

Unequal, Unfair, and Unhappy: The 3 Biggest Myths About Marriage Today

By *W. Bradford Wilcox*



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There is only one problem with the dour and dismal portrait of heterosexual marriage painted by Liza Mundy in this month's *Atlantic* cover [story](#). It's wrong.

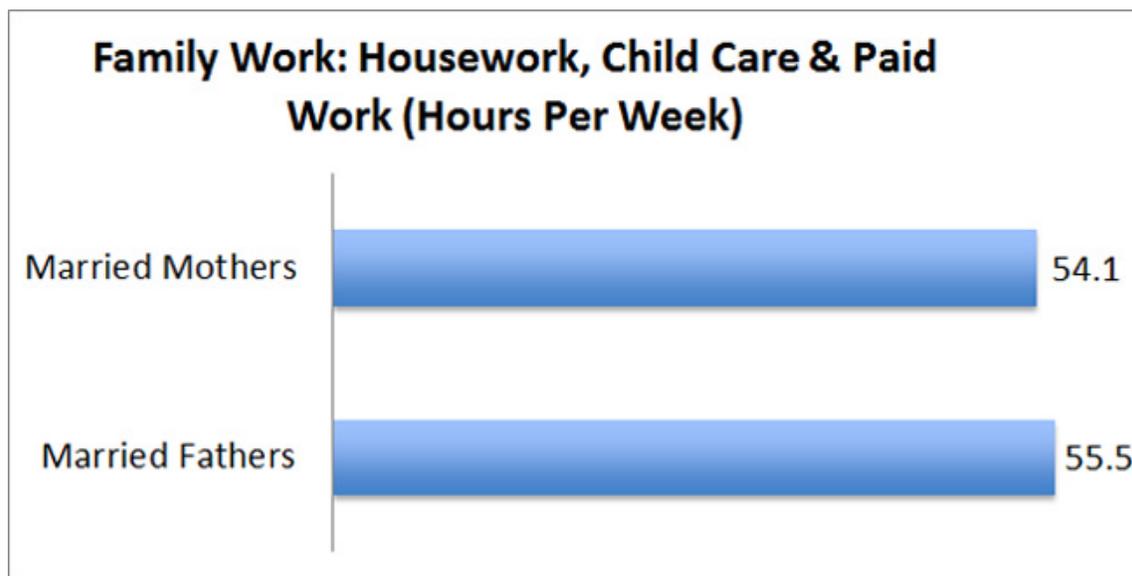
In her bleak rendering, contemporary marriage comes across as unequal, unfair, and unhappy to today's wives. Wives are burdened with an unequal and unfair "second shift" of housework and childcare, husbands enjoy "free time" while their wives toil away at home, lingering gender inequalities in family life leave many wives banging "their heads on their desks in despair," and one poor woman cannot even have a second child because she does "everything" and her husband does nothing. Mundy also suggests that recent [declines](#) in women's happiness can be laid at the feet of "lingering inequity in male-female marriage."

Of course, it's true that some marriages are unequal and unfair, leaving a minority of wives (and husbands) unhappy. And most husbands and wives experience moments or even periods of frustration

with their work-family arrangements. Nevertheless, the big picture for marriage in America—for those Americans fortunate enough to have tied the knot—is markedly more rosy than Mundy's portrait would suggest. Most husbands and wives make about equal total contributions to the paid and unpaid work needed to sustain a family, judge their marriages to be fair, and are happily married.

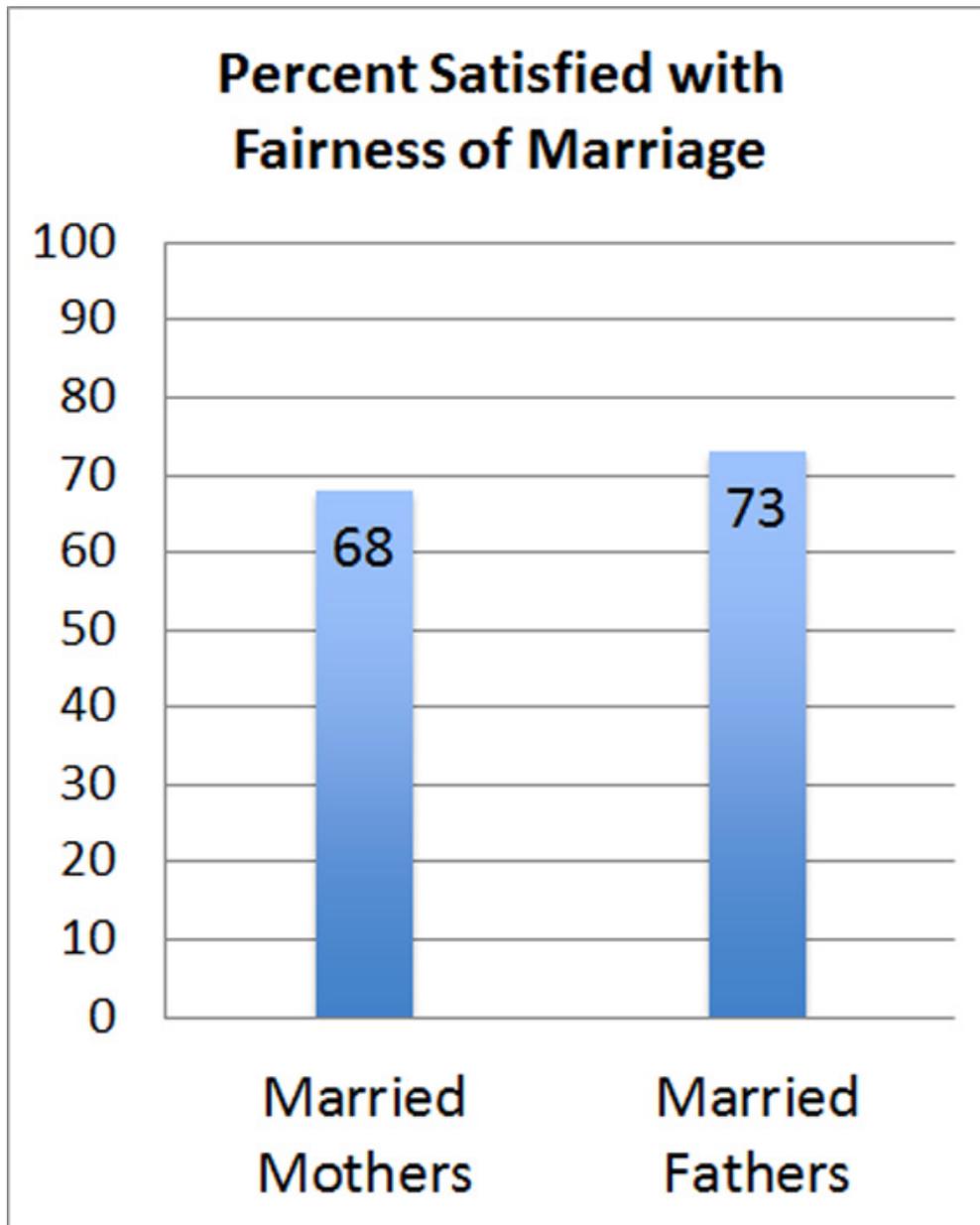


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Based on married parents age 18-64 (Pew Research Center, 2013)

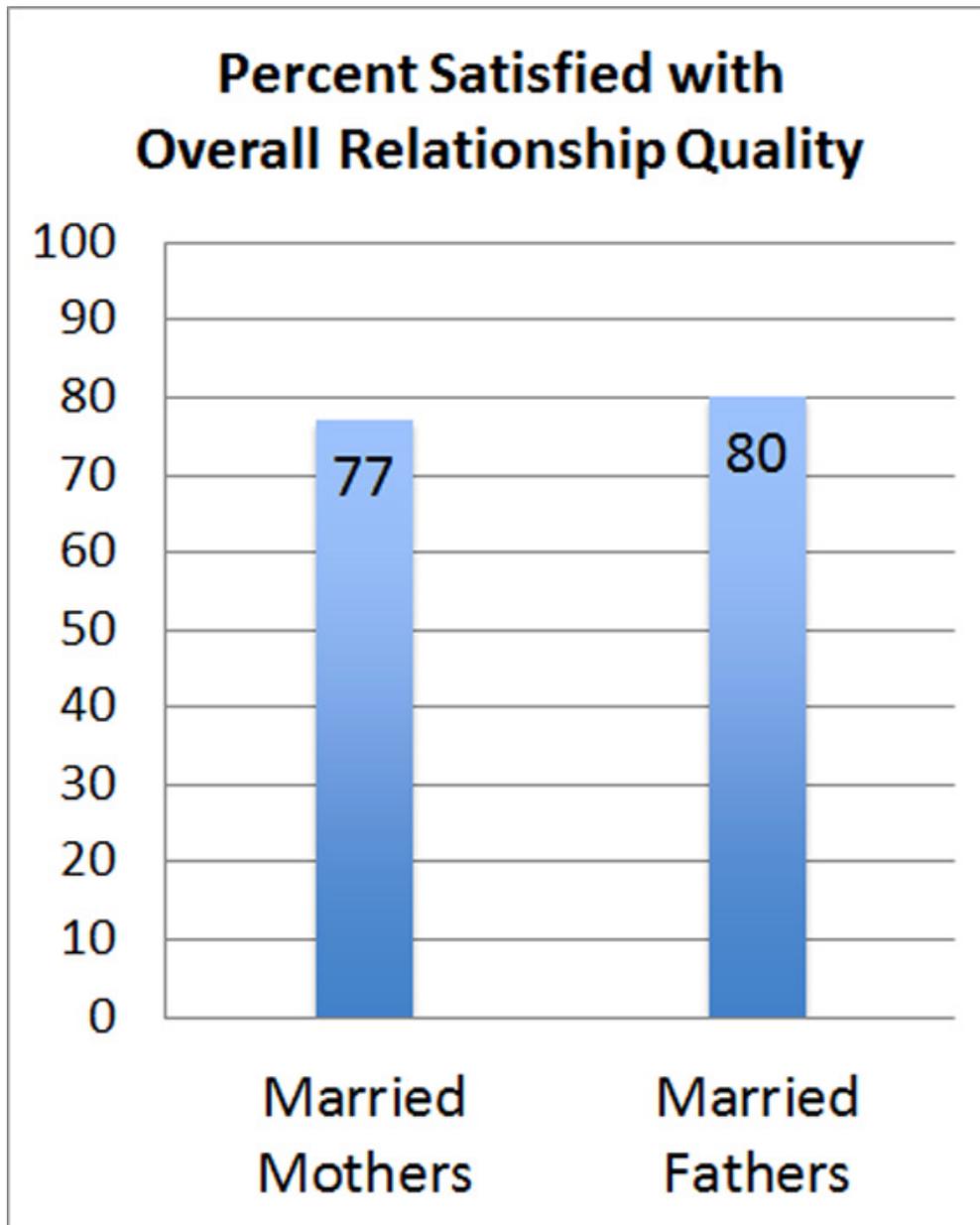
Take family work. When you combine paid work, housework, and childcare, today's married parents both put in about 55 hours, according to a recent report from the Pew Research Center. It's true that married mothers do more of the housework and childcare, but in most households this doesn't amount to an onerous burden for them. That's because most married mothers do *not* work full-time (43 percent work full-time) and do *not* wish to work full-time (just 23 percent wish to work full-time, a fact rarely mentioned in media accounts of work and family life).



Based on 2,624 married parents age 18-45 (Source: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010-2011)

The rough parity in total family work hours enjoyed by most couples, combined with the fact that most married mothers don't wish to work full-time, may explain why most husbands and wives judge their marriages to be fair. In fact, 73 percent of married fathers and 68 percent of married mothers reported that their marriage was fair, according to the 2010-2011 Survey of Marital Generosity.

Perhaps in part because husbands' and wives' perceptions of equity are important predictors of contemporary marital happiness, most married parents report that they are satisfied with their marriages. Specifically, 80 percent of today's married fathers and 77 percent of today's married mothers say they are satisfied or very satisfied with their marriage.



Based on 2,624 married parents age 18-45 (Source: Survey of Marital Generosity, 2010-2011)

Thus, in average families across the nation, married men *and* married women work roughly the same total hours for their families, judge their marriages to be fair, and enjoy happy marriages.

So, why was Mundy so off the mark in her depiction of contemporary marriage? The most notable exception to the positive marriage portrait I have painted here can be found among married couples with children where both spouses work full-time—the one group that featured prominently in the statistics cited by Mundy. In these marriages, there really is a "second shift" for many married mothers; wives in these marriages do about five hours more of total work per week and enjoy six hours less free time per week than their husbands, according to [research](#) by sociologist Suzanne Bianchi. Such marriages may indeed be more vulnerable to the kinds of tensions and unhappiness Mundy dwelled upon.

But for most married men and women today, marriage looks pretty good. It may not be a "[24/7 Sleepover Party](#)," but it is basically equal, fair, and happy. And that's the real and often unreported good news about marriage in America today.

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