

# How to make partnerships and careers work in face of (subtle) social norms

*Subconscious gender norms surrounding families and partnerships are still prevalent even in the most egalitarian societies, and they influence how couples make career choices — even couples who are committed to gender equality. **Cecily Josten** discusses the literature on couples with dual careers and the choices they face.*

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Japan offers the second most generous parental leave schemes for fathers in the world ([OECD 2021](#)). Fathers in Japan can take up to one year of parental leave with 60% of earnings being replaced and a majority of young adults say they are in favour of men taking the leave. Still, only six per cent of fathers take it up. This large gap is surprising and can only be explained by cultural and societal norms surrounding gender, with fathers not daring to take the leave. While the case of Japan may seem extreme, (subconscious) gender norms surrounding families and partnerships are still very prevalent even in the most egalitarian societies. And the example of Japan also shows how sometimes even the most well-intentioned and outspoken commitment to equality in relationships might simply not be enough.

Many partnerships are still very dependent on societal and cultural norms that influence how couples make career choices. This is because those norms are often subconscious. This is even the case for couples who are very committed to gender equality. To successfully match individual aspirations with mutual reality requires couples to constantly re-evaluate their joint choices and is indeed hard work. Equality is important but rather than focusing just on a dual career it is important that partners are content with the choice they make jointly focusing on their dual aspirations even if that comes with temporary sacrifices.

## The (subtle) role of norms in relationships

Norms around gender have been changing rapidly in the past years and when thinking of typical gender norms, many of them seem to be antiquated. Who would expect women to be in the kitchen all the time and wait for their husbands to return from work? Particularly younger generations are very openly devoted to gender equality. And women's participation in the labour market has been converging with that of men and while there is still a gender pay gap, it has also been decreasing ([OECD 2022](#)). But at the same time, it is undeniable that we also still foster specific norms around gender as society. The colour blue is associated with boys, pink with girls to name just one. The role of norms is very prevalent still, not just for us as individuals but also when it comes to forming and living together in a partnership.

Single women, for example, are more likely to understate their true career goals and salary expectations when asked about them publicly, as compared to married females or men, supposedly to increase their chances of finding a partner ([Bursztyn et al. 2017](#)). Single women are thereby conforming to gender norms such as trying not to appear too ambitious or assertive as a woman. Bertrand et al. (2015) show that the expectation that men usually earn more than women drives marriage formation and female labour force participation. They find that women with a high earnings potential are less likely to be in the labour force or, if they are working, they are earning less than one would expect from their education and existing career track. Those findings can be explained by gender norms that lead women with a high earning potential to selling themselves short and/or choosing a different career path to avoid conflict in the partnership.

Further along in the marriage, female career success is associated with divorce. That is if a woman has either increased earnings or is earning more than their male partner, they are more likely to divorce. In a study in Sweden, Folke and Rickne (2020) find that promotions to top jobs increase divorce rates if women get promoted but not if men get promoted. They find that the divorce rates are highest among couples with gender-traditional values, i.e., those who have a large age gap and where the woman takes the majority of the parental leave. It is interesting to see this strong effect on divorce even in a country like Sweden that is (as compared to, e.g., Japan) among the countries with the most gender-egalitarian norms. It highlights that the commitment to reducing gender norms itself does not automatically remove all unconscious gender biases.

While it seems logical that gender norms affect women directly, the fact that many of them have such subtle effects on female labour market success is worrying. It means that even couples that are very dedicated to gender equality might struggle to achieve their goals. For the glass ceiling to disappear it seems imperative to consciously pave the way in which partnerships are formed and lived, taking gender norms into account.

### **Career choices are joint choices, not individual ones**

When making career decisions we often ask ourselves similar questions: Will the new role improve pay? Will I be happier in the new role? Does the new role align with my career goals? We may also be trading off different roles and options. But what we ask ourselves less often is: how does my career choice affect my partner and our joint goals? How will it affect them in the future? And how does it affect the relationship in the short, medium, and long run?

Jennifer Petriglieri (2019) argues that the way in which we make those career decisions is crucial to the success of our partnerships. We should treat them as joint decisions rather than individual ones. She describes how we often make decisions without considering both partner's aspirations. An example she provides is that of a young couple deciding to move for one partner's job that pays very well. While this decision may be the right one, one can also fall into the trap of concentrating too much on practical or money aspects of the job. If the new job pays well but the new location means for the other partner to give up their career aspirations, relocation may be problematic. Petriglieri says for dual-career couples to thrive they should "move from having parallel, independent careers and lives to having interdependent ones". That means that both individuals need to see their personal and career aspirations fulfilled at least in the mid to long-run. A wide aspirations gap, i.e. the gap between one's aspirations and the real-life situation, harms a partnership at the core.

This is not to say that juggling interdependent careers is easy. Particularly once children come into the life of partners, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep up each one's career goals. It has been shown that there is a so-called 'child penalty' for women with children, whose earnings are reduced by 20 per cent overall in the long-run (Kleven et al. 2019). Part of the gender pay gap results from the fact that women cannot spend as many hours at work as their male counterparts due to family commitments (Goldin 2014). With those aspects in mind, partners need to negotiate and re-prioritise across career and family commitments, which is a constant endeavour.

### **Equality as ultimate goal?**

Given the role of norms highlighted above and the difficulties around successfully combining two careers, a desirable ultimate goal is full equality where dual-career couples split up paid work and unpaid household work.

In the traditional economic model of specialisation, however, one would actually expect that partners split up their work in the household and on the job by looking at comparative advantages (Becker 1993). So if one partner earns more or has a better education, it would be rational for that partner to choose to work and the other one to stay at home.

To find out to what extent specialisation is indeed rational and not based on norms, it is helpful to look at how same-sex couples distribute work among each other. Same sex couples distribute household work and paid work more equally than traditional heterosexual couples (i.e., couples where the wife stays at home and the husband works) but in a similar way as non-traditional heterosexual couples (Hofmarcher and Plug 2021). So while couples tend to specialise, they specialise less than traditional couples do, which points at the role of traditional norms rather than comparative advantage for some of the observed specialisation.

Full specialisation (even if rational and not based on norms) is, however, also problematic as it decreases the financial independence of one partner and reduces their bargaining power. Leaving a relationship may become infeasible if this dependence is too large. This is true for both same-sex and heterosexual relationships.

From much of the research mentioned above, it seems that keeping up gender equality is more difficult in more traditional relationships. That is relationships where the age gap is large, for example, or the husband works full-time while the wife stays at home. While this certainly serves as an advice for women to seek out egalitarian partnerships, it is not as easy as that. Because the mere fact of an age difference or traditional mindset does not make an unequal relationship. Also, whether both partners are committed to gender equality (or dual-career and dual-aspiration careers) may only play out during marriage and not be clear at the start.

Raising the awareness of the challenges and barriers to successful relationship is crucial. Removing norms around gender and relationships is also crucial while also more difficult to attain. Societal norms are often formed culturally or fostered within the family from an early age on. Fernández et al. (2004) find that gender norms are passed on across generations. They find that men whose mothers had worked are more likely to have working wives, which highlights the impact of childhood experiences for the formation of norms and identity and occupational segregation. It is also not just the responsibility for men to change but for both partners to negotiate their fair shares and discuss their aspirations. Bobbi Thomason (2022) further highlights the importance of a support network of family, friends and also paid support in form of, for example, childcare, particularly for working women who lack support from their husband.

To finish off the debate on dual-career and dual-aspiration couples: the distribution of tasks at home and at work across partners is not just an issue of fairness and equality but one of efficiency. 90% of fathers, for example, say that taking paternity leave not only improved their relationship with the child but also that with their partner (McKinsey 2021). Also, if more women participated in paid work, it would raise overall productivity by 32% and would allow men to move towards work at home (FT 2022).



#### Notes:

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