

<https://hbr.org/2017/05/does-a-womans-high-status-career-hurt-her-marriage-not-if-her-husband-does-the-laundry>

**Harvard
Business
Review**

**Alyson Byrne
Julian Barling**

MAY 02, 2017

Does a Woman's High-Status Career Hurt Her Marriage? Not If Her Husband Does the Laundry



Executive Summary

In the U.S., women were the primary breadwinners in 18% of marriages in 1987, but rose to 29% in dual-income marriages by 2014. However, societal norms still suggest that in heterosexual marriages, husbands “should” hold higher job status relative to their wives. When this norm is violated, would marital instability ensue? The researchers examined whether and how womens’ high status jobs might impact the quality of their marriages and whether wives’ perceptions of, and feelings about, their husbands’ job status led to marital instability. They found that wives who believed they held higher status positions than their husbands were indeed more likely to experience feelings of resentment or embarrassment, which in turn had a negative impact on their marital satisfaction. However, when wives felt that their husbands provided them with high levels of instrumental support, such as helping with domestic responsibilities or child and elder care, holding higher status positions than their husbands was not associated with marital instability. These findings are relevant for managers looking to develop and retain female talent as well as for dual career couples, who should seek to have open and honest conversations about their career ambitions and their expectations about mutual support.

While women who win the Academy Award for Best Actress are celebrated for reaching a pinnacle of career achievement, several of them also share another distinction – divorce. Known as the “**Oscar Curse**,” Best Actress award recipients are more likely to file for divorce than are their nominated counterparts or Best Actor winners. Sandra Bullock, Julie Andrews, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Halle Berry, Emma Thompson, and Kate Winslet all share this experience. Patterns like this led us to ask whether womens’ high status careers affect marital stability, and if so, why. Our research on the matter was **recently published** in the journal *Organization Science*.

While men continue to occupy the upper echelons of most organizations, women have made considerable progress in acquiring high status roles in organizations. According to U.S. Department of Labor Data, **women now hold at least 50% of management** and professional positions, outnumbering males in roles such as financial managers, accountants, and medical and health services managers. These workplace changes have affected household roles as well: whereas U.S. women were the primary breadwinners in 18% of marriages in 1987, that number rose to **29% in dual-income marriages by 2014**.

Despite these organizational and economic changes, societal norms still suggest that in heterosexual marriages, husbands “should” hold higher job status relative to their wives. When this norm is violated, and wives hold the higher status job, negative consequences can follow: Women are disparagingly referred to as **having “married down,”** are more likely to be **targets of husbands’ aggression**, and the **risk for divorce increases**. With these findings in mind, we wanted to examine whether and how womens’ high status jobs might impact the quality of their marriages and whether wives’ perceptions of, and feelings about, their husbands’ job status led to marital instability.

To do this, we proposed that when wives see themselves holding a higher job role than their husbands, their feelings about their own statuses might change. Typically, when individuals and organizations affiliate with others of higher status than themselves, they elevate their own status (something researchers call “status leakage.”) And on the flip side, when people affiliate with

others in lower status positions than themselves, they may experience status anxiety or the **fear of losing status**, which can be both **economically and personally threatening**.

Bringing this closer to home, when wives believe that the statuses they worked so hard to achieve at work are at risk because of their husbands' lower job status, they could experience a different kind of status spillover, which would include feeling embarrassed by or resentful of their spouses' lower job status, and fearing that their status could be compromised by that of their husbands.

To explore this, we developed a 9-item scale to assess wives' feelings about their status relative to their husbands. We then surveyed 209 women from executive leadership networks who held high status roles and were in heterosexual married or common-law relationships. Our results controlled for a number of variables such as age, whether they had children, and initial status levels when they first met their partners. We also asked the women if we could contact their husbands, and were able to obtain data from 53 of them.

A 9-Item Scale to Measure Feelings on Job Status

Women in this study rated the following statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

I am embarrassed by my spouse's job.

My spouse's job impedes my future career success.

I wish my spouse had picked a job that gets more respect.

I am embarrassed when my spouse accompanies me to work events.

I feel that my spouse should find a more respectable job.

My spouse's job takes away from my own job status.

My spouse is not proud of his job status.

My spouse's work makes me look bad.

My spouse's job does not bring me status

Source: "**When She Brings Home the Job Status**," by Alyson Byrne and Julian Barling, *Organization Science*, Volume 28.

We found that wives who believed they held higher status positions than their husbands were indeed more likely to experience feelings of resentment or embarrassment, feeling that their status was decreased by their husbands' lower status position, which in turn had a negative impact on their marital satisfaction — and even increased the likelihood that they were thinking about divorce. Husbands, however, were unaffected by their wives' status spillover feelings: They only experienced greater marital dissatisfaction and thoughts about divorce if their wives' were outwardly unhappy with their relationship.

However, when wives felt that their husbands provided them with high levels of instrumental support, such as helping with domestic responsibilities or child and elder care, holding higher status positions than their husbands was not associated with marital instability. This was not the case if their partner simply provided emotional support, suggesting that it is the *tangible* support that husbands provide to higher job status wives that matters more. We suspect that providing this type of tangible support not only allows wives to focus on their careers, but also denotes respect.

Do wives' higher status positions exert long-term effects on their marriages? To investigate this, we again contacted our original sample of high status wives three years after our initial survey. Of our original female participants, 90 responded. Our analyses then showed that wives' initial higher job status and feelings of status spillover predicted marital instability (but not necessarily divorce) three years later, reinforcing the importance of understanding this dynamic. Notwithstanding our findings, other questions remain to be answered in future research. For example, might women who hold higher job status than their husbands be penalized for violating gender role prescriptions in their workplaces? And would we find the similar effects of status spillover on marital instability for LGBTQ couples?

Still, these findings are relevant for organizations and for individuals. First, it's a useful reminder that women who seek a successful career and family life still find it challenging to achieve both. Some may choose to exit high status careers in an attempt to find happiness at home, while **previous research shows** that others might downplay their career paths so as not to threaten their partners, both of which would negatively affect the development of organizational talent.

Second, our results suggest that receiving instrumental, tangible support from one's husband buffers against the negative effects of wives' status anxiety. Organizations have an important role to play by providing family-friendly policies to all employees, and reducing any perception of a penalty against those, either male or female, who use those policies.

Third, it is critical for those in dual-career couples to have open and honest conversations about their career ambitions and their **expectations about mutual support** — however uncomfortable those conversations might be. We also see a role for business school educators to help ensure that students enter the workplace fully aware of the pressures and opportunities involved in seeking to balance career advancement and family relationships.

Finally, perhaps our findings speak less to an “Oscar curse” and more to an “Oscar gift” in which successful, high status women are in a position today to make life and relationship choices less constrained by fear of financial repercussions and more as equal partners in a mutual relationship. Thinking of our findings this way would be consistent with viewing and valuing women as equal members in marriage, work, and society at large.

Alyson Byrne is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Business Administration at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her research focuses on gender, leadership, status, and work-family dynamics.

Julian Barling holds the Borden Chair of Leadership in the Smith School of Business, Queen's University, and is the author of *The Science of Leadership: Lessons From Research for Organizational Leadership* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2014).