

# Gender Roles and Marriage: A Fact Sheet

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## Introduction

Gender roles and expectations play a significant role in couple interaction, family decision-making, and perspectives on marital satisfaction. Gender roles are typically determined by society (Williams and McBain 2006). Over the past several decades, these expectations have changed dramatically in the United States for both men and women due to shifting cultural norms.

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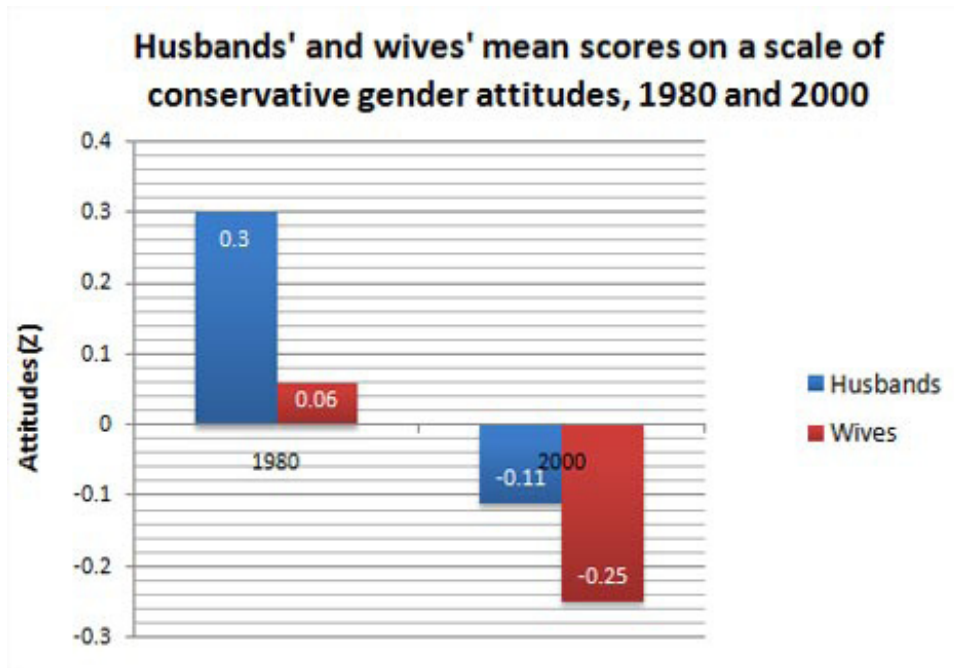
## Background

In the U.S., traditional gender roles and behaviors have typified men as autonomous, powerful, controlling, assertive, aggressive and self-determined. Within the family, the traditional male role has been one of authority and financial responsibility. U.S. women, on the other hand, have traditionally been considered the caregiver and homemaker. In the mid-1950's, it was a common belief that the husband, acting as head of the household, should have more

power than his wife to make key decisions. Recent research shows a dramatic departure from this view that could be explained, in part, by the influx of women into the workforce. In fact, the U.S. Department of Labor reports that almost 60% of women were in the workforce in 2004.

According to a survey conducted in 2007 by Amato, Booth, Johnson and Rogers, by the end of the 1990's, the majority of husbands believed that spouses should share breadwinning, that a wife's employment does not interfere with her role as a mother and that husbands should take on a greater share of the housework when their wives are employed. In turn, studies show that the majority of wives expect husbands to perform a greater share of the household chores and child care than in recent decades.





*This graph illustrates husbands' and wives' mean scores on a scale of conservative gender attitudes in 1980 and 2000 (Amato, Booth, Johnson, Rogers, 2007). This was based on responses to a series of seven statements regarding gender arrangements in marriage. The questions focused mainly on wives' employment and motherhood. Those respondents who supported the view that husbands should be breadwinners and wives should be homemakers and primary caregivers were considered to be conservative. Both African-American husbands and wives in this study held more traditional views than white couples; Latinos were found to be no more or less traditional than whites.*

## New Trends

Research is revealing trends that Americans are moving away from patriarchal marriages. A study conducted in 2000 by Amato, Booth, Rogers and Stanley found that 61 percent husbands and 74 percent of wives reported that husbands sometimes had the final word, while 65 percent of husbands and 70 percent of wives reported that wives sometimes had the final word (Amato et al 2007). The Pew Research Center (2008) conducted a telephone survey to assess the decision-making process in American homes; 2250 adults were interviewed. Forty-three percent of all couples surveyed reported that the woman makes decisions in more areas than

the man. By contrast, 26 percent of couples reported that men make more of the decisions. Joint decision making arrangements were reported by 31 percent of couples.

## The Impact of Gender Role Expectations on Relationships

There is empirical evidence that expectations can affect couples in two ways: 1) They can serve as goal structures in which partners can shape and guide their relationship or 2) They can create a "counterfactual" phenomenon, where people compare what has occurred within their relationship to what *might* have occurred. In essence, the former

can cause positive changes within relationships while the latter can create negative outcomes and disappointment. One study found that “unrealistic expectations” was the major reason that 30 percent of women respondents gave for their divorces in Texas (Twogether in Texas Baseline Report on Marriage in the Lone Star State, 2008). Thus, it is essential for both members of the couple to understand the gender role expectations of themselves and of their partners throughout the course of the marriage.

There is also considerable evidence suggesting that men and women have very different approaches to solving problems and dealing with conflict (Hepp 2008).

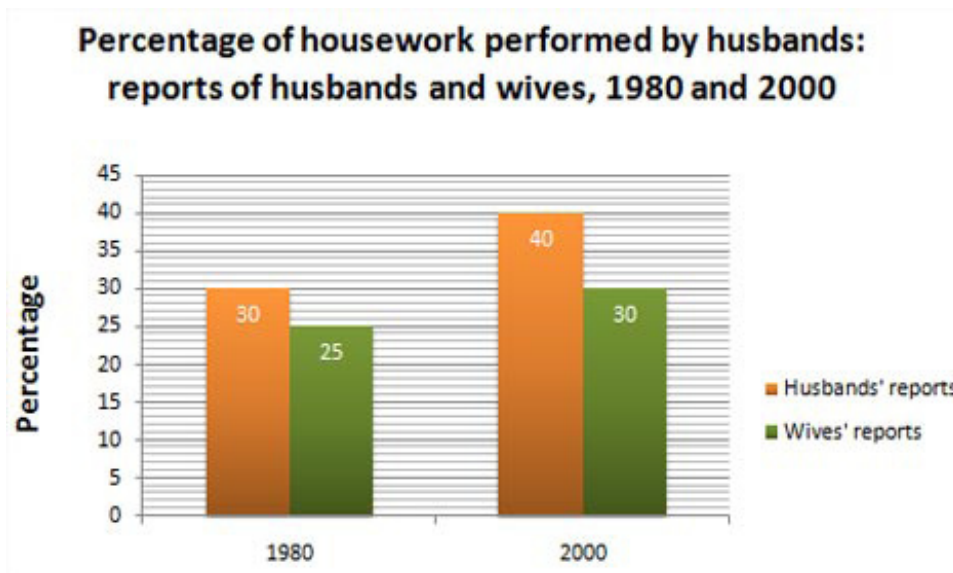
There is also considerable evidence suggesting that men and women have very different approaches to solving problems and dealing with conflict (Hepp 2008). Gottman (1999) found that in cases where one partner in the marriage felt emotionally shut

out, men in 85 percent of those marriages were the ones to do be emotionally unavailable. Gottman’s research also found that men tend to take on a “flight” response to conflict.

Intimacy is another area where gender differences can cause conflict in marriage. Research has shown that men tend to define intimacy in terms of shared activities while women focus more on verbal communication in order to establish partner intimacy. (Markman, Stanley, Blumberg 2001).

### Differences by Subgroup

Results from a 2007 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center showed that respondents reported that “shared household duties” were the third most important component for a successful marriage (out of nine options). Coltrane (1996) and Shelton & John (1996) found that women, even when they are employed full time, perform the bulk of routine housework and child care. Amato, Booth, Johnson and Rogers (2007) also found that African-American and Latino husbands both performed more



housework than did white husbands. Interestingly, the same researchers indicated that men and women between 1980 and 2000 have reported that wives have become happier with their husband's work around the house while husbands have become less happy (see graph below).

## Hispanic Couples

According to a memo entitled "Gender Norms and the Role of the Extended Family" based on expert's discussions at several research meetings on Hispanic healthy marriages, it is important to examine traditional gender roles and family systems in different populations to understand their impact on couple dynamics (memo prepared by ACF, 2005). Although there is research that indicates that traditional Hispanic roles are not as predominant within recent years (see results from the Amato, Booth, Johnson and Rogers study, 2007), there is contradictory research showing that Hispanic men and women are influenced by traditional and idealized cultural expectations. Such traditional values include a focus on the woman in the marriage as a submissive and dependent mother figure rather than a wife ("marianismo") while the husband is dominant and virile ("machismo"). There is much discussion between scholars about the positive and negative outcomes that such traditions can create within the family system. The key is to recognize that the degree to which this ideology shapes the Hispanic man and woman prior to their union is going to provide the framework for each individual's expectations of their own gender role within the marriage and for the roles of his or her partner.

## African American Couples

Scholars studying African American gender roles agree that gender role distinctions among this population have been negated to a certain extent

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(Hill 2002). Scholars argue that African American women are taught to be independent and strong and to prepare for careers rather than to rely on marriage for economic security (Collins, 1987 and Higginbotham & Weber 1992, as cited in Hill). The literature contends that African American men, due to challenges regarding unemployment and low wages, are unable to assume traditional gender roles within their families (cf. Blake & Darling, 1994; Gibbs, 1988; Hunter & Davis, 1992; W.J. Wilson, 1997, as cited in Hill). Practitioners should understand that an African American's individual upbringing and internal view of gender roles will influence the shaping of marital expectations regarding these roles.

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