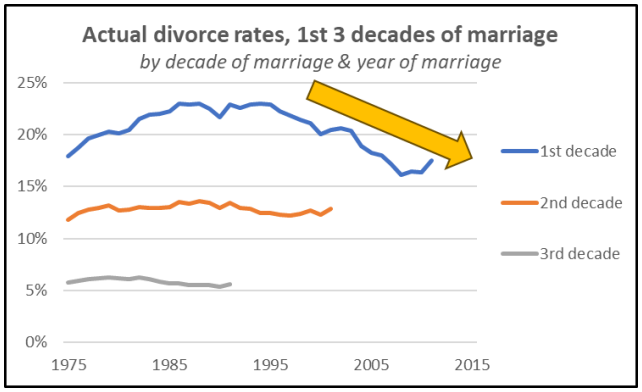
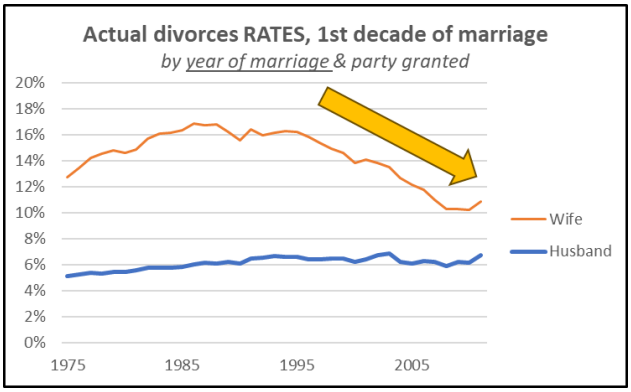
# Why are fewer women (but not men) divorcing?

**Harry Benson, Marriage Foundation**

- Until April 2022, when the new rules for 'no-fault' divorce came in, couples had to file for divorce in either the wife's or husband's name alone. There have been examples where both parties filed together but these were rare.
- Given that one party must sign the form, a reasonable assumption might be that the process is random. If that's the case, half of all divorces should be granted to wives and half to husbands.
- But that's not what has happened. Our analysis of divorce rates for couples marrying in any year since 1975 shows a very distinctive pattern.
- The big trend in divorce rates has been a steady long-term rise among couples marrying throughout the 1970s and 1980s followed by a steady long-term fall among couples marrying throughout the 2000s and 2010s.
- The vast majority (over 80 percent) of this long-term rise and fall is accounted for by divorces granted to wives in their first decade of married life. After ten years of marriage, divorce rates become highly predictable and have barely changed in decades. Unlike for women, divorces granted to men over any duration of marriage have also barely changed. Why?
- Any account of changes in divorce rates must explain this extraordinary gender effect. It can't be anything to do with changes in family income or age at which couples marry. Each should cause both husbands and wives to want to divorce equally, either both more or both less.
- One obvious gender-based change since the 1960s has been in greater women's equality of opportunity. But this doesn't explain it either. Classic economic theory suggests the gain to a woman from being married reduces if she has her own job or increases her income. So rising women's employment and equality should lead to *more* women divorcing, not *fewer*.
- Our explanation is that as social pressure to marry reduces, women's divorce rates have fallen because the men they marry are more committed. Several studies show that men, more than women, who 'decide' rather than 'slide' are more committed in their subsequent marriage. As fewer men marry now because they 'have to', more men marry because they 'want to'.



## Falling divorce numbers

Most people know that divorce rates have risen since the 1960s. When I mention that divorce rates have been falling since the 1990s, the response is usually surprise, 'Really?', followed quickly by 'It must be because fewer people are getting married.'

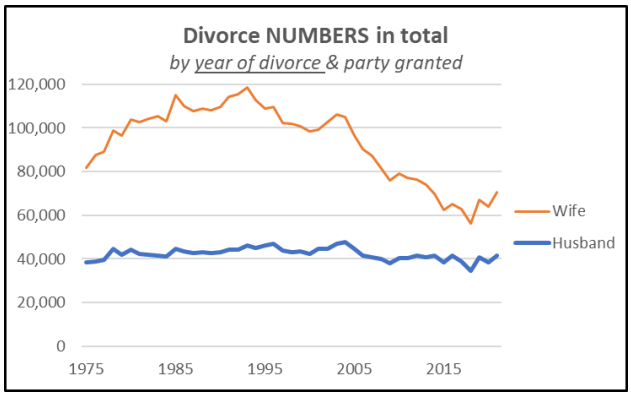
It's certainly true that fewer people are getting married, but the number of marriages has been falling consistently since 1972, a period during which divorce rates went up a lot and have now gone down a lot. So that's not a good argument.

Let's have a look at the number of divorces broken down by whether the wife or husband was granted divorce. Until the law changed in April 2022, only one party could file for divorce and be granted divorce. There were exceptions but these were rare.

The chart below is what sparked my interest some ten years ago or so when I first came across this phenomenon. Almost all the variation, in raw numbers at least, seems to be around wife-granted divorces.

I think you'll agree this is remarkable. Comparing 2021 with 1986 for example – which is the wedding year that has turned out to have the highest proportion of divorces – there were 39,276 fewer divorces granted to wives yet only 2,112 fewer divorces granted to husbands.

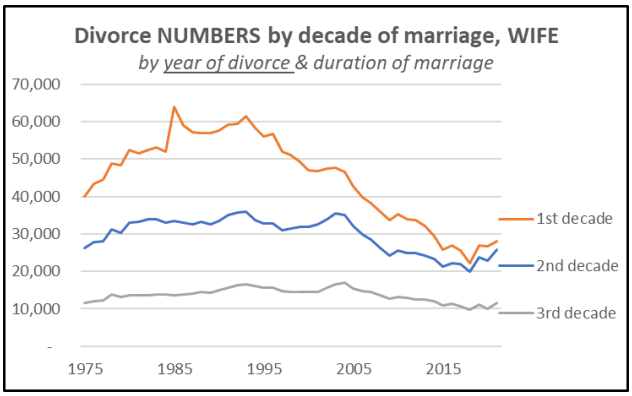
Therefore, fewer divorces granted to wives accounts for 95 percent of the reduction in all divorces since the 1980s.

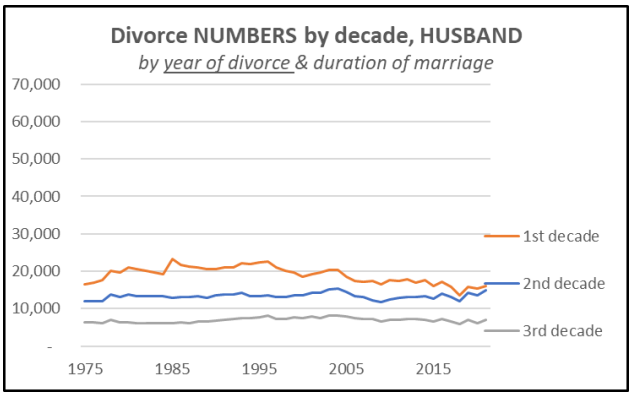



Because I wanted to know how this broke down by duration of marriage, I commissioned the Office for National Statistics to break down the annual divorce data further as they don't routinely publish such data. They have now done that for me on four separate occasions. The data is all publicly available and downloadable from their website (ONS 2012b, 2015, 2019, 2023).

With this data, I can contrast the number of divorces during the first, second and third decade of marriage and divide them into divorces granted to wives and husbands.

The difference is stark. Self-evidently, the biggest contributor to the fall in divorce rates is from wife-granted divorces in their first decade of marriage, accounting for 75 percent of the drop (i.e., 30,873 out of 41,388 fewer divorces).




**Divorce NUMBERS, by party granted**

*by year of divorce & duration of marriage*

| | Wife-granted | | | Husband-granted | | | All divorces | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1st 10 | 2nd 10 | 3rd 10 | 1st 10 | 2nd 10 | 3rd 10 | Wife | Husband |
| 1980 | 52,523 | 33,066 | 13,688 | 20,982 | 13,898 | 6,336 | 103,796 | 44,034 |
| 1986 | 58,959 | 32,945 | 13,854 | 21,596 | 13,106 | 6,337 | 109,883 | 43,439 |
| 1990 | 57,539 | 33,507 | 14,836 | 20,649 | 13,481 | 6,765 | 109,830 | 43,160 |
| 2000 | 47,016 | 31,789 | 14,461 | 18,573 | 13,455 | 7,417 | 98,438 | 42,452 |
| 2010 | 35,257 | 25,478 | 13,030 | 17,736 | 12,377 | 7,006 | 79,178 | 40,338 |
| 2020 | 26,736 | 22,762 | 9,945 | 15,403 | 13,579 | 6,167 | 64,076 | 38,362 |
| 2021 | 28,086 | 25,871 | 11,455 | 16,028 | 14,974 | 6,960 | 70,607 | 41,327 |
| *vs 1986* | *-30,873* | *-7,074* | *-2,399* | *-5,568* | *1,868* | *623* | *-39,276* | *-2,112* |

## Falling divorce rates

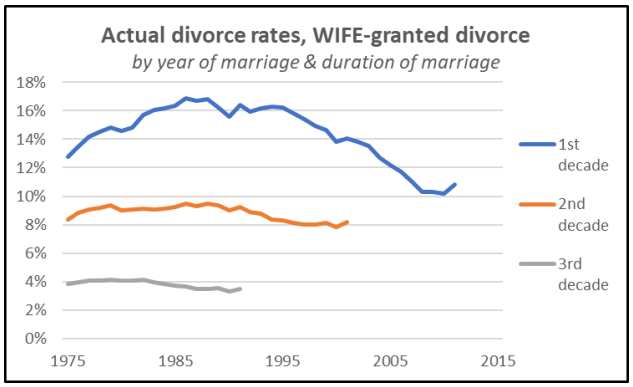
Because fewer couples are marrying, it's quite right that we need to consider divorce *rates* and not just divorce *numbers*. To turn numbers into rates, we need to know how many couples divorce after one year, two years, three years, etc, of marriage. We can then compare that to the number of weddings one year, two years, three years ago, etc, and hence look at what's happened to any particular cohort by year of

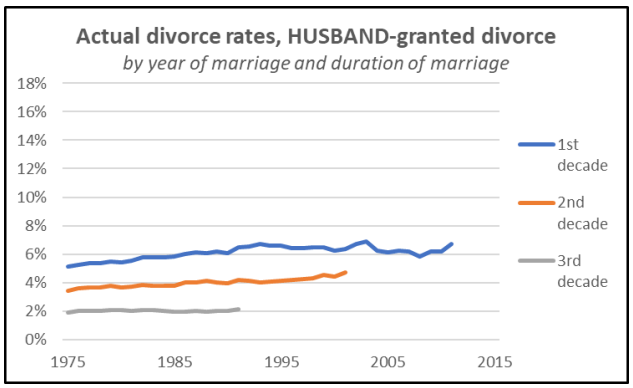
marriage. There's a more detailed explanation of how I do this at the end of this paper.

Using the data commissioned from the Office for National Statistics, I can then calculate actual divorce rates. What I really want to know is what has actually happened to the couples who married in any particular year.

So if I want to know how many couples divorce in their first ten years of marriage, that means I need to look at marriages that began ten or more years ago. The lines in the charts below show the latest actual divorce rates for couples who married ten, twenty and thirty years ago respectively going back to 1975.

In this case, the fall in divorce rates from wife-granted divorces in their first decade of marriage, accounts for 86 percent of the likely eventual lifetime drop (i.e., 6.7% out of "8.7-0.9" fewer lifetime divorces).




**Divorce RATES, by party granted**

*by year of marriage & duration of marriage*

| | Wife-granted | | | Husband-granted | | | Predicted lifetime | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1st 10 | 2nd 10 | 3rd 10 | 1st 10 | 2nd 10 | 3rd 10 | Wife | Husband |
| 1980 | 14.6% | 9.0% | 4.1% | 5.4% | 3.7% | 2.1% | 29.0% | 12.1% |
| 1986 | 16.9% | 9.5% | 3.7% | 6.0% | 4.0% | 2.0% | 31.4% | 12.9% |
| 1990 | 15.6% | 9.0% | 3.3% | 6.1% | 3.9% | 2.0% | 29.2% | 12.9% |
| 2000 | 13.8% | 7.8% | | 6.2% | 4.4% | | 26.3% | 13.7% |
| 2010 | 10.2% | | | 6.2% | | | 22.7% | 13.8% |
| *vs 1986* | *-6.7%* | *-1.7%* | *-0.3%* | *+0.2%* | *+0.5%* | *+0.0%* | *-8.7%* | *+0.9%* |

## What CANNOT explain fewer women (but not men) filing for divorce?

Most research that attempts to explain the big social trends in family formation and dissolution in the developed world tends to focus on Becker's economic theory of the family as a 'little factory' and Lesthaeghe's Second Demographic Transition that looks at how our economic focus has shifted from our survival to our children to ourselves (Becker 1981, Lesthaeghe 2010).

There is also a plethora of research looking at the characteristics of people or couples who turn out to be more or less likely to divorce in the future. These tend to divide into socio-demographic predictors such as age, education, employment status, family history and relationship history (e.g. Amato 2010) or interpersonal predictors such as love, trust, and the ways couples interact positively or negatively (e.g. Gottman & Levenson 2000).

Finally, there are surveys that ask people why they divorced or separated. In the UK National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, the most common reasons given were growing apart, arguments, unfaithfulness and lack of respect (Gravningen et al 2017).

The problem is that most of these explanations involve both parties, which is incompatible with a gender-specific account of changing divorce rates. For example, changes in the age at which couples marry, changes in economic circumstances, having more or fewer arguments, growing apart more or less, or making changes in negative or positive patterns of interaction, all these involve the couple. It's not at all obvious why wives would be the ones who file for divorce in these cases rather than husbands.

Becker's explanation is certainly gender-specific but in the wrong direction. He argues that the economic benefit of marriage is that couples can specialize roles, such as earner and homemaker. This is a more efficient economic system than dividing roles, which amounts to doubling the skills needed to run the 'little factory' of the family. However, as women's employment opportunities have become more equal and more women go to work, the gain to marriage for women reduces. Women should be divorcing more not less.

## What MIGHT explain fewer women (but not men) filing for divorce?

To me, the most plausible explanation comes from reduced social and family pressure to marry. This would especially affect the level of commitment among men, which is more dependent on making deliberate decisions about the future (Rhoades et al, 2006 and 2009)

In short, there are fewer men who 'slide' into marriage and more who 'decide'. Men who 'slide' into marriage because they 'have to', perhaps due to social pressure and expectations, are less committed and more likely to make their wives unhappy. In contrast men who 'decide' to marry because they 'want to' are more committed.

**Imagine a man who married in the 1980s** under social pressure from his family or friends. 'Do the right thing,' they say. 'Make an honest woman of her. Tie the knot.'

So he enters marriage under a certain amount of duress, without ever fully buying in. His sense of dedication is weaker than that of his wife. However, so long as things are good, he is broadly content with his new arrangement.

But over time, and perhaps with the arrival of a young baby, inevitable little conflicts emerge between him and his wife. Instead of dealing with them responsibly, he feels less constrained in the way he behaves because he knows he never really bought in to a long term plan in the first place. But just as he was sucked into marriage without making the decision for himself, inertia and indecision keep him in the marriage.

His behaviour appears increasingly indifferent and disrespectful to his wife. After only a few years, she has become well aware of his indifference. Fed up with treading on eggshells around him, it is she who pulls the plug.

**Imagine a man who married in the 2000s**. He is under no such family or social pressure to marry. So when he does commit to his wife and his marriage, he commits with all his heart.

When the conflicts emerge, he knows that he has a responsibility to sort them out. There is a long term plan at stake here. His wife appreciates the effort he makes to sort things out and thus knows he is fully committed to her. Serious difficulties are therefore much less likely to materialise in these early years.

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# Methodology

## How do we calculate divorce rates?

Almost all reporting on 'divorce rates' involves some comparison of the number of divorces in the most recent year divided by the number of marriages in the most recent year, or the number of adults in the population, or the number of adults who are married. This is called the 'year of divorce' method.

The problem with this method is that we're not really comparing like with like. Imagine a simple scenario where there are 100,000 divorces in two consecutive years. But in the first year, its mostly old marriages ending and in the second year, its mostly younger marriages ending. The headline 'divorce rate' would show no change. Yet a great deal is happening behind the scenes.

What we really want to know is what has already happened to couples who married in the same year, whether 1970 or 1980 or 1990. That tells us the real trend. We also want to know what will happen to couples who get married this year, on present trends. This is called the 'year of marriage' method.

The big advantage of the 'year of marriage' method is that it should give a really clear indication of trends in divorce. How are today's couples likely to fare, compared to couples who married in the 1980s or 1990s. The big disadvantage of this is that it's much harder to calculate.

I use much the same method used by the Office for National Statistics on the rare occasion when they report 'year of marriage' divorce rates. Their most recent paper on this is from 2012 when they calculated the lifetime risk of divorce at 42%. This is the figure most often cited in the media (ONS 2012a).

Because ONS do not routinely publish the data in sufficient detail, Marriage Foundation has specially commissioned data on four separate occasions, including this year (ONS 2012b, 2015, 2019, 2023)

The method used is straightforward enough. I take the number of divorces involving marriages under one year and divide by the total number of marriages that took place last year. I then do the same for divorces that took place after one to two years of marriage and divide by the total number of marriages two years ago.

The method isn't perfect because of overlap – for example not all divorces within a year were marriages that took place last year. But so long as the changes aren't too dramatic, the method is accurate and gives an excellent guide to trends.

**Calculating divorce rates, by year of marriage and duration of marriage**

| Year of marriage | No. of opposite sex marriages | Adjust for +50% overseas weddings | Adjusted number of marriages | 0-1 year | 1-2 years | 2-3 years | 3-4 years | 4-5 years |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2016 | 242,774 | *19,422* | 262,196 | | | | | 2.0% |
| 2017 | 235,910 | *18,873* | 254,783 | | | | 1.8% | |
| 2018 | 227,870 | *18,230* | 246,100 | | | 1.3% | | |
| 2019 | 213,122 | *17,050* | 230,172 | | 0.6% | | | |
| 2020 | 82,959 | *0* | 82,959 | 0.0% | | | | |
| | | | Divorces during 2021 | 10 | 1,283 | 3,162 | 4,538 | 5,253 |

## Adjusting for overseas weddings

I also make one very important adjustment to the number of new marriages recorded in any given year, as the table above shows. The Annual Passenger Survey produces an estimate of the number of people returning to the UK after getting married. Because many or most of these people will in fact be one half of a returning couple, I make a conservative adjustment to my wedding numbers by adding 50% of this estimate to the figure for England & Wales weddings.

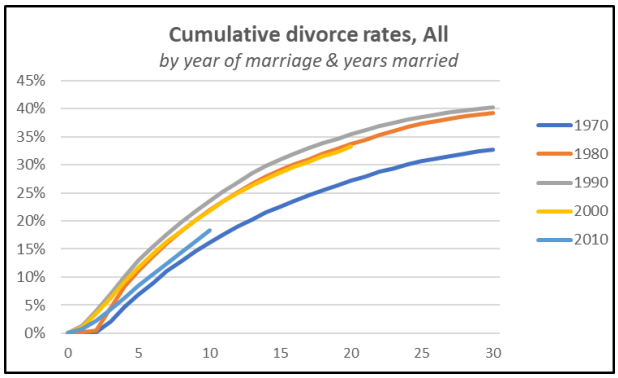
Between 2002 and 2015, some 30-70,000 British nationals married abroad in each year (adjusted for England & Wales population). Reducing these numbers by half adds an average of 12%, ranging between 6% and 17%, to the total number of weddings in any of these years (ONS 2008, 2017).

Because these figures are based on relatively small survey samples, ONS do not adjust their divorce rate estimates for overseas weddings. ONS divorce rates will therefore always overstate the true divorce rate because they underestimate the number of weddings. I on the other hand don't have to be quite so precise. I am therefore confident that the addition of a conservative estimate for overseas weddings significantly improves the quality of all divorce rate estimates.

## Cumulative changes in divorce rates

The next chart shows the cumulative progression of actual divorce rates over time among different cohorts. After 30 years of marriage, 35% of couples who married in 1970 had divorced.

Among the 1980 cohort, 41% had divorced. Among the 1990 cohort 42% had divorced.

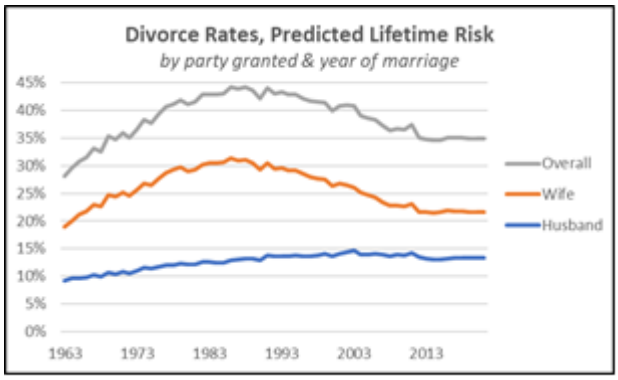



Although the 2000 cohort have only been married for 20 years, the addition of the highly predictable divorce rates in years 20-30 mean that 40% of this cohort are likely to have divorced within 30 years.

Using the same technique, the 2010 cohort already have lower divorce rates in their first ten years that makes them look more like the 1970 cohort. A long-range projection for them, albeit with a slightly higher margin of error, is that 35% will have divorced within 30 years of marriage, i.e. by 2040.

## Lifetime divorce rates

Continuing this projection over 50 years for all cohorts who have married since 1963 produces the following chart.




Overall lifetime divorce rates have risen from 28% among couples marrying in 1963 to peak at 44% among couples marrying in 1986 – the cohort with the highest ever rates of subsequent divorce – before falling to the current best estimate of 35%. The chart also shows the relative contributions made by divorce granted either to wives or husbands.

Note that these predictions included a conservative adjustment estimate for overseas weddings that are not included in official figures for weddings but nonetheless contribute to the real annual number of weddings.

Leaving out this important adjustment, divorce rates would be proportionately higher, rising from 28% among 1963 couples to 46% among 1986 couples and falling to the current estimate of 38%.

## Finally, what about the 'blip in divorce rates?

The most recent 'year of divorce' data show a 9.3% increase in divorces from 102,438 to 111,934 in 2021. It is tempting to assume this is a post-lockdown phenomenon, where couples who grimly survived the domestic pressures of 2020 lockdown finally gave up on their marriages.

However, the evidence strongly suggests this is a system issue rather than a divorce rate issue. The increase is not due to more marriages giving up but more likely to a clearing of previous backlogs and/or faster processing of previous delays.

First, Ministry of Justice figures for 'divorce cases started' were falling during 2020 and showed no indication that there would be a 9% increase in divorces completed during 2021 (Ministry of Justice 2023) – see chart below. Second, our own analysis of survey data showed a reduction, not increase, in 'thoughts about divorce' during lockdown itself (Benson & McKay 2021). Thirdly, the 'blip' in divorce is evenly spread across all durations of marriage. The number of divorces by duration of marriage show a consistent increase of between 200 and 600 extra divorces during 2021 for every duration of marriage between 2 and 25 years. Had there been a genuine increase in divorce rates, we should have seen this concentrated among those vulnerable years 3-7.