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National Opinion Research Center
Affiliated with the University of Chicago
6030 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637

312-962-1200

Also in New York

902 Broadway
New York, New York 10010

Working Wives and Women's Rights: The Connection Between the Employment Status of Wives and the Feminist Attitudes of Husbands¹

Tom W. Smith²

National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago

Women in the labor force tend to have more profeminist attitudes on women's rights and sex roles than women working in the home. In turn, the husbands of wives employed outside the home are more supportive of feminist positions than the husbands of wives working in the home. The difference is greater on attitudes relating to employment and traditional roles in the home and family but also occurs on some items dealing with political rights and general sexual equality. The causal connection between the attitude of husbands and the labor-force status of their wives can not be demonstrated, but causation is believed to work in both directions.

Previous research has found that working women are more supportive of women's rights and feminist positions than housewives.³ A few studies have considered whether the association between the wife's employment status and her support for women's rights carries over to her husband. Scheppele

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²To whom correspondence should be addressed at National Opinion Research Center, 6030 South Ellis Avenue, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois 60637.

³Eight studies (Mason et al., 1976; Thornton et al., 1983; Scheppele, 1978; Morgan & Walker, 1983; Smith-Lovin & Tickmayer, 1978; Davis et al., 1983; Waite, 1978; Thornton & Freedman, 1979) found associations between the employment status of women and attitudes toward women's rights. Three studies show mixed results, with employment status associated for some women's right attitudes but not all (Welch, 1975; Duncan & Duncan, 1978; Astle, 1978). Only three studies (Huber et al., 1978; Spitze & Huber, 1979; Spitze & Waite, 1980) failed to find any relationship.

(1978) found that husbands of women who either worked currently or had worked in the past were not significantly more willing to vote for a woman for president than husbands of women never in the labor force. Similarly, Spitze and Huber (1979) found that the wife's employment status had no significant impact on the husband's attitude toward either the employment of wives or voting for a woman for president. Since their study was also one of the minority to find no differences between working women and housewives themselves, it is not surprising that no effect was found among husbands. On the other hand, in a survey of Illinois residents, Huber et al. (1978) found that husbands of homemakers were less supportive of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) than husbands of working women and unmarried men. This impact was found despite the fact that employment status had no impact on the women themselves. In brief, these three studies find a working-wife effect in only one of four questions examined.

Despite the relatively unpromising findings in the literature, we believed that a connection between the feminist attitudes of husbands and the employment status of their wives did exist. To test for this effect we used 11 items on women's rights contained in the General Social Surveys (GSS) (for wordings see Davis & Smith, 1983). The GSS are probability samples of adults living in households of the contiguous United States that have been conducted nine times from 1972 to 1982 by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

Table I shows that male support for women's rights increases with the labor-force involvement of the wife. The relationship is generally monotonic, with only 4 of the 33 adjacent percentage differences being in the wrong direction (i.e., support for feminism dropping when the wife's labor-force participation is greater). Notable differences occur between each level of labor-force involvement, but the differences are largest and most consistent between the currently employed and the homemakers. On 8 of the 11 items husbands of homemakers who had worked previously are more supportive of women's rights than husbands of homemakers who had never been employed outside the home. The increase averaged 4.6 percentage points. In all 11 comparisons husbands with wives currently working part-time are more supportive than husbands with homemakers with previous work experience. The difference averaged 12.7 percentage points. Finally, husbands with wives working full-time are the most liberal in all but one instance. Their support exceeds that of husbands with wives employed part-time by an average of 5.8 percentage points. Altogether as wife's involvement in the labor force increases from no contact, either past or present, to current full-time employment, approval of profeminist positions by their husbands rises by an average of over 23 percentage points.

To examine the independent effect of wife's employment status on husband's attitude toward women's rights, we developed a multivariate

Table I. Husband's Support for Women's Rights by Wife's Employment Status

	Percentage		
	Wife employed full-time	Wife employed part-time	Wife keeps house, never employed
Vote for woman president ^a	81.8 (746)	88.2 (321)	80.4 (983)
Allow wife to work ^a	81.3 (766)	75.1 (329)	62.9 (922)
Women stay home, men run country, disagree ^b	74.5 (605)	72.9 (258)	62.1 (758)
Men better suited for politics, disagree ^b	62.3 (623)	60.7 (270)	56.8 (777)
Favor ERA ^c	75.9 (224)	70.8 (89)	61.8 (238)
Working mother can be warm parent, agree ^d	57.0 (128)	42.9 (56)	27.2 (158)
Wife should help husband's career, disagree ^d	63.7 (124)	62.0 (50)	32.9 (152)
Preschooler will suffer if mother works, disagree ^d	41.1 (129)	27.8 (54)	13.9 (158)
Wife should take care of home, disagree ^d	41.7 (127)	35.2 (54)	17.3 (156)
Allow wife to work, if jobs in limited supply ^d	50.0 (128)	35.2 (54)	30.8 (156)
Wife may refuse to have children for husband ^d	82.5 (114)	78.4 (51)	62.9 (143)
			73.2 (451)
			51.9 (459)
			50.3 (354)
			55.9 (363)
			66.0 (100)
			20.8 (77)
			27.8 (72)
			18.4 (76)
			17.3 (75)
			21.3 (75)
			54.9 (71)

^aGSS for 1972, 1974, 1975, 1977, 1978, and 1982 combined.

^bGSS for 1974, 1975, 1977, 1978, and 1982 combined.

model that controlled for other factors associated with feminist opinions. Previous research on liberalism in general and women's rights in particular indicates that progressive and nontraditional attitudes are highest among the young and better educated. We also included a self-ranking of political ideology on a seven-point liberal-conservative scale to see whether one's general political orientation could explain attitudes on women's rights. Finally, we included wife's education in order to see whether it was the wife's general academic achievement rather than her employment that accounted for the feminist opinion of husbands. Wife's employment status itself was entered as a dummy variable, with current homemakers with no work experience as the excluded category.

Table II shows that wife's employment status is a significant independent contributor to husband's attitude on women's rights in six of eight comparisons. The associations are strongest and most consistent on attitudes relating to the employment of women and the traditional role of women in the household. Coefficients generally increase as the dummy variables increase their distance from the base category of homemakers without experience in the labor force, and the employment variables account for a notable share of the explained variance. The impact of wife's employment status on husband's attitudes toward political issues is more modest. Willingness to vote for a woman for president also increases among husbands of working wives, but support for the ERA and the emotional suitability of men/women in politics are unrelated to the employment status of wives.⁴ This suggests that the employment status of women is associated with the husband's attitudes in areas most directly connected to the actual experience of a wife's employment in the labor force. This includes employment itself and those traditional wifely roles—mother, helpmate, and homemaker—that are directly changed by employment outside the household. Political roles for women and the more general and abstract issue of the ERA are more remote from employment status and do not tend to be consistently associated with the wife's employment status. Yet even in this more remote area of women's rights, effects, when they occur, are in the same direction as those involving employment and traditional household roles. In addition, we found that a working-wife effect on husbands carried over into certain areas associated with sex-role and feminist issues, such as support for easier divorce laws and elective abortions (data not shown).

⁴Since the ERA model showed a considerably different multivariate model than the other feminist issues, with only one factor, political ideology, contributing significantly, we tried alternative models with region, church attendance, community type (central city, suburbs, town, rural, etc.), and a liberal-conservative scale constructed from nine attitude items. All of these items were significantly related to the ERA, but the best explanatory model did not include any significant association with wife's employment status.

Table II. Multivariate Analysis of Sex-Role Attitudes of Husbands

	Standardized coefficients/F
A. Vote for woman president	
Wife's education (years of schooling)	-.078/7.0
Political ideology (conservative = high)	.069/9.1
R's education (years of schooling)	-.068/5.4
Age	.043/3.2
Wife's employment status	
Working full-time (yes = 1)	.103/12.8
Working part-time (yes = 1)	.086/7.0
Keeps house, employed before (yes = 1)	.078/5.6
	(1882)
B. Allow wife to work	
Education	-.190/47.4
Age	.118/26.5
Wife's education	-.068/6.0
Political ideology	.043/3.9
Wife's employment status	
Working full-time	.186/36.5
Working part-time	.110/16.6
Keeps house, employed before	.061/3.9
	(1918)
C. Women stay home, men run country	
Education	-.261/89.2
Political ideology	.083/15.2
Wife's education	-.077/7.7
Age	.068/8.9
Wife's employment status	
Working full-time	.144/22.0
Working part-time	.083/9.4
Keeps house, employed before	.076/6.1
	(1874)
D. Men better suited for politics	
Education	-.096/11.0
Political ideology	.086/14.6
Wife's education	-.057/3.9
Age	.047/3.9
Wife's employment status	
Working full-time	.024/0.8
Working part-time	-.004/0.0
Keeps house, employed before	-.001/0.0
	(1928)
E. Equal Rights Amendment	
Political ideology	.261/45.4
Education	.069/2.0
Wife's education	-.051/1.1
Age	.020/0.2
Wife's employment status	
Working full-time	.087/2.2
Working part-time	-.014/0.1
Keeps house, employed before	-.029/0.2
	(629)
F. Sex-role scale^a	
Age	.226/30.0
Education	-.147/5.6
Political ideology	.053/1.3

Table II. Continued

	Standardized coefficients/F
Wife's education	-.018/0.1
Wife's employment status	
Working full-time	.202/9.6
Working part-time	.139/5.9
Keeps house, employed before	.023/0.1 (410)
G. Allow wife to work, jobs limited	
Education	-.202/9.5
Age	.088/3.0
Wife's education	.023/0.1
Political ideology	.004/0.0
Wife's employment status	
Working full-time	.264/14.8
Working part-time	.074/1.5
Keeps house, employed before	.084/1.4 (393)
H. Wife refuses to have children	
Education	-.122/3.0
Wife's education	.035/0.2
Age	.001/0.0
Political ideology	-.021/0.2
Wife's employment status	
Working full-time	.225/9.3
Working part-time	.133/4.1
Keeps house, employed before	.034/0.2 (362)

^aAdditive scale of four items on working mother: can be warm parent, wife should help husband's career, preschooler will suffer if mother works, and wife should take care of home. Don't knows included and coded to midpoint on five-point scale.

While the data clearly indicate that the wife's employment status is associated with the sex-role attitudes of the husband, the causal linkage between these variables is uncertain. At least three explanations can be offered for the connection: (1) assortative marriage/divorce, (2) wifely adaptation, and (3) husbandly adaptation. The assortative marriage pattern means that people do not marry in a random, nonselective fashion. People tend to marry a partner of their own race, religion, nationality, and region. Some compatibility or commonality of interests and values also usually exists. This may mean that men with traditional sex-role attitudes seek wives who prefer the traditional role of homemaker, while men with more feminist attitudes are more likely to marry women with career orientations. Assortative divorce means that marriages are not dissolved in a random fashion. Most forms of intermarriage are less stable than within-group marriages. As a result, even without adaptation by one spouse, surviving

marriages involve more homogeneous couples than marriages at the time of formation. Assortative divorce thus tends to increase the effect initially established by the assortative marriage pattern.

The second model argues that the employment status of women is caused by the sex-role attitudes of the husband. Husbands with traditional orientations will discourage employment outside the home by their wives (Duncan & Duncan, 1978, p. 84). This factor might become particularly important after the start of child rearing by the couple. The final model argues that the sex-role attitudes of husbands are caused by the employment status of wives. Husbands of working wives adapt their attitudes to their wife's nontraditional role.

While no evidence is available to choose among these hypotheses, we suspect that all three are operating. Assortative marriage/divorce probably plays a role since child rearing and economic support are central roles in a marriage and because several factors that influence the selection of marriage partners (e.g., region, community type, and religion) are also related to women's rights attitudes. Adaptation of spouses is of course a well-documented feature of marriages. Attitudes of women have been shown both to be influenced by their employment status and to influence in turn their decision to work outside the home (Thornton et al., 1983; Thornton & Freedman, 1979). We suspect that a similar pattern of two-way causality applies for men as well.

Support for women's rights is associated with greater involvement in the labor force not only among women but among their husbands as well. The impact is strongest and most consistent in issues dealing with the home and work but also extends into some political women's rights issues and into other sex role-related topics. Assuming that at least a substantial part of this association comes from the liberalizing impact of employment outside the home on the attitudes of husbands and wives, this helps to explain the dearth of differences between men and women on women's rights issues (Peek & Brown, 1980; Cherlin & Walters, 1981; Schreiber, 1978; Ferree, 1974; Smith, 1976; Roper Organization, 1980). It also suggests that characteristics of spouse might in general influence respondent attitudes in areas related to the particular spousal attributes.

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