

# Women's Economic Activity and the Marital Stability in Poland

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## Abstract

The economic theory of family predicts a destabilising effect of women's employment on marriages. This prediction has come in doubt, recently, as women have been increasingly present in the labour market, there has been an ongoing change in gender roles and household organisation has been shifting from production to consumption. It has been argued that in modern societies decisions to remain married depend more on satisfaction from the quality of the union and that similarity of economic activities and interests may improve understanding between spouses. Moreover, the additional income provided by a woman leads to higher living standards and thus should reduce marital strains. The aim of the study is to contribute to the discussion on the association between woman's economic activity and marital stability through investigating the case of Poland. This country is an interesting case study for this research purpose as it is characterised by a strong social expectations toward women to withdraw from employment to provide care of young children and to return to paid work and contribute to the household income once children grow older.

To this end, we estimate an event-history model for marital disruption using the Polish GGS (2011). The major explanatory variable is woman's current labour market status and her earning potential, measured with indicators of socio-economic status. We also account for the intervening effect of children and try to control for selection effects, by estimating the hazard of marital disruption jointly with a probit of being employed. We expect that women's inactivity stabilizes marital unions when children are young and require care, but has no longer such an effect after children reach the school age. We also envisage that the effect of women's employment on marital stability changes after selection effects are accounted for and becomes insignificant or even positive.

## **Background and research objectives**

The role of women's social and economic independence for marital stability has been of interest for social scientists for several decades in response to growing female labour force participation and marital disruption. It is still unclear, however, whether an increase in women's socio-economic status has indeed a destabilising impact on marital unions at the time of changing gender roles (Jalovaara, 2003; Sigle-Rushton, 2010) and a social shift from household production to household consumption (Cherlin, 2000; Stevenson, & Wolfers, 2007; Raz-Yurovich, 2011).

The view that women's employment destabilises marital unions is derived from the influential Becker's theory (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977). The economic model of marriage was built upon an assumption of a *role specialisation* within a couple, and presupposed that the gains from marriage are higher if both spouses specialize – one in income provision and the other in home production. Due to gender gap in wages and culturally rooted gender norms a woman usually gets specialized in the housework and a man in breadwinning (Lyngstad, & Jalovaara, 2010). The negative relationship between women's employment and marital stability was also envisioned by psycho-social theorist who argued that woman's involvement in paid work might be indicative of man's poor performance as an income provider, which might further lead to strains between spouses (Cherlin, 1979; Jalovaara, 2003).

Recently, however, as women have been increasingly present in the labour market, the negative effect of women's employment on marital stability has come in doubt. It has been increasingly argued that in modern societies decisions to remain married depend more on satisfaction from the quality of the union than on pure transfers of income and household labour (Ross, & Sawhill, 1975) and that similarity of economic activities and interests may improve understanding between spouses (Simpson, & England, 1981). Furthermore, it was presupposed that the increasing earning potential of a woman leads to higher living standards and thus should reduce marital strains, particularly at the time of the changing household organisation from role specialisation to income pooling (Cherlin, 2000). Finally, the change of the gender norms leaves men fewer possibilities to find a partner who would be willing to specialise in household production (Sigle-Rushton, 2010).

Empirical research usually finds a negative association between women's employment and marital stability (for review see Spitze, 1988, and Lyngstad, & Jalovaara, 2010). Nevertheless, some recent studies found that this effect weakens or even disappears after accounting for the level of satisfaction with marriage (Schoen et al., 2002), commitment of

spouses to each other and acknowledged gender ideology (Sayer, & Bianchi, 2000) or men's involvement in housework (Sigle-Rushton, 2010). Furthermore, a cross-country comparative studies by Cooke (2005, 2011) revealed that the effect of women's employment on marital stability depends on the country context and is more likely to be negative in countries with traditional gender roles.

It is noteworthy, however, that the available studies on the topic usually fail to account for selection effects and hence may provide biased estimates of the effect of women's employment on marital stability. Selection effects arise if the unobserved characteristics of women (such as traditional family values or plans to dissolve the union) jointly affect the decision to remain married as well as the decision to enter employment and remain employed. Controlling for selection effects may thus lead to a change in the effect of women's employment on marital stability.

Overall, this short review of empirical research on the association between marital stability and women's employment calls for further research on this topic, conducted in other country contexts, characterised by different attitudes towards women's family and economic roles. This research should additionally aim at accounting for selection effects.

The aim of the study is to contribute to the discussion on the association between woman's economic activity and marital stability through investigating the case of Poland. Poland represents a Central and Eastern European region where the empirical evidence on the topic is scarce and the considered relationship is captured only in a descriptive way (e.g. Muszyńska, 2008, Styr, 2011). It also constitutes a very interesting case study for this research purpose. On the one hand, it is characterised by strong attachment to family and Catholic values as well as a high expectation towards mothers to stay at home and provide care to their children when they are small. Consistently, with this traditional view of women's roles childcare provision is highly underdeveloped there. On the other hand, Poland has a long history of relatively high female labour force participation, which in the past was stimulated by the socialist ideology. Furthermore, Polish women are perceived as important income providers and in fact are expected to return to work after care-related interruptions (Treas and Widmer 2000, Lueck and Hoffaecker 2003). This expectation is likely to be caused by relatively low wages. In this context the relationship between women's economic activity and marital disruption is unclear. We expect that it may depend on the fact of having a young child as well as on the earning potential of a woman.

## **Data and method**

The data used for the study is the first wave of the Polish Generations and Gender Survey (GGS). It was conducted at the turn of 2010 and 2011 on a representative sample of 20,000 women and men aged 18-79. The Polish GGS questionnaire corresponds largely with the standard GGS questionnaire, but it additionally covers full employment and occupational histories of respondents since the age of 15. A strong advantage of the Polish GGS is thus that it allows to measure the socio-economic status of the respondents in a dynamic way. Its drawback is the lack of full retrospective information about the labour market situation of the partners.

Using this data we proceed in three steps. First, we estimate an event-history model for marital disruption. Our major explanatory variable in this model is woman's current labour market status and her earning potential, measured with the indicators of socio-economic status (such as International Socioeconomic Index ISEI). These indicators can be computed with the use of data on performed occupations, available in our dataset. Second, we interact woman's labour market status with her child status to verify whether the effect of women's employment on marital stability depends on the stage in the family life cycle (and hence whether it depends on the social roles attributed to women at various stages of the family life cycle). Finally, we try to control for selection effects. To this end, we estimate the event history model for the transition to divorce jointly with a random-effects probit model for the probability of being employed. It was demonstrated by Lillard et al. (1995) and Lillard, and Panis (1996) that identification of parameters in joint models is achieved if the analysed events are repeated or if suitable instruments for the explanatory variable are available. In our study both events can be repeated, but the number of persons who divorced more than once in our sample might be insufficient to achieve identification. In such a case female respondents' employment will be instrumented with socio-economic characteristics of woman's mother during the respondent's childhood.

## **Expected findings**

We expect the relationship between women's economic activity and marital disruption to depend on the fact of having a young child and woman's earning potential. More specifically, we anticipate that women's inactivity stabilizes marital unions when children are young and require care, but has no longer such an effect after children reach the school age. We also envisage that the effect of women's employment on marital stability changes after selection effects are accounted for and becomes insignificant or even positive afterwards.

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