

Feminism and Marital Happiness

W. Bradford Wilcox
Department of Sociology
Cabell Hall, 5th Floor
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA 22904
wbwilcox@virginia.edu

One important innovation I will discuss in this brief essay is the rise of gender egalitarianism—defined here as the idea that men and women should have equal roles in the home and the labor force—since the 1960s. In the United States, this innovation has numerous sources. Let me name four. First, with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the federal government and judiciary took an active role in encouraging female participation in the labor force and challenging legal norms that had treated men and women differently.¹ Second, businesses played a key role in fostering gender egalitarianism by seeking out female employees in large numbers, partly as a consequence of 1970s-era shifts in the economy in the direction of a service economy that made women more attractive workers. Specifically, the labor force participation rates of working age women rose from 33 percent in 1950 to 74 percent in 2000.² Third, feminist social movements, aided by supporters in universities and the media, have advocated for egalitarianism in and outside the home.³ Finally, highly-educated men and women have been more likely to embrace egalitarian gender norms, partly because of their attentiveness to key culture-forming institutions like the media, and have exerted a strong influence on marital social norms as high-status couples.⁴

So, gender egalitarianism, at least in theory, came to be institutionalized in American marriages because a range of actors from other institutions supported equality and because high-status married Americans embraced this innovation. This normative trend is reflected in opinion data. In 1998, 66 percent of American adults disagreed with

¹ Allan Carlson. 2004. *The American Way*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books.

²

<http://www.prb.org/Template.cfm?Section=PRB&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=11880>

³ Martha A. Fineman and Martha T. McCluskey. 1997. *Feminism, Media, and the Law*. New York: Oxford.

⁴ W. Bradford Wilcox. 2004. *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

the norm that it was better for men to focus on breadwinning and for women to focus on homemaking, up from about 33 percent in 1977.⁵ In other words, the norm of gender equality is now firmly established in most American marriages as the official ideal to which couples aspire.

Nonetheless, this normative support is only loosely coupled to the practice of domestic life for married couples. Despite widespread support for the norm of gender equality, American wives do about two-thirds of the work associated with housework and childrearing in families. In fact, one recent study found that men in the United States did about 26 percent of the housework in 1999. (Swedish men did not do much better: the same study found that Swedish men did about 27 percent of the housework.) Of course, it is true, as this study found, that men's relative share of housework has doubled since the 1970s. But men's contributions to housework have not increased much since the early 1990s.⁶ Furthermore, married men continue to earn about two-thirds of the income.⁷

We seem to be in a holding pattern, or what Arlie Hochschild called a "stalled revolution," when it comes to living up to the norm of gender equality.⁸ Although it is true that men do a lot more around the house than they used to and women are much more involved in the workforce than they used to be, it is still the case that men focus more on breadwinning and women focus more on childrearing and housework, particularly when children are in the house.

⁵ My analysis of the 1998 General Social Survey. Daphne Spain and Suzanne M. Bianchi. 1996. *Balancing Act*. New York: Russell Sage. p. 183.

⁶ Marie Evertsson and Magnus Nermo. 2004. "Dependence within Families and the Division of Labor: Comparing Sweden and the United States." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66: 1272-1286.

⁷ W. Bradford Wilcox and Steven Nock. 2006. "What's Love Got to Do With It?" *Social Forces*. Forthcoming.

⁸ Arlie Hochschild. 1989. *The Second Shift*. New York: Avon.

What is even more interesting is that the loose coupling between normative commitment to gender equality and gender practices in marriage even extends to the way in which avowedly egalitarian women experience married life. My analysis of the 1992-1994 National Survey of Families and Households indicates that even married women who agree with progressive gender norms—who, for instance, approve of working mothers and who believe that men and women should basically split breadwinning and homemaking—report that their marriages are happier when they do not work and when their husband earns the lion’s share of the couple income (see Table 1). These women are also not happier when their husbands take on an equal share of the housework.⁹ So, even women who affirm gender equality in theory are less likely to enjoy happy marriages if their marriages are constituted along egalitarian lines. These results suggests that one of our contemporary marital innovations does not quite deliver on its promise of greater marital quality, even though it enjoys a substantial amount of institutional support and legitimacy both inside and outside of marriage.

⁹ My analysis of the 1992-1994 National Survey of Families and Households.

TABLE 1: THE MARITAL HAPPINESS OF PROGRESSIVE-MINDED WOMEN[^]

Wife not working outside the home	.138*
Husband earns more than 66% of household income	.122*
Husband does 33-65% of housework	-.143*
Husband does 66% or more of housework	NS
Couple attends church together	.203**
Husband attends alone	NS
Wife attends alone	.182*
Couple share strong normative commitment to marriage	.411**
Husbands holds strong normative commitment to marriage	.236**
Wife holds strong normative commitment to marriage	NS
Wife does not report if housework unfair to her	NS
Wife reports housework unfair to her	-.564***
Wife reports housework unfair to her husband	NS

N=2418

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

NS = Not statistically significant.

Note: These analyses control for age, income, education, race, ethnicity, region, number of children, and history of divorce for either spouse.

[^] **Progressive-minded** is defined as supporting working mothers, rejecting a husband-breadwinning/wife-homemaking model of marriage, and approving shared housework for husbands and wives who both work full-time. This sample focuses on married women who scored above the median in holding progressive views about gender.

Data are from the Second Wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (1992-1994).