend on couples sharing domestic work

By Stephanie Coontz

**B**ack in the early 1960s, if a woman wanted a job she consulted the ads under the category “Help Wanted/Female.” There she would find openings for a “pretty-looking cheerful gal” to greet clients at an ad agency, or “an Ivy League grad with good typing skills,” or even an executive secretary, provided she met the main requirement: “You must be really beautiful.”<sup>1</sup> Being young and single was usually another job requirement.

Many employers then would not hire married women, and psychiatrists warned of the strain on marriages if a woman got used to earning her own money or making her own decisions. In fact, most Americans believed—in the words of one respondent to a Gallup survey in December 1962—that “being subordinate to men is a part of being feminine.” And these beliefs were codified in law. Many states had “head-and-master” laws affirming that wives were “subject” to their husbands. Only four states allowed a wife the right to a separate legal residence, and in no state was it illegal for a man to rape his wife.<sup>2</sup>

That was the context in which Betty Friedan published her shocking best seller, *The Feminine Mystique*, in February 1963, which urged women to seek work outside the home. In October of that year, President John F. Kennedy’s Commission on the Status of Women added to the controversy by issuing lengthy recommendations for more fully incorporating women into the public sphere.

By then, though, many housewives—and even more of their daughters—were already beginning to look beyond the home. Most Americans worried about what

that might mean for the future of marriage, since conventional wisdom held that women who pursued higher education or a career were unlikely to marry, and if they did, their marriages were likely to end in divorce.

There was a kernel of truth to the idea that “female emancipation” undermined marital “solidarity.” The reason: When marriage was based on a woman’s lack of alternative options rather than on mutual respect or interdependence, then a woman who acquired educational and economic resources was indeed a threat to the stability of marriage. Economists called this the “independence effect.”

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For the first 70 years of the 20th century, female college graduates were much less likely to marry than women with less education. And if a married woman took a job, the couple was more likely to ultimately divorce. In the late 1960s and 1970s as women poured into the labor force, divorce rates soared. By 1980 nearly half of American marriages were ending in divorce. The “independence effect” seemed inexorable.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the 21st century. As more wives went to work in the 1980s, and as the women’s movement challenged old inequities at home and on the job, the divorce rate began to fall. From a peak of 22.8 divorces per 1,000 couples in 1979, the divorce rate dropped to 16.7 divorces per 1,000 married couples by 2005, and those more recently married seem to be following the same trend.<sup>3</sup> Today, divorce rates tend to be highest in states where fewer wives have paid jobs and lower in states where more than 70 percent of married women work outside the home.<sup>4</sup>

Education is now a plus for marriage, too. The difference in marriage rates between female college graduates and women with less education has almost entirely disappeared, and divorce rates for educated women have fallen more rapidly than for other groups. The result: educated women are now more likely to be married at age 35 than their less-educated counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

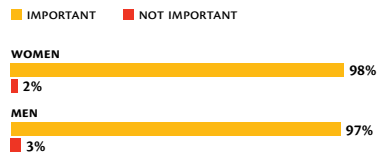
High-earning women—once considered the most divorce-prone of all females—have gained a similar advantage. Analyzing the 2000 and 2001 Current Population Surveys, Heather Boushey (then an economist at the Economic Policy Institute and now the co-editor of this report as senior economist for the Center for American Progress) found that women between the ages of 28 and 35 who worked full time and earned more than \$55,000 a year, or who had graduate or professional degrees, were just as likely to be married as other working women of the same age. Sociologist Christine Whelan reports that among women aged 30 to 44 earning more than \$100,000 per year, 88 percent are married, compared to 82 percent of other women. And Whelan's mate selection studies reveal that men now find career women and educated women much more attractive as marriage partners than in earlier decades.<sup>6</sup>

Today, the independence effect seems to increase marital quality and stability. When a woman is capable of making her own way in the world, she can be more selective in choosing a marriage partner and has more negotiating tools inside the marriage. This creates fairer marriages with improved marital quality for husbands as well as wives. Educated couples, especially those with egalitarian gender views, report the highest marital quality of all.

Stay-at-home wives also benefit from the independence effect. It was the women's movement, not defenders of so-called traditional marriage, that convinced legislators to overturn the prevailing marriage laws in 1963—when 42 states and the District of Columbia all held that if a couple divorced and the wife had been a homemaker, she was not entitled to share the earnings her husband had accumulated during their marriage.<sup>7</sup>

THE LATEST FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Q: Is it important to be self-sufficient and not to have to depend on others?



Source: Rockefeller/TIME poll, 2009.

Similarly, the pressure on husbands to take on more responsibilities at home was initiated by working wives, but these new expectations trickled down to male-breadwinner-only families as well, with the result that all men now do significantly more housework and child care than in the past. That's good for children, who get more time with both their fathers and their mothers today than they did in 1963. And it's good for couples, too, despite the stresses of trying to preserve quality couple time as expectations of parenting have expanded and wives spend more time at work.

Although there are many variations by racial and ethnic status, income, and occupation in the division of housework and the values that couples hold about both of them doing these chores, one of the biggest predictors of a wife's marital satisfaction is whether she feels that the division of housework is fair. Meanwhile, one of the biggest predictors of a husband's satisfaction is how often he has sex. And researchers report that women feel more sexual attraction to husbands who do more housework and child care.<sup>8</sup>

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Despite the group differences in men's housework, the trend has almost universally been toward greater participation. Twenty-nine percent of wives reported in 1980 that their husbands did no housework at all. Twenty years later this had fallen to 16 percent. That makes for healthier and more stable marriages. Sadly proving the point is the new countertrend—marriages where the husband earns all the income and the wife does all the housework are now more likely to split up than marriages where husbands and wives share breadwinning and homemaking.<sup>9</sup>

The movement of wives into the workforce has been especially positive for well-educated couples with secure middle-class jobs, with husbands and wives both reporting increased marital satisfaction. Although highly work-committed, dual-earner couples experience more stress in juggling work and family obligations, couples where both husband and wife have challenging and rewarding jobs also



**LIVING TOGETHER, WORKING TOGETHER.** Couples who share domestic chores and have dual careers can survive the toughest challenges, as this couple did after Hurricane Katrina. {NICOLE BENVENEO, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*}

report the highest sexual satisfaction. It helps, of course, that many of these dual-income parents can also afford to pay for outside—or sometimes live-in—child care and housekeeping. Nonetheless, employed wives earning all kinds of different incomes are less likely to suffer from depression than full-time homemakers with comparable household incomes.<sup>10</sup>

For couples with fewer resources to cope with the economic uncertainties of the last two decades, women's growing economic roles have been more problematic, resulting in lower personal satisfaction and greater marital distress. This is especially true among lower-income couples and those with less education, who consequently have less access to secure, remunerative, or flexible jobs. Balancing rigid work schedules with unpredictable family obligations—while also keeping up with everyday household cooking and chores—is difficult enough, but for most economically secure couples there have been enough enhancements from women's work to generally raise the quality of most marriages. The couples who have experienced the most declines in marital satisfaction are those in which the wife would rather

stay at home and works solely due to financial constraints, while the husband wants to be the sole provider and household authority but cannot achieve that goal, and yet does not help with housework when his wife has to go to work.<sup>11</sup>

Trying to turn the clock back to a largely mythical Golden Age of marriage in the past will not solve these stresses. The threat to successful marriages today is not that women have changed too much but that other individuals and institutions have changed too little. We are no longer in the thrall of the feminine mystique, but two other mystiques continue to impede our progress.

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One is the masculine mystique, which still leads some men to resist sharing household chores and to feel threatened by their wives’ work commitments or earnings successes. Pandering to this—as some politicians and pop psychologists advise—is not the answer. The men most likely to experience psychological and health setbacks when they lose their job or when their wives earn equal or higher salaries are those who are more invested in their identity as breadwinners than as family members. And men or women in dual-earner couples who adopt less egalitarian ideas over time become more psychologically vulnerable in their marriages.<sup>12</sup>

By contrast, men whose attitudes become more egalitarian during the course of their marriage report higher marital satisfaction, as do their wives.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps that’s why the masculine mystique is on the defensive, and why more men are in fact beginning to accept and even embrace women’s equality.

A far more insidious mystique that has yet to be seriously challenged by any of our social institutions is what sociology professor Phyllis Moen and psychology professor Patricia Roehling call the “career mystique.” This postulates that

a successful career requires people to devote “all their time, energy, and commitment throughout their ‘prime’ adult years” to their jobs and to delegate all care-giving responsibilities to someone else.<sup>14</sup>

Finding creative ways to allow men and women to integrate, combine, and sometimes alternate their responsibilities to work and to family could be the single most effective “pro-marriage” program of the 21st century. Now that women have so many more options outside marriage and men have so much less arbitrary authority within it, our government, our employers, and our society need to:

- Recognize that the institution of marriage circa the 1960s will never again provide most employees with an unpaid second worker to free the first one up from all domestic responsibilities and care-giving obligations.
- Understand that despite the stresses and trade-offs associated with the multiplication of family diversity, today’s “independence effect” is good for the married and unmarried women and men alike. Enhancing gender equality will reduce—not increase—tensions between men and women.
- Structure our laws and institutions so that when marriages do break up, more couples are able to negotiate less conflicted partings. Encouraging fathers to take parental leave and use flex time from day one will engage fathers in more child care and develop strong family identities during their marriages, which means they will be far less likely to cut off contact with their children after divorce.
- Embrace flexible working hours, family leave, and child care and elder care time so that married couples and other individuals with care-giving obligations, no matter what their income status, can balance the demands of work and family equitably.

Family diversity is here to stay, and every kind of family has strengths that we can help them build upon. But the marriages that do last today—and more *are* lasting in each new generation of newlyweds since the baby boomers—are fairer, more intimate, and more respectful than couples from previous eras would have ever dared to dream. If only we could say the same about the work policies and social support systems that families need.

## ENDNOTES

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- 4 Zvika Neeman, Andrew F. Newman, and Claudia Olivetti. "Are Career Women Good for Marriage?" Institute for Economic Development Discussion Paper 167, Boston University (April 2007.). Evidence from other countries also indicates that "the independence effect" tends to be strongest when the terms of marriage are unfair to women. One cross-cultural study finds that increases in women's power and resources are a threat to marital stability only in societies where there is widespread gender inequality, with men dominating the realm of production and women responsible for most reproductive and nurturing activities. In societies where women and men share productive and reproductive labor, by contrast, especially when men are heavily involved with infants, divorce rates are lower, and increases in female resources do not have such destabilizing effects. Llewellyn Hendrix and Willie Pearson, "Spousal Interdependence, Female Power, and Divorce: A Cross-Cultural Examination," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 26 (1975) pp. 217–32. See also Burton Pasternak, Carol Ember, and Melvin Ember, *Sex, Gender, and Kinship: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), p. 199.
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