Increased divorce rates are linked to the welfare state

Swedish research places the soaring divorce rates in recent decades on the shoulders of equal rights and social justice.

Divorce statistics rose dramatically in the 20th century. In the early 1900s marriages rarely broke up. Today half of all marriages end in divorce.

This rate has held since the 1970s.

But this isn’t necessarily a sign of moral downfall. According to Swedish researchers it hinges on the expansion of opportunities for making do without a spouse and on fairer distribution of wealth among social classes.

In the old days divorce was primarily one of the privileges of the elite.

A real alternative

“Although divorces were relatively uncommon in the early 1900s, the divorce rate in many high-income groups such as lawyers, journalists and engineers was comparable to what you find in the general population today,” says researcher Glenn Sandström in a press release from the University of Umeå.

The development of the welfare state and the modern economic system have opened this opportunity to the majority.

Sandström’s study shows that periods where divorce rates rose have coincided almost completely with times of major progress in the welfare state.

“The equalising of income which has occurred among social classes and between the sexes in the 20th century has contributed to making divorce a viable alternative, not just for the elite,” says the researcher.

Indeed, since the 1960s most divorces have occurred within social groups with less income and less education.

Individual opportunities

“A special feature of the Nordic welfare model is that utilisation of the welfare system has not been linked to the family. Rather, it tends to be based on individual needs and the individual’s participation in the job market,” he says.

The economic model has evolved from families with a single breadwinner to households with two incomes. This trend has given both wives and husbands footholds in the job market outside the home.
This development has contributed to a democratisation of access to divorce, particularly for women and people with low income.

New attitudes

However, in his study Sandström points out it’s impossible to comprehend divorce figures solely in light of economic and institutional trends.

An interplay has taken place between social changes and developments in our system of values. In the 1940s and 1960s especially, big changes occurred in attitudes and norms regarding the family, marriage and sexuality.

He writes that individualistic and secular values have flourished and gained legitimacy. Now we are much more likely to think that each individual has the right to make his or her own decisions.

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Read this article in Norwegian at forskning.no [6]

Finland has the highest divorce rate in Europe, followed by Sweden and Denmark. Norway and Iceland have a slightly lower divorce rate, but higher than most European countries, according to Statistics Norway. (Photo: Colourbox) [7]


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