

May 2025

A Quadruple Bind? How Romantic Partner Dynamics May Hold Women Back at Work, Especially in the “Winner Take All” Economy

Melissa Vink
Utrecht University, the Netherlands

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lawandinequality.org/>

Recommended Citation

Melissa Vink, *A Quadruple Bind? How Romantic Partner Dynamics May Hold Women Back at Work, Especially in the “Winner Take All” Economy*, 43 L. & INEQUALITY 83 (2025).
Available at: <https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/lawineq/vol43/iss3/6>

A Quadruple Bind? How Romantic Partner Dynamics May Hold Women Back at Work, Especially in the “Winner Take All” Economy

Melissa Vink[†]

Introduction

Despite the tremendous gains for women in the workplace over the past decades, gender inequality persists, and the gender gap in wages seems to increase rather than decrease.¹ Women remain less likely to gain access to positions of power or to obtain jobs with higher social and financial rewards than similarly qualified men.² In *Fair Shake: Women and the Fight for a Just Economy*, Naomi Cahn, June Carbone, and Nancy Levit explain how the “winner take all” (WTA) approach to business undermines women’s prospects for achieving equality in the workplace.³ In this system, there is a disproportionately high payoff for a single dominant player and those at the top of the WTA system can take a much larger share of the available institutional resources. To illustrate, the ratio of CEO vs. ordinary worker salary was 2 to 1 in 1965 versus 344 to 1 in 2022.⁴ In such a system, those who are highly competitive, ruthless, and rule-breaking thrive and reach top positions.

[†]. Dr. Melissa Vink is assistant professor at the Department of Social, Health, and Organizational Psychology at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. She received her PhD from Utrecht University in 2020. She investigates the factors that hinder or facilitate equal opportunities in the workplace through the lenses of interpersonal and intergroup relationships.

1. *Closing the Gender Gaps 2.0: Fresh Data Show More Work to Do*, GOLDMAN SACHS (2019), https://www.goldmansachs.com/pdfs/insights/pages/gender-pay-gap-2_0-f/report.pdf [<https://perma.cc/B7KF-9CGM>]; *2022 State of the Gender Pay Gap Report*, Payscale (2025), <https://www.payscale.com/research-and-insights/gender-pay-gap> [<https://perma.cc/ELH7-RYZW>].

2. Aparna Joshi, Soojin Oh & Mark DesJardine, *A New Perspective on Gender Bias in the Upper Echelons: Why Stakeholder Variability Matters*, 49 ACAD. MGMT. REV. 322 (2024); David R. Galos & Alexander Coppock, *Gender Composition Predicts Gender Bias: A Meta-Reanalysis of Hiring Discrimination Audit Experiments*, 9 SCI. ADVANCES (2023).

3. NAOMI CAHN, JUNE CARBONE, & NANCY LEVIT, *FAIR SHAKE: WOMEN AND THE FIGHT FOR A JUST ECONOMY* (2024).

4. Josh Bivens & Jori Kanda, *CEO Pay Slightly Declined in 2022*, ECON. POL’Y INST. (2023) <https://www.epi.org/publication/ceo-pay-in-2022/#epi-toc-1> [<https://perma.cc/N2Q9-M8DJ>].

The authors of *Fair Shake* delineate how the hyper-competitiveness of the WTA system becomes detrimental to everyone and women in particular. Specifically, women are trapped in a “triple bind:” 1) if they don’t compete on the same terms as the men in the WTA workplace, they lose, 2) if women do try to compete on the same terms as the men, they lose because they are disproportionately punished for the sharp elbows or perceived misdeeds, and 3) when women see that they can’t win on the same terms as men, they take themselves out of the game—if they haven’t been pushed out already. The common denominator of these binding factors of women at work are gender stereotypes that describe and prescribe women to be communal and caring and not to be agentic and competitive, and that explain why gender bias and discrimination in the workplace persist.⁵ However, gender stereotypes also strongly impact women’s and men’s lives outside of their work. Specifically, regarding romantic relationships, the stereotypical expectation that men should be breadwinners and women should prioritize caregiving abilities negatively impacts those men and women who divide work and care in a less traditional manner.⁶ These gender stereotypes have an additional binding effect on heterosexual women in the WTA system, as when they surpass their male partner in societal status, they have to deal with negative consequences at home, which, in turn, affect their career and work choices.⁷

In this white paper, I will delineate how romantic partner dynamics are the fourth binding factor that explains why women are worse off in the WTA system. I do this by showing the influence of persisting gender stereotypes on work and relationship outcomes for couples in which the woman is more successful than her male partner (i.e., a role-reversed relationship). First, I show why others judge role-reversed couples less positively than traditional couples by examining how backlash mechanisms operate when the woman has higher status than her male partner. Second, I explain how these backlash mechanisms and stereotypes operate within couples

5. Madeline Heilman, Suzette Caleo, & Francesca Manzi, *Women at Work: Pathways from Gender Stereotypes to Gender Bias and Discrimination*, 11 ANN. REV. ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCH. & ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAV. 165 (2024).

6. Melissa Vink, Belle Derks, Naomi Ellemers & Tanja van der Lippe, *Penalized for Challenging Traditional Gender Roles: Why Heterosexual Relationships in Which Women Wear the Pants May Be More Precarious*, 88 SEX ROLES 130 (2023).

7. Melissa Vink, Belle Derks, Naomi Ellemers, & Tanja van der Lippe, *All Is Nice and Well Unless She Outshines Him: Higher Social Status Benefits Women’s Well-Being and Relationship Quality But Not If They Surpass Their Male Partner*, 79 J. SOC. ISSUES 494, 495 (2023).

by examining how these evaluations impact how women deal and cope with their role-reversed relationship and how this impacts their career intentions and decisions. Third, I show how these negative mechanisms of gender stereotypes for role-reversed couples are especially pronounced in countries that uphold a traditional gender stereotypical culture, which is highly associated with the WTA system⁸. The main tenet of this paper is that, given the strong implicit norms that men should be the ones with higher status than their female partner; in attaining societal status, women are bound by the level of societal status that their male partner has attained. I define societal status as a combination of income, educational level and prestige in society. As sociocultural mechanisms are at play here, I will provide recommendations on decreasing the negative impact of breaking traditional gender roles by looking at structural solutions rather than individual ones.

I. Background

Relationships in which the woman has attained higher societal status than her partner remain scarce. On the one hand, in the United States and almost all European countries, it is nowadays more likely for women to be more highly educated than their male partners in romantic relationships.⁹ However, on the other hand, the percentage of relationships in which the woman earns more than her male partner remains small (e.g., only 16% of American women had a higher income than their husband in 2022, a percentage that has dropped 1% in the last ten years¹⁰). Moreover, there is growing evidence that these couples experience more negative relationship outcomes compared to more traditional couples. Individual outcomes include higher marital distress among husbands, more worries and guilt among wives, more use of erectile dysfunction medication among men and more sleep deprivation and anxiety medication among women.¹¹ Relational outcomes include

8. Melissa Vink, Tanja van der Lippe, Belle Derks & Naomi Ellemers, *Does National Context Matter When Women Surpass Their Partner in Status?*, 12 FRONTIERS. IN. PSYCH. 670439 (2022).

9. Yolien de Hauw, André Grow & Jan van Bavel, *The Reversed Gender Gap in Education and Assortative Mating in Europe*, 33 EUR. J. POPULATION 445 (2017).

10. Richard Fry, Carolina Aragão, Kiley Hurst & Kim Parker, *In a Growing Share of U.S. Marriages, Husbands and Wives Earn About the Same*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (Apr. 13, 2023), <https://pewrsr.ch/3Af1q1n> [<https://perma.cc/3YYJ-TKUZ>].

11. Joanna Syrda, *Spousal Relative Income and Male Psychological Distress*, 46 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. BULL. 976 (2020); Rebecca J. Meisenbach, *The Female Breadwinner: Phenomenological Experience and Gendered Identity in Work/Family*

lower experienced relationship quality and higher rates of marriage dissolution.¹²

Understanding the underlying mechanisms that are driving these negative relationship outcomes for role-reversed couples is important because this identifies means to prevent or reduce them. Similarly, as the authors of *Fair Shake* show for the triple bind at work, the bind of heterosexual marriages that straitjacket women into traditional roles should be investigated through the lens of sociocultural factors. Norms about gender roles within romantic relationships remain quite traditional as many people still expect men to be the breadwinner and women to be the main caregiver of the family.¹³ Although most people in the United States and European countries agree that it is acceptable for women to do at least some paid work and for men to do at least some caregiving, most people disapprove of men and women who have completely reversed these roles.¹⁴ To illustrate, less than 3% of Dutch inhabitants agree it is better for a family when the woman does most of the paid work and the man most of the unpaid work at home, whereas 17% agree it is better for a family when the man does most of the paid work and the woman most of the unpaid work.¹⁴ It is especially these norms about gender role divisions at home that have barely changed over the last forty years, which is surprising given the increase of women who have paid jobs and have attained higher educational degrees.¹⁵

The sociocultural factors impacting the lives of role-reversed couples can be traced back to gender stereotypes within societies. Gender stereotypes follow from observations of men and women in gender typical social roles, such as men who are the breadwinners of their family and have higher status roles in society and women who are homemakers and have lower status roles. In turn, gender

Spaces, 62 SEX ROLES 2 (2009); Lamar Pierce, Michael Dahl & Jimmi Nielsen, *In Sickness and in Wealth: Psychological and Sexual Costs of Income Comparison in Marriage*, 39 PERS. & SOC. PSYCH. BULL. 359 (2013).

12. See, e.g., Marianne Bertrand, Emir Kamenica & Jessica Pan, *Gender Identity and Relative Income Within Households*, 130 Q.J. ECON. 571 (2015).

13. Thekla Morgenroth & Madeline E. Heilman, *Should I Stay or Should I Go? Implications of Maternity Leave Choice for Perceptions of Working Mothers*, 72 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCH. 53, 53–56 (2017).

14. Wil Portegijs & Marion van den Brakel, *Emancipatiemonitor 2018*, SOCIAAL EN CULTUREEL PLANBUREAU (2018), <https://digitaal.scp.nl/emancipatiemonitor2018/assets/pdf/emancipatiemonitor-2018-SCP.pdf> [https://perma.cc/7DK2-ZTCG]; *Breadwinner Moms*, PEW RSCH. CTR. (May 29, 2013), <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/29/breadwinner-moms> [https://perma.cc/X6RK-CAJ2].

15. Brittany A. Dernberger & Joanna R. Pepin, *Gender Flexibility, But Not Equality: Young Adults' Division of Labor Preferences*, 7 SOCIO. SCI. 36 (2020).

stereotypes are not only descriptive, resulting in the belief that men are “agentic” (e.g., ambitious, independent) and women are “communal” (e.g., warm, concerned about others¹⁶), but also prescriptive: they dictate what men and women *should* be like and proscriptive in what men and women *should not* be like.¹⁷ To illustrate, although weak feminine traits (e.g., being emotional, naïve) are tolerated for women, these traits are proscribed for men. Also, although dominant masculine traits (e.g., dominance, arrogance) are tolerated for men, these traits are proscribed for women.

Men and women who break with these gender stereotypes are likely to receive social and economic penalties (a process called “backlash”¹⁸). Specifically, men who succeed in feminine occupations—domains that are still seen as lower in status—tend to be viewed as weak and are consequently disrespected and less preferred as bosses. This process is termed the “weakness penalty.”¹⁹ Similarly, women who succeed in masculine occupations—domains that are still seen as higher in status—tend to be viewed as interpersonally hostile and, therefore, disliked and less preferred as bosses. This penalty has been termed the “dominance penalty.”²⁰

Besides being confronted with negative evaluations of others when violating prescriptive gender stereotypes, people actively seek meaning of the social groups that they belong to, and they do this through self-categorization and self-stereotyping.²¹ This also applies to gender, such that men and women themselves care about

16. Madeline E. Heilman, *Description and Prescription: How Gender Stereotypes Prevent Women's Ascent up the Organizational Ladder*, 57 J. SOC. ISSUES 657 (2001).

17. Deborah A. Prentice & Erica Carranza, *What Women and Men Should Be, Shouldn't Be, Are Allowed to Be, and Don't Have to Be: The Contents of Prescriptive Gender Stereotypes*, 26 PSYCH. WOMEN Q. 269 (2002).

18. Laurie A. Rudman, Corinne A. Moss-Racusin, Julie E. Phelan & Sanne Nauts, *Status Incongruity and Backlash Effects: Defending the Gender Hierarchy Motivates Prejudice Toward Female Leaders*, 48 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCH. 165 (2012).

19. Madeline E. Heilman & Aaron S. Wallen, *Wimpy and Undeserving of Respect: Penalties for Men's Gender-Inconsistent Success*, 46 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCH. 664 (2010).

20. Madeline E. Heilman & Tyler G. Okimoto, *Why Are Women Penalized for Success at Male Tasks?: The Implied Communality Deficit*, 92 J. APPLIED PSYCH. 81 (2007).

21. Nyla R. Branscombe, Naomi Ellemers, Russell Spears & Bertjan Doosje, *The Context and Content of Social Identity Threat*, in SOCIAL IDENTITY: CONTEXT, COMMITMENT, CONTENT 35 (Naomi Ellemers, Russell Spears & Bertjan Doosje eds. 1999).

acting in line with gendered behaviors and traits. Gender norms about what is or is not appropriate have a strong influence on people, and people often try to avoid gender role violations.²² Also, in reaction to perceived gender role violations, people adhere even more to prescriptive gender stereotypes.²³ For these reasons, gender stereotypes persist and are quite resistant to change.²⁴

II. Analysis

In explaining how gender stereotypes impact women who surpass their male partner in societal status, I will first delineate how backlash mechanisms explain why people often evaluate role-reversed couples more negatively than traditional couples.

A. *Women and Men in Role-Reversed Relationships Face Backlash*

In two experimental studies conducted in the United States (223 participants) and in the Netherlands (269 participants), my colleagues and I investigated whether women with higher societal status than their partner are perceived to be the dominant and agentic one *relative to* their partner, whereas men with lower societal status than their partner are perceived to be the weak one *relative to* their partner.²⁵ As consequences of these dominance and weakness perceptions, we anticipated that people would perceive role-reversed relationships as less satisfying, find these women less likeable and have less respect for these men.

In the two studies, we investigated these hypotheses by manipulating women's status relative to their male partner by presenting participants with a vignette about a fictional couple (Ryan and Anna), as well as information about their occupations. We included three conditions: one in which Anna had a higher status occupation than Ryan, one in which Anna and Ryan had an occupation with equal status, and one in which Anna had a lower status occupation than Ryan. Furthermore, we orthogonally

22. Emily T. Amanatullah & Michael W. Morris, *Negotiating Gender Roles: Gender Differences in Assertive Negotiating Are Mediated by Women's Fear of Backlash and Attenuated When Negotiating on Behalf of Others*, 98 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. 256 (2010).

23. See, e.g., Jennifer K. Bosson, Joseph A. Vandello, Rochelle M. Burnaford, Jonathan R. Weaver & S. Arzu Wasti, *Precarious Manhood and Displays of Physical Aggression*, 35 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. BULL. 623 (2009).

24. Elizabeth L. Haines, Kay Deaux & Nicole Lofaro, *The Times They Are a-Changing . . . Or Are They Not? A Comparison of Gender Stereotypes, 1983–2014*, 40 PSYCH. WOMEN Q. 353 (2016).

25. Vink et al., *supra* note 6.

manipulated Ryan's absolute status (medium vs. high) in order to test whether backlash in the relational domain is indeed predicted by the relative status of the woman compared to the man, instead of the absolute status of the man.

In the U.S. sample, the average age of participants was 35.19 ($SD = 9.21$), and the majority of participants were of white ethnic origin (51.6%) or Asian ethnic origin (42.2%). Most participants had a bachelor's degree (41.3%), were high school graduates or equivalent (21.1%), or had a master's degree (19.7%). Participants were married (61.9%) or single (38.1%). Also, the majority of participants were employed for wages (72.6%) or self-employed (20.6%). In the Dutch sample, the average age was similar to that of the U.S. sample ($M = 32.96$, $SD = 13.33$). Education levels were also similar (i.e., most participants had a bachelor's degree (31.2%), a higher educational degree (29%), or a master's degree (23.8%)). Most participants were employed for wages (43.9%) or were students (34.6%). They were mostly single (34.6%) or married (26.4%).

In the U.S. sample, we controlled for participants' education level, ethnicity (Asian vs. white ethnic origin), marital status (married vs. single), and employment status (wages vs. self-employed). In the Dutch sample, we also controlled for participants' education level and employment status as well as whether participants were recruited through a platform (i.e., Prolific academic) vs. convenience sampling.

In both studies, the results revealed firstly that when people thought that Anna had an occupation with higher status than Ryan, they perceived Anna to be the dominant one in the relationship and Ryan to be the weak one in the relationship. Also, in this condition, people disliked Anna because of her relative dominance and had less respect for Ryan because of his relative weakness. Moreover, people expected the relationship to be less satisfying when they rated Anna to be the dominant one and Ryan to be the weak one in the role-reversed relationship. Importantly, these effects of the status distribution between Anna and Ryan were found over and above the effects of the absolute societal status of Ryan. It is thus not the low absolute status of the man that predicts backlash, rather, the fact that the female partner has surpassed the male partner in status predicts social penalties for the couple.

Interestingly, we also found that Anna's relative agency can buffer against backlash for her. People evaluated Anna to be the agentic one in her relationship when she had higher status than

Ryan. As a consequence of her relative agency, people also perceived Anna to be more likeable and had more respect for her. This finding is in line with a growing body of literature showing that the role of agency has changed for women due to societal developments that made it more common for women to take up agentic roles in U.S. and European societies.²⁶ This suggests that people think more positively of women who have higher status roles, but that their status is bounded by the level of societal status that their male partner has attained.

Men and women thus risk backlash when they are in a role-reversed relationship in which the woman has the highest status occupation of the two. However, for women, being the agentic one in a role-reversed relationship can have some positive effects on how she is perceived by others.

B. Consequences of “Wearing the Pants in the Relationship”

The aforementioned backlash mechanisms show how people outside the relationship react when they are confronted with another couple’s relationship in which the woman has higher societal status than the man. Although these perceptions of others are important to understand why gender stereotypes about heterosexual relationships persist, it is also important to understand how men and women in role-reversed relationships deal with the non-traditional nature of their relationships. On the one hand, it is not self-evident that perceptions that outsiders have of role-reversed relationships are shared by the men and women in role-reversed relationships because partners have a much more detailed and complete mental representation of one another compared to outsiders.²⁷ On the other hand, gender norms about what is or is not appropriate can have a strong influence on people and people often try to avoid gender role violations.

Research shows that prescriptive gender stereotypes indeed have an impact on romantic relationships through how men and women interact and engage in their relationships. According to the gender deviance neutralization idea, men and women who violate gender norms will try to reduce their deviance by showing more

26. See Alyssa Croft, Toni Schmader & Katharina Block, *An Underexamined Inequality: Cultural and Psychological Barriers to Men’s Engagement with Communal Roles*, 19 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. REV. 343 (2015) (reviewing the literature).

27. Yaacov Trope & Nira Liberman, *Construal-Level Theory of Psychological Distance*, 117 PSYCH. REV. 440 (2010).

traditional behaviors (e.g., doing household tasks²⁸). Gender norms make women feel that they should do or want to do household tasks as these tasks are perceived to be feminine, and by engaging in these feminine behaviors, women can reassure themselves and their partners that they are “good” women, regardless of their professional status. For this reason, it can be argued that women with higher societal status than their partner (intend to) adjust their behavior to fit the gender norm.

Additionally, these negative effects of surpassing one’s partner in status may be especially strong among women who have internalized traditional gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes affect us without us realizing it.²⁹ People may be reluctant to explicitly claim that men should be breadwinners and women should be caregivers, but at the same time, most of us are likely to automatically associate family words more easily with women and career words more easily with men.³⁰ Although these beliefs are implicit, they can have actual affective and behavioral consequences. For instance, couples who implicitly believe that women need to be protected by men are more likely to prioritize the man’s need for intimacy over the woman’s work ambitions.³¹ For this reason, I posit that especially women who have internalized traditional implicit gender associations experience negative outcomes and (intend to) adjust their behavior to fit the gender norm when they have surpassed their partner in status.

In order to test these arguments, my colleagues and I conducted a cross-sectional study ($N = 314$) and a daily diary study ($N = 112$) among working women in the Netherlands. Firstly, in both studies, we showed that women experience more negative relationship outcomes (e.g., lower daily and general relationship satisfaction, more work-family conflict) when they have surpassed their partner in status. Interestingly, we found in the diary study that among women who have higher status relative to their partner, it was especially the women with more traditional implicit gender associations who, on a daily basis, thought about how they could

28. See, e.g., Michael Bittman, Paula England, Liana Sayer, Nancy Folbre & George Matheson, *When Does Gender Trump Money? Bargaining and Time in Household Work*, 109 AM. J. SOCIO. 186 (2003).

29. Naomi Ellemers, *Gender Stereotypes*, 69 ANN. REV. PSYCH. 275 (2018).

30. Anthony Greenwald & Mahzarin Banaji, *Implicit Social Cognition: Attitudes, Self-Esteem, and Stereotypes*, 102 PSYCH. REV. 4 (1995).

31. Matthew D. Hammond & Nickola C. Overall, *Benevolent Sexism and Support of Romantic Partner’s Goals: Undermining Women’s Competence While Fulfilling Men’s Intimacy Needs*, 41 PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. BULL. 1180 (2015).

adjust their behavior to fit the gender norm (e.g., by sacrificing leisure time and reducing working hours in favor of their family). Interestingly, women with more egalitarian associations who have higher status relative to their partner did not think about adjusting their behavior. This does not mean, however, that these women were protected against the negative effects of surpassing one's partner in status. We found that the more these women have surpassed their partner in status, the more they report feeling guilty towards their partner daily.

Successful women thus experience negative outcomes at home when they surpass their partner in status, because these women report more negative relationship outcomes. Furthermore, these women walk a tightrope as women with traditional implicit gender associations try to adjust their behavior, but still report lower relationship quality and wellbeing, whereas women with egalitarian implicit gender associations feel guilty towards their partner. So, although the effects of being in a role-reversed relationship are different for women with traditional and egalitarian gender associations, either way, these women experience negative consequences of having higher societal status than their male partner.

C. *Does National Context Matter When Women Surpass Their Partner in Status?*

In the previous section, I showed how gender stereotypes affect couples in role-reversed relationships on the individual level (i.e., by women's own implicit endorsement of gender stereotypes). However, it remains to be seen to what extent these findings remain valid in different national contexts. Although our findings are in line with many sociological studies showing negative relationship outcomes for role-traditional couples, these effects also seem to vary by culture. Indeed, the gender stereotypical culture of a country influences relationship dynamics.³² To illustrate, in the United States, the risk of divorce in couples with higher educated wives (compared to their husbands) is reduced over time, which is argued to be a result of greater acceptance of gender egalitarian relationships in the United States³³ Also, married men who do a larger share of household chores are less likely to divorce in countries in which the social policies are more egalitarian (e.g., the

32. See, e.g., Leah Ruppanner, *Conflict and Housework: Does Country Context Matter?*, 26 EUR. SOCIO. REV. 557 (2010).

33. Christine R. Schwartz & Hongyun Han, *The Reversal of the Gender Gap in Education and Trends in Marital Dissolution*, 79 AM. SOCIO. REV. 605 (2014).

United States) compared to countries that reinforce the male breadwinner model (e.g., Germany).³⁴ Additionally, according to rational and economic explanations, partners bargain paid and unpaid work in a rational way, such that the more income one partner brings home, the more unpaid work the other partner takes on. However, this economic perspective is only valid up and until the point that women earn more than their male partner, as women do proportionally more household chores even when they earn more than their partner.

For this reason, I posit that the culture in gender egalitarian countries makes it easier for couples to maintain an egalitarian or role-reversed relationship compared to the culture in more traditional countries. The culture in a country influences decisions, behaviors and feelings of people directly through its social policies as well as indirectly through the implicit norms that are endorsed.³⁵ Following these lines of reasoning, my colleagues and I conceptualize the salience of the gender stereotypical culture by including two indicators: 1) an associative, normative indicator of culture (i.e., average country-level implicit gender stereotypes), and 2) an indicator of institutionalized outcomes of gender inequality (i.e., women's representation in non-stereotypical roles).

With regard to the associative indicator, we used data between 2014 and 2018 of the Gender-Career Implicit Association Task (IAT) made available by Project Implicit.³⁶ Similar to the measure of women's own implicit associations the Gender-Career IAT measures respondents' association strength of the groups *men* and *women* with the concepts *career* and *family*. With regard to the indicator of institutionalized outcomes, we used United Nation's Gender Empowerment Measurement (GEM) index, which is based on four measures: (1) women's share of legislators in the national parliament, (2) the percentage of female managers, legislators and senior officials, (3) amount of female employees in professions, and (4) the female-to-male wage ratio among full-time employees.

We tested two pre-registered hypotheses with the second wave of the European Sustainable Workforce Survey (ESWS). The ESWS

34. Lynn P. Cooke, "Doing" Gender in Context: Household Bargaining and Risk of Divorce in Germany and the United States, 112 AM. J. SOCIO. 442 (2006).

35. B. Keith Payne, Heidi A. Vuletich & Kristjen B. Lundberg, *The Bias of Crowds: How Implicit Bias Bridges Personal and Systemic Prejudice*, 28 PSYCH. INQUIRY 233 (2017).

36. PROJECT IMPLICIT, <https://implicit.harvard.edu> [https://perma.cc/L2TQ-QPKP].

is a multifactor organizational survey and is conducted in nine different countries: Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. We included all participants who were in a heterosexual relationship ($N = 2748$). First, we aimed to replicate previous findings and hypothesized that the higher women's status relative to their male partner (i.e., the higher women's relative income, educational degree, and working hours relative to their male partner), the more negative relationship- and life outcomes (i.e., relationship quality, work-life satisfaction, time pressure and negative emotions) men and women will report. The results suggested that especially women's income and—to a lesser extent—educational degree relative to their male partner negatively predict relationship outcomes. Specifically, when men and women were in a relationship in which the woman earned more than the man, they reported lower relationship quality and experienced more negative emotions. Moreover, when men and women were in a relationship in which the woman had attained a higher educational degree than the man, they experienced more time pressure.

Second, we expected that men and women in a relationship in which the woman has higher status relative to her male partner would experience more negative outcomes when they live in a country with traditional gender attitudes rather than in more egalitarian countries (as indicated by combining the countries' average IAT score and their GEM index). Here, we found that men and women living in countries with a traditional gender stereotypical culture reported lower relationship quality when they were in a relationship in which the woman earned more than her partner. This was not the case for participants living in countries with an egalitarian gender stereotypical culture. Furthermore, we found that couples in relationships in which the woman was more highly educated than the man reported higher relationship quality in egalitarian countries, but not in traditional countries.

In sum, these results counter evolutionary explanations that men and women have fixed and evolved preferences for traditional gender role divisions. Specifically, these results suggest that countries' gender stereotypical culture has an influence on men and women in relationships in which the woman earns more than her partner and -to a lesser extent- on men and women in relationships in which the woman is more highly educated than her partner. Importantly, we find this using a combination of two different indicators of gender inequality: the average implicit gender stereotypes of countries' inhabitants as well as a country's gender

empowerment (i.e., representation of women in senior positions). This work provides first evidence that the national context determines the degree to which individuals are stimulated to establish traditional relationships in which men are the ones with the highest status of both partners.

III. Recommendations

As the relationship outcomes of men and women in role-reversed relationships are dependent on the context that they are in, it is important to seek solutions and recommendations in the context of these relationships. In order to deal with the difficulties that role-reversed couples experience, it seems more effective to understand and tackle gender stereotypes rather than helping men and women in role-reversed relationships individually. Specifically, the findings suggest that the negative outcomes for men and women in role-reversed relationships can be prevented by tackling both women's own implicit gender stereotypes as well as the gender stereotypes that are salient in the environment of the couple. As gender stereotypes follow both from cultural norms and the observation of men and women in typical social roles, I suggest that the best way to break the vicious cycle is by increasing the representation as well as the cultural acceptance of role-reversed couples in societies. Here, governmental agents, as well as policymakers in organizations, can play a crucial role as they can implement social policies that help role-reversed couples to thrive. For example, governmental agents could implement policies that move away from the male breadwinner model. Furthermore, HR professionals and managers in organizations can facilitate role-reversed couples by acknowledging and facilitating the needs of employees with regard to their careers as well as their relationships. They can do this, for instance, by considering the careers of employees' partners during performance reviews and by stepping away from the expectation that a good employee is someone who prioritizes their work 24/7. If an employer is aware of the career of an employee's partner, they might also better understand if this employee is not working overtime or uses flexibility arrangements without assuming that this employee is less committed to the job.³⁷

37. See Jennifer L. Petriglieri, *Talent Management and the Dual-Career Couple: Rigid Tours of Duty Are the Wrong Approach to Development*, 96 HARV. BUS. REV. 106 (2018) (describing how to consider an employee's partner).

If it becomes easier to maintain a role-reversed relationship, these relationships might also become more common and, thereby, more accepted. To illustrate, it has become more accepted over time for women to possess agentic traits and engage in agentic roles because women have entered male-dominated roles in large numbers. Similar patterns can be expected for the representation of couples who break with the traditional gender hierarchy within their relationship. Lastly, representation and cultural acceptance of role-reversed couples also provide a way to form weaker implicit associations of men with work and women with family, as people's implicit associations follow from their experiences in their own context.

Another reason why it is important to break the negative vicious cycle that role-reversed couples face is that moving away from traditional gender roles can benefit the quality of relationships. Our findings suggest that women's *personal* status is associated with several positive relationship outcomes (e.g., higher relationship satisfaction and less relationship conflict). This is in line with other work showing that couples who adhere to stereotypical gender roles are less happy with their relationship than couples who do not adhere to stereotypical gender roles.³⁸ Empowering women to gain personal status is also important to achieve gender equality. As I show, women who have surpassed their partner in status experience negative work-related outcomes (e.g., work-family conflict), and women with traditional implicit associations even think about reducing their work hours when they have surpassed their partner in status; women's romantic relationships are another reason why it is so difficult to achieve gender equality, especially in the WTA system.

It is worth considering the implications of the negative relationship outcomes for role-reversed couples without undermining the severity of these outcomes for couples themselves. Although I analyzed how role-reversed couples experience less satisfaction with their relationships, more time pressure and negative emotions, I do not find that these couples have more conflict or are less committed to their relationship than traditional couples. Couples with higher socioeconomic status report being happier with their marriages and are less likely to divorce than

38. Heather M. Helms, Christine M. Proulx, Mary Maguire Klute, Susan M. McHale & Ann C. Crouter, *Spouses' Gender-Typed Attributes and Their Links with Marital Quality: A Pattern Analytic Approach*, 23 J. SOC. & PERS. RELATIONSHIPS 843 (2006).

those with lower socioeconomic status.³⁹ One way to become a couple with higher socioeconomic status is for both partners to have a successful career.⁴⁰ Also, partners are better able to support one another when their relationship is equal and when they feel that they can both be communal (e.g., providing warmth and understanding) regardless of their gender.⁴¹ Traditional men in higher status roles do thus not provide an ideal alternative, as these men are less likely to fulfill their partner's needs for support.⁴²

In order to deal with the negative relationship outcomes of men and women in role-reversed relationships, it is important to tackle gender stereotypes in the context that couples operate in rather than advising partners on how they could individually cope with their role-reversed relationship.

Conclusion

In this paper, I analyzed how men and women who try to break gender stereotypes face a vicious cycle of negative evaluations and dynamics. By showing these mechanisms, women's romantic relationships are an additional bind for women who try to make careers within the WTA system. Specifically, I show three mechanisms by which prescriptive stereotypes within the relationship domain constrain women and men into traditional gender roles. Backlash mechanisms affect how others perceive couples in which the woman attains higher societal status than her male partner. This reveals that role-reversed couples face social disapproval and are likely to experience a lack of understanding or social support for their life choices. Furthermore, gender stereotypes explain how women who have surpassed their partner in status feel and cope with their role-reversed relationship. This explains why women in role-reversed relationships walk a tightrope

39. W. BRADFORD WILCOX & ELIZABETH MARQUARDT, WHEN MARRIAGE DISAPPEARS: THE NEW MIDDLE AMERICA 15–16 (2010) <https://fatherhoodchannel.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/when-marriage-disappears.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/69FR-WHZ2>].

40. Sharon J. Bartley, Priscilla W. Blanton & Jennifer L. Gilliard, *Husbands and Wives in Dual-Earner Marriages: Decision-Making, Gender Role Attitudes, Division of Household Labor, and Equity*, 37 MARRIAGE & FAMILY REV. 69, 73 (2005).

41. Harry T. Reis & Shelly L. Gable, *Toward a Positive Psychology of Relationships*, in FLOURISHING: POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND THE LIFE WELL-LIVED, 129 (Corey L. M. Keyes & Jonathan Haidt eds., 2003).

42. Paul J. E. Miller, John P. Caughlin & Ted L. Huston, *Trait Expressiveness and Marital Satisfaction: The Role of Idealization Processes*, 65 J. MARRIAGE & FAMILY 978, 981 (2003).

for breaking traditional gender norms because it does not matter what these women do (or do not do); either way, they are worse off compared to women who have not surpassed their partner in status. Lastly, the extent to which gender stereotypes are endorsed nationally also influences relationship outcomes. This clarifies that the negative relationship outcomes experienced by role-reversed couples are influenced by sociocultural factors rather than fixed or evolved individual characteristics but also shows how these mechanisms are especially pronounced in WTA systems. In order to understand the negative outcomes that couples in role-reversed relationships experience, it is thus crucial to understand the intricate gender stereotypical system that dissuades men and women from role-reversed relationships. This way, status dynamics within romantic relationships are a domain that cannot be overlooked when aiming for gender equality.