

Revisiting the Association between Women's Economic Independence and Separation: What Can We Learn from Multi-Country Panel Studies?

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Abstract

We reexamine one of the most discussed hypotheses in divorce studies, namely the idea that women's economic independence facilitates union dissolution. Women have traditionally depended more on their spouse's socio-economic status than men due to weaker labour market conditions, gender pay gap, and traditional family roles. Having a higher level of employment and income allows them to leave the marriage with less damage to their economic stability and more psychological self-confidence. However, research on this topic is contradictory, especially when considered in the context of changing socio-economic conditions for women. This study uses large-scale national household panel studies from Australia, Germany, Russia, South Korea, Switzerland, the UK, and the US (harmonised using the Comparative Panel File) to analyse the association between married and cohabiting women's employment status and their risk of divorce or separation. The extensive, longitudinal, and high-quality data (period 1990-2021, analytical sample: 1,438,113 observations and 189,670 respondents) provide new insights, contributing to the knowledge about the gendered nature of union dissolution. Using discrete-time event history analysis, we show that economic independence corresponds to a higher risk of divorce for women, while in the case of men, it plays no role. We also use growth curve modelling to track trajectories of working hours for men and women who experience divorce and find that women tend to increase their work engagement before and after union dissolution. The comparative analyses show important country differences, allowing discussion on the role of welfare support and socio-economic context.

Introduction

In this study, we reexamine one of the most discussed hypotheses in divorce studies, namely the idea that women's economic independence facilitates union dissolution. Using large-scale national household panel data from Australia, Germany, Russia, South Korea, Switzerland, the UK, and the US, covering the past two to three decades, we analyse the association between married and cohabiting women's employment status and their risk of divorce or separation. The extensive, longitudinal, and high-quality data provide new insights, contributing to the knowledge about the gendered nature of union dissolution. Specifically, we show that economic independence corresponds to a higher risk of divorce for women, while in the case of men, it plays no role. We also track trajectories of working hours for men and women who experience divorce and find that women tend to increase their work engagement before and after union dissolution. The comparative analyses show important country differences, allowing discussion on the role of welfare support and socio-economic context.

Theoretical background

Women's economic independence effect suggests that the probability of a divorce increases when they are financially self-sufficient and less dependent on the spouse (Oppenheimer, 1994; Sayer & Bianchi, 2000). Women have traditionally relied more on their spouse's income and socio-economic status than men due to a weaker labour market situation, the gender pay gap, traditional family roles and social norms (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; Poortman, 2005; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007; Wagner et al., 2015). In such a situation, gaining economic independence allows them to exit the marriage with less harm to their economic stability. Employment can also give women a sense of psychological independence and empowerment, which decreases the perceived costs of divorce and increases the likelihood of initiating divorce (Kalmijn & Poortman, 2005). The effect has been observed in many research, which showed higher levels of employment and income contributing to higher divorce risk among various demographic groups and in a variety of countries (Lyngstad & Jalovaara, 2010; South, 2001; van Damme & Kalmijn, 2014). Research has also evidence a longitudinal anticipation mechanism, where women intensify their employment in a short period surrounding the event of union dissolution (van Damme et al., 2009). For example, Thielemans and Mortelmans (2019) find that women have a higher probability of increasing their employment in the year preceding separation.

However, there is no general agreement regarding the association between women's employment status and their risk of exiting relationships. In his overview of the literature, Wagner (2020) concludes that "the results of empirical research on the effects of female employment on marital instability have been highly contradictory" (p. 50). Some studies have challenged the economic independence effect and its impact on divorce rates (Killewald, 2016; Ono, 1998; Sayer & Bianchi, 2000; Schwartz & Han, 2014). They suggest that because of societal transitions women's economic independence has improved over time, reducing its role in enabling them to leave unhappy marriages. Along with the growing female labour force participation, increasing education level and more extensive welfare support (e.g., for single mothers), the financial burden related to divorce or separation has decreased. For example, Killewald (2016) found that for marriages formed after 1975, wives' full-time employment is not statistically significantly associated with the risk of divorce, whereas husbands' lack of full-time employment facilitates dissolution. Scholars have also suggested that divorce risk may depend on the overall quality and satisfaction within the marriage. For instance, Sayer and Bianchi (2000) suggest that economic independence does not significantly increase the risk of divorce once marital satisfaction is considered. Also, Schoen et al. (2002) find that women's employment does not destabilize happy marriages but increases the risk of disruption in unhappy marriages. Additionally, some studies suggest that women's employment stabilizes marriages (Schwartz & Han, 2014).

Importantly, the effects of women's economic position on divorce may be influenced by country context. Less rigid social roles and norms regarding gender and family, and easier legal access to divorce can make the decision to end relationship easier for women. Such factors like financial support provided by the welfare institutions (e.g., for single parents) and active labour market policies (e.g., supporting women's employment) can make women less reliant on partner's resources, as well as on the market, facilitating their autonomy (Cooke et al., 2013; van Damme et al., 2009; Vignoli et al., 2018).

Data

The data come from seven countries and were integrated using the Comparative Panel File (CPF; for details, see Turek, Kalmijn, & Leopold, 2021, or www.cpfdata.com). The CPF is a new and first fully open harmonization initiative in the social sciences. The harmonized data allow studying life trajectories of several generations across countries and against a changing historical background. CPF provides an open-source code to combine data from the largest and longest-running household panel surveys from Australia (*Household, Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia Survey*, HILDA), Germany (*German Socio-Economic Panel*, SOEP), the United Kingdom (*British Household Panel Survey*, BHPS, and *Understanding Society-The UK*

Household Longitudinal Study, UKHLS), South Korea (*Korean Labor and Income Panel Study, KLIPS*), Russia (*Russian Longitudinal Monitoring Survey, RLMS*), Switzerland (*Swiss Household Panel, SHP*), and the United States (*Panel Study of Income Dynamics, PSID*). One of the strengths of these data is that they were collected regularly (mostly yearly interviews of household members) and contain current measures of employment and income. Most previous studies have used retrospective life history data and such data do not have income measures and may suffer from recall error. In this study, we cover the period of 1990 to 2021, with the analytical sample of N=1,438,113 observations and 189,670 respondents (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Sample sizes by country (analytical sample*)*

Country	N observations	%	N respondents	%
[1] Australia	146,300	10.2	15,959	8.4
[2] Korea	176,042	12.2	18,713	9.9
[3] USA	151,120	10.5	15,029	7.9
[4] Russia	149,438	10.4	21,894	11.5
[5] Switzerland	89,852	6.3	16,433	8.7
[6] Germany	367,043	25.5	50,336	26.5
[7] UK	358,318	24.9	51,306	27.1
Total	1,438,113	100	189,670	100

Note: Analytical sample used for the event history model

Variables

Dependent variable. The dependent variable indicates the event of dissolution (divorce or separation) in next wave. A person who was married or living together in a current and subsequent wave was considered as ‘not separated’; a person who was married or living together in a current wave and divorced or separated in a subsequent wave was considered as ‘separated’. The separation variable was missing if a person was in their last observed wave (either because of attrition or because it was the last wave of the survey).

Economic independence. The economic independence effect is measured using a proxy of women’s and men’s employment status at current wave. In additional analyses, we consider the role of working hours and income.

Predictors. We control for educational attainment, age, household income (10 deciles), self-rated health (higher = more healthy), religiousness (yes/no), having young kids in the household, cohabitation status, ethnicity, union’s duration and number of unions, and year of observation.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of the variables for the sample selected for the analysis, which means respondents with no missing values on marital or partner status, and with no widowhood spell before divorce, aged 25-65, and in period of 1990-2021.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics of variables used in the analysis (analytical sample*)*

<i>A. Continuous variables</i>	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Wave's year	1,438,113	2008.6	8.1	1,990	2,021
Household income	1,438,113	6.5	2.5	1	10
Self-rated health	1,438,113	3.6	0.9	1	5
Union's order	1,438,113	1.1	0.3	1	7
Union's duration	1,438,113	7.2	6.1	1	39
Working hours per week	1,377,297	29.0	20.3	0	72
<i>B. Categorical variables</i>	N	%			
Union dissolution observed					
No	1,412,239	98.2			
Yes	25,814	1.8			
Age					
25-34	311,458	21.7			
35-44	428,833	29.8			
45-54	381,884	26.6			
55-65	315,938	22.0			
Education					
[0-2] Low	245,546	17.1			
[3-4] Medium	705,878	49.3			
[5-8] High	481,098	33.6			
Religious					
Not	448,954	31.2			
Yes	989,159	68.8			
Employment situation					
Not active, retired	275,284	19.2			
Actively unemployed	64,903	4.5			
Emp: Part-time	337,209	23.5			
Emp: Full-time	750,071	52.2			
In education	10,141	0.7			
Kids 0-4 in household					
No	1,187,747	82.7			
Yes	248,249	17.3			

Note: Analytical sample used for the event history model

Analytical approach

From the merged panel files, we selected individuals aged 25-60 years who were observed between 1990 and 2021. We delete respondents with missing values on marital or partner status, and with widowhood spell before divorce.

In the first part of analysis, we perform discrete-time event history analysis separately for women and men, with the union dissolution as the risk event and wave's year as the time dimension. Each person's union is treated as a separate cluster of observations, with correction of standard errors related to clustering within individual. This approach allows to verify the hypothesis regarding the role of employment independence in wave t , operationalized as employment status, for the risk of divorce in $t+1$.

In the second part of the analysis, we estimate growth curve models for the trajectory of working hours observed in the period of 5 waves before to 5 years after the dissolution event.

This approach allows estimating the trajectory of work engagement separately for men and women experiencing divorce.

The analyses are performed separately for each country.

Preliminary results

Tables 3 and 4 show that employment (part or full-time) has different effects for women and men. For women, employment (especially full-time), tends to facilitate union dissolution, aligning with the independence hypothesis. The effect is not observed for men.

Table 3. *Event-history model for the risk of divorce: women*

	AUS	GER	KOR	RUS	SWT	UK	USA
Wave's year	-.028**	-.021**	-.040**	-.043**	-.047**	-.029**	-.057**
Wave's year (<i>squared</i>)	-.005**	-.002**	.001	-.002**	-.006**	-.002**	-.005**
Age (<i>Ref: 25-34</i>)							
35-44	-.071	-.234**	-.330*	-.184**	-.153	-.160**	-.249**
45-54	-.333**	-.658**	-.650**	-.458**	-.289*	-.535**	-.762**
55-65	-.986**	-1.401**	-1.412**	-.677**	-.912**	-1.251**	-1.503**
Education (<i>Ref: Low</i>)							
Medium	-.037	-.098	.298*	-.216*	.299	-.009	.149*
High	-.330**	-.199**	-.142	-.317**	.424*	-.128*	-.184*
HH income (10 deciles)	-.084**	-.057**	-.182**	-.039**	-.111**	-.067**	-.099**
Self-rated health (1-5)	-.197**	-.103**	-.540**	-.053	-.142*	-.155**	-.088**
Religious (0/1)	-.063	-.202**	-.178	-.155	-.616**	-.286**	-.429**
Employment (<i>Ref: Not active/retired</i>)							
Actively unemployed	.526**	.699**	.540	.454**	1.143**	.504**	.596**
Employed: Part-time	-.092	.390**	.473**	.319**	.560**	.048	.223**
Employed: Full-time	.173*	.518**	.991**	.393**	.715**	.208**	.243**
In education	.499*	.474**		.368	.072	.371*	.248
Kids 0-4 in household	.190**	-.138**	-.315	-.062	-.653**	-.089	.099
Cohabiting	.968**	1.006**		+1.496**	1.120**	.771**	1.096*
Black						.964**	.676**
Asian						-.121	-.605*
Union's duration	-.168**	-.040**	.057	-.200**	-.076*	-.048**	-.040**
Union's duration (<i>squared</i>)	.009**	.000	-.001	.007**	.005**	.001	.000
Union's order (<i>Ref: first</i>)							
2nd	.759**	.537**	2.038**	.732**	.766**	.805**	.860**
3rd	.715**	.642**	3.358**	1.296**	.584	.802**	1.035**
4th	.057	.352		1.009*	.029	.674	1.371**
5th		1.224		2.384**		.954	1.605**
6th							3.805*
Constant	-1.977**	-3.123**	-2.842**	-2.405**	-3.056**	-2.721**	-1.871**
N	74853	186515	89672	72984	48348	185425	74995
N of respondents	9271	29200	9594	11819	8898	27754	12474

NOTE: * For RUS, Cohabiting is from a separate model valid only for 2009+ waves (N= 49623, N_g= 8988)

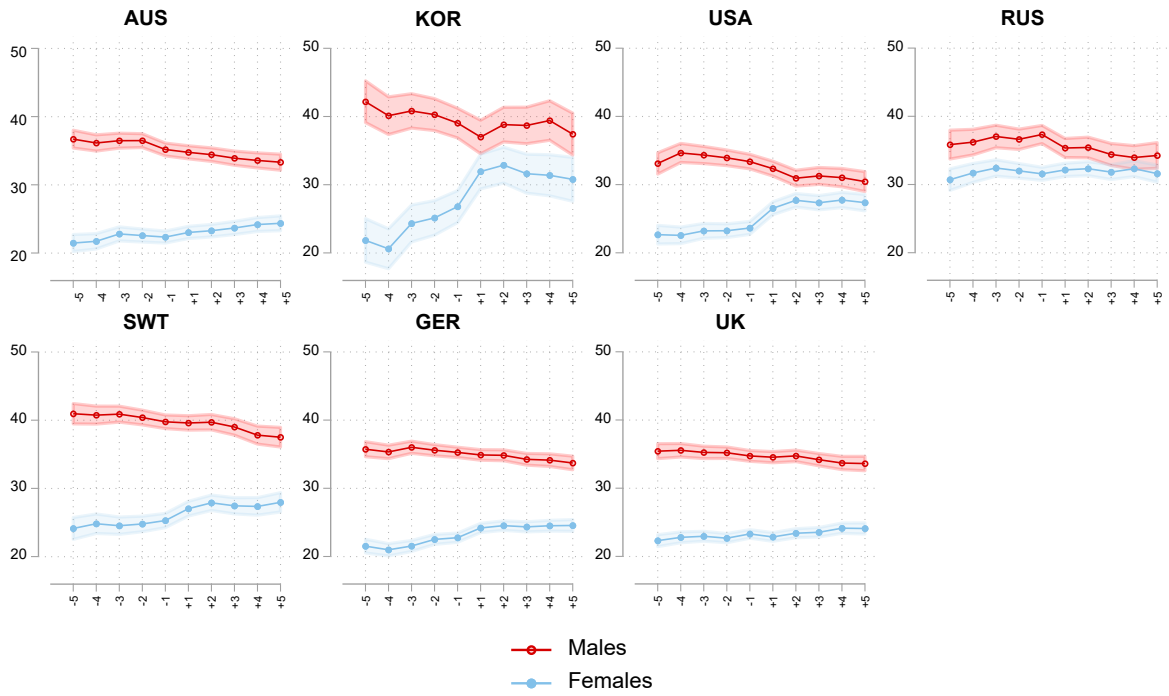
Table 4. Event-history model for the risk of divorce: men

	AUS	GER	KOR	RUS	SWT	UK	USA
Wave's year	-.030**	-.024**	-.027**	-.047**	-.031**	-.028**	-.053**
Wave's year (<i>squared</i>)	-.004**	-.001**	-.002	-.002**	-.006**	-.001	-.004**
Age (<i>Ref: 25-34</i>)							
35-44	-.150*	-.355**	.122	-.334**	-.104	-.295**	-.388**
45-54	-.364**	-.748**	-.217	-.624**	-.192	-.607**	-.956**
55-65	-1.041**	-1.281**	-1.003**	-1.228**	-.953**	-1.179**	-1.484**
Education (<i>Ref: Low</i>)							
Medium	-.167*	-.003	-.046	-.121	-.185	.078	.163*
High	-.479**	-.108	-.807**	-.401**	-.222	.018	-.203*
HH income (10 deciles)	-.057**	-.017	-.146**	-.011	-.088**	-.061**	-.062**
Self-rated health (1-5)	-.132**	-.104**	-.171*	-.011	-.273**	-.132**	-.120**
Religious (0/1)	-.098	-.275**	-.262**	-.214*	-.510**	-.284**	-.241**
Employment (<i>Ref: Not active/retired</i>)							
Actively unemployed	.273*	.401**	.289	.429**	.307	.209	.679**
Employed: Part-time	-.166	.184	-.297	-.118	-.031	-.091	.161
Employed: Full-time	-.258**	.070	-.197	-.077	.097	-.166	.088
In education	-.043	.171		.844	.087	.090	.287
Kids 0-4 in household	-.003	-.444**	-.474**	-.433**	-.667**	-.390**	.033
Cohabiting	1.052**	1.083**		+1.254**	1.488**	.863**	
Black						.882**	.588**
Asian						-.180	.033
Union's duration	-.142**	-.023	-.031	-.275**	-.090**	-.030*	-.036**
Union's duration (<i>squared</i>)	.008**	-.001	.002	.010**	.007**	.001	.001
Union's order (<i>Ref: first</i>)							
2nd	.677**	.423**	1.733**	1.265**	.160	.847**	1.077**
3rd	.649**	.599*	3.168**	1.858**	-.054	.943**	1.454**
4th	1.176*	.656		1.654*	.091	1.202*	1.689**
5th						-.141	2.110**
6th	-2.104**	-3.168**	-2.947**	-2.261**	-1.970**	-3.139**	-2.400**
Constant	.677**	.423**	1.733**	1.265**	.160	.847**	1.077**
N	71434	180234	86052	76438	41479	170432	75952
N of respondents	9118	29516	9417	12837	8063	26882	12911

NOTE: * For RUS, Cohabiting is from a separate model valid only for 2009+ waves (N= 49710, N_g= 9349)

The growth-curve model (Figure 1) shows that trajectories of working hours differ for women and men experiencing divorce (the graph shows the period of 5 year before/after the event). Women's employment engagement tends to increase, while men's tends to decrease. However, some country differences are visible, with much stronger changes observed in Korea and the US.

Figure 1. Growth-curve model for the trajectory of working hours (per week) for men and women experiencing divorce.



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