

Gender Roles and family stability: the influence of a more active father's role on divorce risk in the Nordic countries

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Increasing union instability, especially among parents, have prompt theoretical explanations of the possible links between gender roles and family stability. In the past, women's economic dependence on their spouses was an important reason of family stability (Oppenheimer 1994). Family instability has been linked to increasing proportions of dual-earner couples, where both men and women are engaged in labor market work. These changes have not automatically resulted in equal division of labor in the home and create a gap between gender equality in the public and private spheres which is a possible source of family instability. In this study we ask whether a smaller gap in gender equality between the two spheres has a stabilizing effect on the family.

The actual policies and policy discourse in a country are likely to influence the development of gender relations in the family (Oláh 2001). Gender equality is an explicit policy goal in the Nordic countries which have a long tradition of promoting gender equality through family policy. On the one side, policies have actively supported female employment facilitating the combination of childrearing and female employment. On the other side, specific policies are aimed of encouraging men's participation in the domestic sphere and thus change gender relations in the families.

The aim of this paper is to examine whether more active fathers role in the family has a negative effect of divorce risk. We will use unique data allowing for detailed information from administrative registers of the whole population of men and women in two Nordic countries – Sweden and Norway. We make use of one specific family policy, the parental leave program, which both promotes female employment and challenges the gender division at home. In general, parents are offered a generous wage-compensation for staying home with their newborn child for around one year. Part of the leave is reserved for the fathers meaning that if the leave days are not taken by the father they cannot be transferred to the mother. The introduction of this father's quota is a unique Nordic feature and we will use the reform to estimate the casual effect of more active fathers role in the family on the risk of divorce. The reform has been embraced by the fathers and the majority of all fathers make use of the father's quota. Our analysis is based on an assumption that father's use of parental leave is an investment in the relationship possibly generating more equality in the family in general and thus leads to more stable relationships.

Our analysis will have a class perspective as it is not obvious that the relation of gender roles and family stability are the same in different groups, i.e. couples with higher education are both associated with more gender equality and more family stability. For this we will set up separate analysis for different educational groups in order to test whether the relationship between gender equality in the family and union stability differs by educational attainment.

We will also consider whether there is cross-national variations in the relation of gender roles and family instability. Family policies in Sweden and Norway are fairly similar, but there are some key differences that can provide country differences. For instance, Norway has a longer history of dualistic family policies that support both dual-earner couples and provide direct family support. Sweden on the other hand have had a more consistent orientation towards gender equality. Comparing countries with fairly similar policies, and economic, social and cultural conditions, we are better able to isolate the effects of the family policy on demographic behavior from the effects of other factors.

Theoretical framework

Let us follow two sets of arguments that lead to contradictory interpretations about the relationship between gender roles and family stability (Cooke 2006). First, in the traditional male breadwinner-female caregiver societies gender specialization increase couples' mutual dependence (Becker 1981) and thereby maintain family stability (Oppenheimer 1994). In the process towards more dual-earner couples women's economic empowerment reduces her dependence upon men which becomes a threat to the benefits for specialization and thus predicting greater divorce risks (Cooke 2006). Second, when both men and women are participating in the labor market the division of paid and unpaid work in the family becomes a result of negotiations between the spouses based on relative wages, preferences etc. (Cooke 2006). Here, alternatives to marriage are seen as important determinants of bargaining power. This means that women's empowerment may invoke a credible threat of divorce when bargaining over division of domestic labor, and thus a more equal share of domestic work should decrease the risk of divorce (Breen and Cooke 2005). In other words when women and men contribute more equally to the family economy an unequal share of responsibility for domestic work becomes perceived both as unfair and problematic given constraints on time and energy, and thus generates a demand for a more equal division family work among women (Oláh 2001). From this it has been argued that increasing divorce risks is not only reflecting more female employment, but also men's lack of changing behavior in response to increasing female employment (Cooke 2006).

There is evidence that gives support for both interpretations. In a comparison between the United States and Germany Cooke (2006) finds that while in Germany any move away from gender specialization, either in terms of her involvement in paid labor work or his involvement in unpaid work, increase the risk of divorce, while in the United States, more gender equality in the family are associated with more marital stability. In a comparison between Sweden and Hungary Oláh (2001) finds that gender relations does not seems to be important for family stability in Hungary, while there is a positive association in Sweden. A recent study from the United Kingdom shows that the divorce rate is lower when fathers engage in the highest level of unpaid work and childcare regardless of their wives' employment statuses (Sigle-Rushton 2010). This study also shows that men's active involvement in unpaid work can substantially offset the destabilizing effect of women's employment (Sigle-Rushton 2010).

The relationship between gender roles and family stability is undoubtedly depending on the social context. In societies where there is no policies reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies, men's greater participation in domestic tasks results in more stable marriages regardless of women's employment (Cooke 2006). In most societies that have encouraged an equal participation between paid work and family work there is still a gap between ideology and

practice. It is argued that the establishment of the dual-earner family model influences family stability only if it is accompanied by some changes in traditional gender relations within the family (Oláh 2001).

Given the strong focus on gender equality in the Nordic countries it is good reasons to expect that more father involvement in the family and more equal gender roles increase marital stability as suggested in the theoretical arguments. We test this using critical juncture in time when major changes in policy occur. In this study we use the introduction of the father's quota. The introduction of the father's quota is related to the gender roles at home, in particular father's role in the family. A more gender equal use of parental leave might help couples achieve more equality in total time spent in paid and unpaid work. A smaller gap between gender roles in the public and private sphere can thereby have a stabilizing effect on the family. In relationships where gender equality is accepted by the partners, men tend to take parental leave both in order to take their share of parenting responsibilities and because they wish to spend more time with their children. More specifically we expect the introduction of the father's quota to increase father's involvement in the family which has stabilizing effect on unions (lower divorce risks).

Data and methods

We use data from the national population registers covering the whole population. Each person is identified by a unique identification numbers. This allows us to link data from different administrative registers and we will construct datasets that contain childbearing histories and longitudinal information on income and education. The data cover an almost twenty year period 1993 to 2011. The father's quota reform was introduced at different times, 1993 in Norway and 1995 in Sweden. When the reform was implemented it was 4 weeks in Norway and Sweden. In both countries there has been additional reforms increasing the father's quota to the total of 10 weeks in Sweden and 12 weeks in Norway.

In order to examine the relations between the introduction of the father's quota in the parental leave policy and divorce we make use of a "quasi-experimental" approach (e.g. Angrist and Pischke 2009). This means that we focus on so-called "critical junctures" which is major changes in policy, i.e. the introduction of the father's quota, which is likely to have an impact on subsequent behavior. To understand the "quasi-experimental" approach, we can first consider the ideal of a controlled laboratory experiment in which we are able to randomly assign some families to receive a "treatment" (the father taking longer leave) and other families into a "control group" (the father takes little or no leave). After some time, we can then compare outcomes (here divorce) for the "treatment" and "control" groups and reach conclusions about the effect of paternal leave-taking. Obviously, it is quite difficult to implement such experiments in the real world, but the introduction of the father's quota creates a situation in which some (pre-reform) families experience one parental leave regime and other families experience a different (post-reform) system. Assuming that inclusion in the pre- and post-reform populations is largely random or exogenously determined, comparison of outcomes for pre- and post-reform families would allow us to reach stronger conclusions about the true effects of leave-taking than would be the case with standard correlation studies.

Innovation

The proposed analysis is innovative in several ways. To our knowledge, this is the first time the parental leave policy including the father's quota has been used in analysis of marital stability. The analysis from Sweden by Oláh (2001) used data that covered the period prior to the father's quota reform. Therefore we do not know how a policy with an explicit aim of changing the gender roles in the family are interrelated with marital stability. Another innovative feature of this study is our research strategy. Using a sophisticated method the aim is to remove some of the selection in the relationship between gender equality in the family and divorce in order to assess the causal effect of the father's quota reform on divorce. This will give improved knowledge about whether and how more equal gender roles in the families influence union stability. Using administrative register data including information of the whole population allows us to perform more detailed analysis, distinguishing into rather small groups, than previous analysis using survey data have been able to. Last, to the best of our knowledge, no comparative studies of the parental leave policy and divorce in the Nordic countries exist.

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