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## Why Is It Women Who File for Divorce? Some Steps towards Solving an Enigma

This article is about which one of the spouses files for divorce when a (unilateral) divorce occurs. It provides empirical support to the claim that in most human societies and in most circumstances most divorce filers are women. Given that women have more to lose from divorce than men both economically and on the remarriage market, the fact that most divorce filers are women obviously begs for an explanation. I propose nine such explanations and test seven of them empirically on French data from 1970 to 1982 (N=1,433). Although much work remains to be done, two out of the seven tested explanations seem more promising than the others.

**WORK IN PROGRESS**  
**PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE**

### Introduction

Social science researchers who are interested in divorce have been studying several of its aspects, notably the variations of its intensity and timing across time in different countries, the variations of its intensity across couples (according to their social status, ages at marriage, number of children, etc.) and its consequences on divorcees and their children. One aspect of divorce which has been relatively neglected by researchers is “who filed for the divorce” when a (unilateral-initiative, henceforth “unilateral”) divorce has been filed and granted. The works on this topic have focused on contemporary Western countries such as the United States (Brinig, Allen 2000), Germany (Andress, Lingnau 2004; Esser 2004) and the Netherlands (Kalmijn, Poortman 2006).

In this paper I use data collected from several different sources to show that in most human societies (at an aggregate level) and in most contexts (at an individual or couple level) most divorce filers are women. Given the well-known fact that women have more to lose from divorce than men both economically and on the remarriage market, the reason why most divorce filers are women is intriguingly unclear. After discarding several pseudo explanations, I propose several explanations which could, by principle, be satisfying, and I then test them empirically with French data from 1970 to 1982. The main conclusion is that

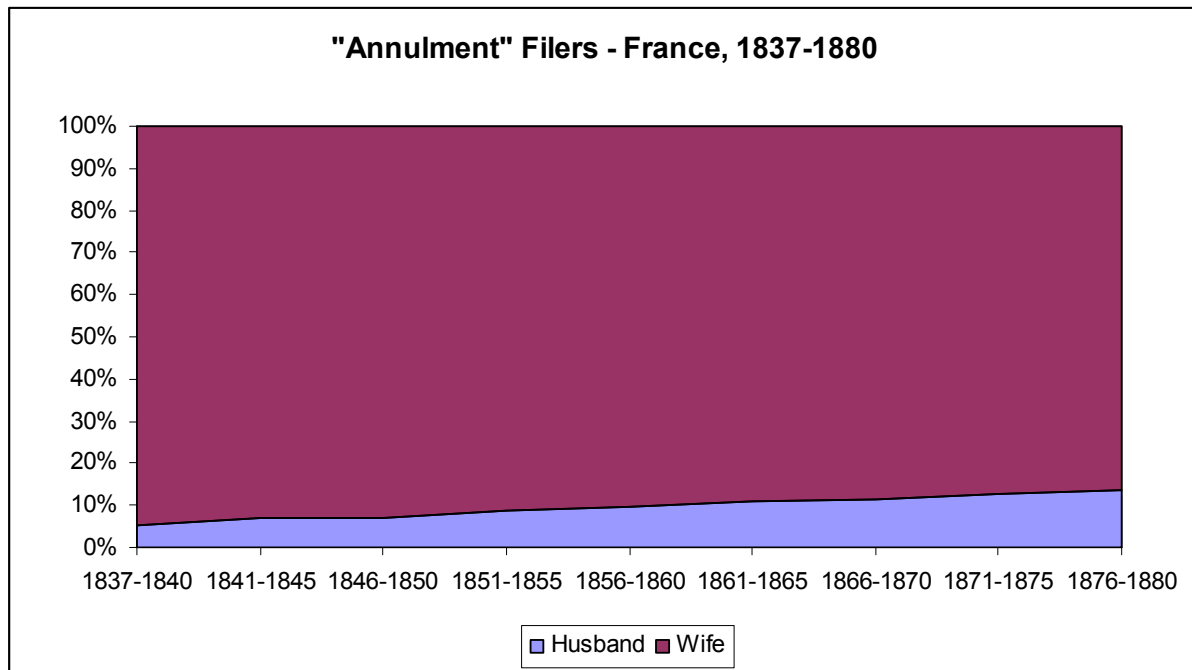
# 1. Most Divorce Filers are Women in Most Societies

In this section I want to show that in most societies – i.e., in most places in most times – most divorce filers are women. Aggregate time series data on divorce filers are hard to find (notably because not all countries publish or even collect these statistics – especially for remote periods – and because no organization or document has ever centralized these statistics), but those that are available converge in showing that most divorce filers are women across time and space.

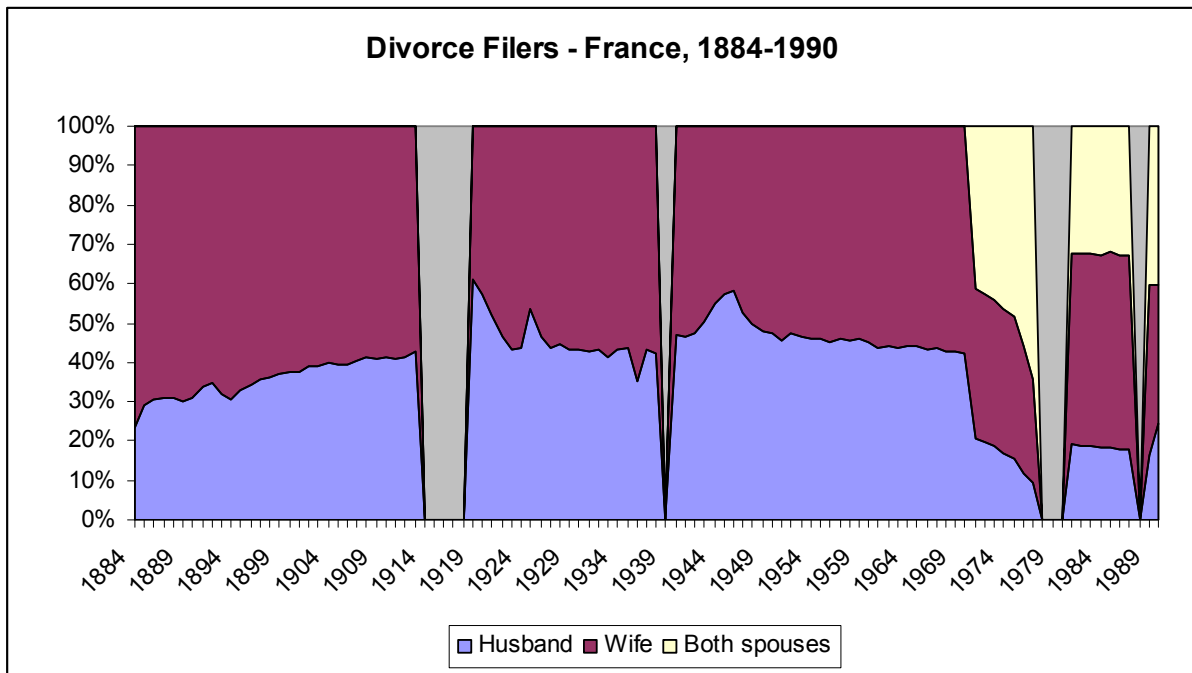
- **Western Countries Before the 1950s**

In New Jersey from 1778 to 1866 most divorces were granted to the wife, and since there is a very close connection between who was granted the divorce and who filed for it one can safely presume that most divorce filers were women (Friedman, Percival 1976). Similarly in the United States wives were granted around two thirds of divorces from 1867-1871 to 1906 (Hill 1908) and almost three fourths of them in 1931 and in 1949-1965 (Friedman, Percival 1976).

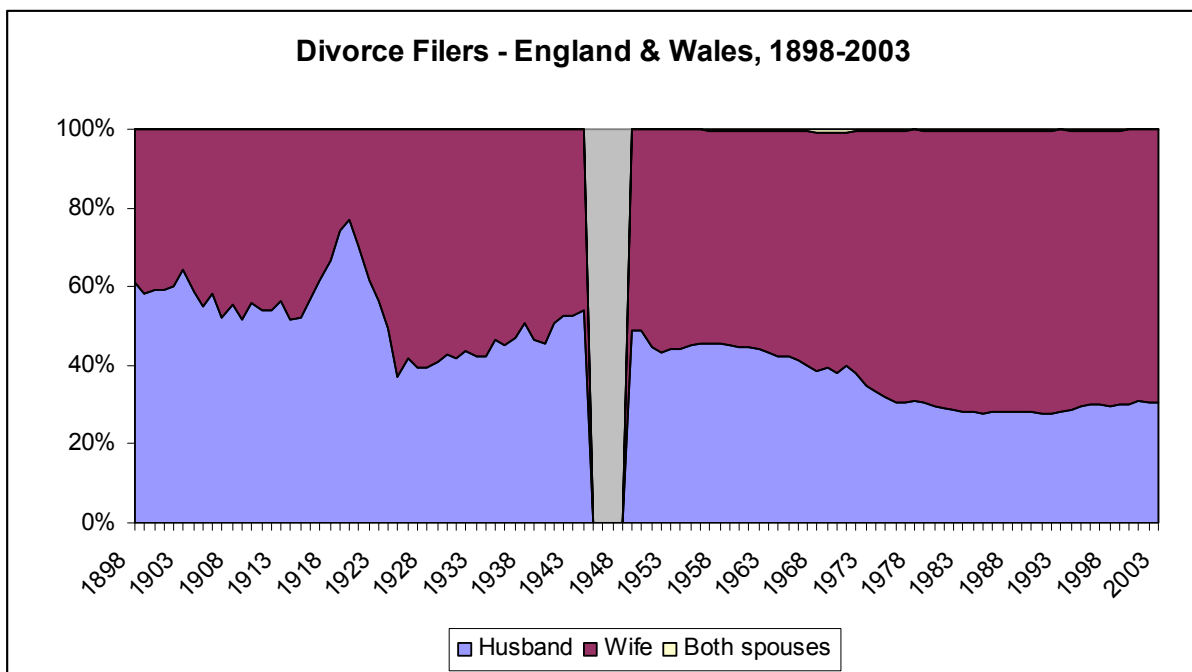
In France during the French Revolution (1792-1802) two thirds to three fourths of divorce filers in unilateral divorces were women (Ronsin 1990 ; Goody 2001). Same in 1792-1816 in the French city of Rouen (Phillips ???). In France in the 19th century most annulment (“séparation de corps”) filers were women, as can be seen below.



In France since 1884 (the date when divorce was reintroduced after being abolished in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century) most divorce filers are women: this was true when only unilateral divorces existed (before 1975) and it remains true among unilateral divorces, as can be seen below. The exceptions are the periods after world wars (cf. *infra*).



In England and Wales since the 1920s most divorce filers are women. This was not the case between 1898 and the 1920s, however.



In Finland, Belgium, Baden, Saxony, Italy, Massachusetts and Romania from the 1860s to the 1880s, most divorce or annulment filers were women (Bertillon 1883). However, it was not the case in Scotland (Bertillon 1883).

- **Western Countries since the 1950s**

In the United States in the 1950s 70% of divorce filers were women (Levinger 1965), and between 1975 and 1988 the share of divorce and annulment filers who were women went from 67.2% to 60.7% (National Center for Health Statistics 1991). In the United States in the 1990s, around two thirds of divorce filers were women (Brinig, Allen 2000).

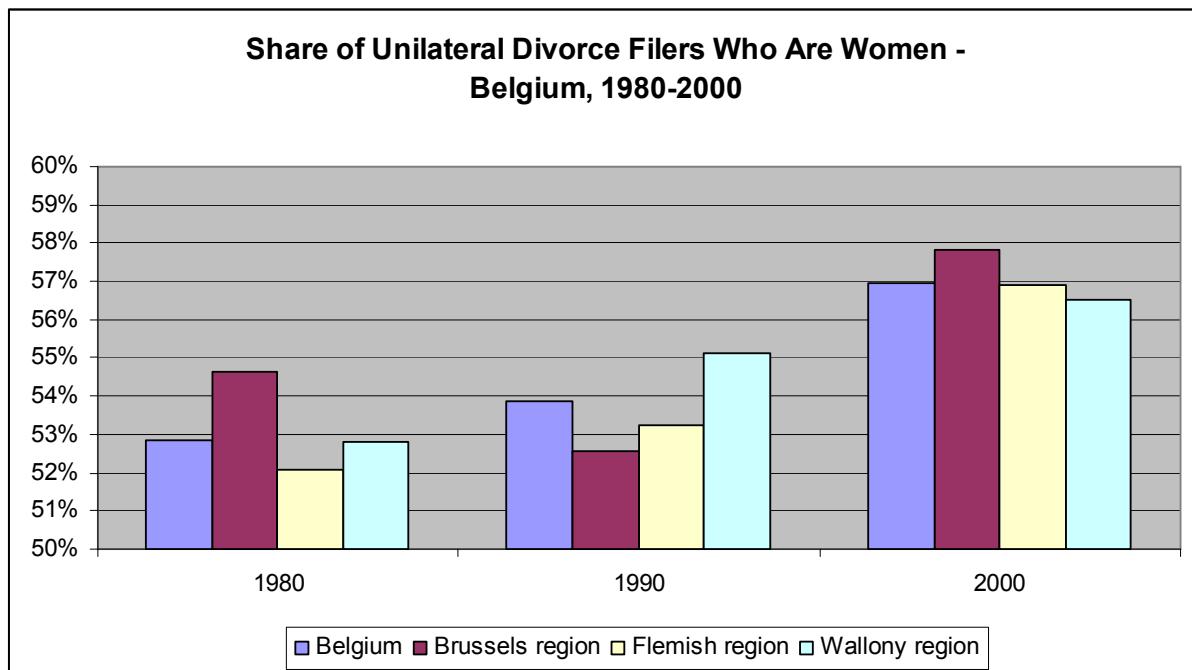
In Scotland from 1959 to 1976, the share of divorce filers who were women went from 55% to 76% (Smith 1997).

In the 1970s in the Netherlands, Western Germany, Switzerland, Finland and the USSR, most divorce filers were women (Michel 1978). In Belgium divorce filers were equally represented among men and women, and it was only in Italy (which had had divorce for a very short time) that most divorce filers were men (Michel 1978).

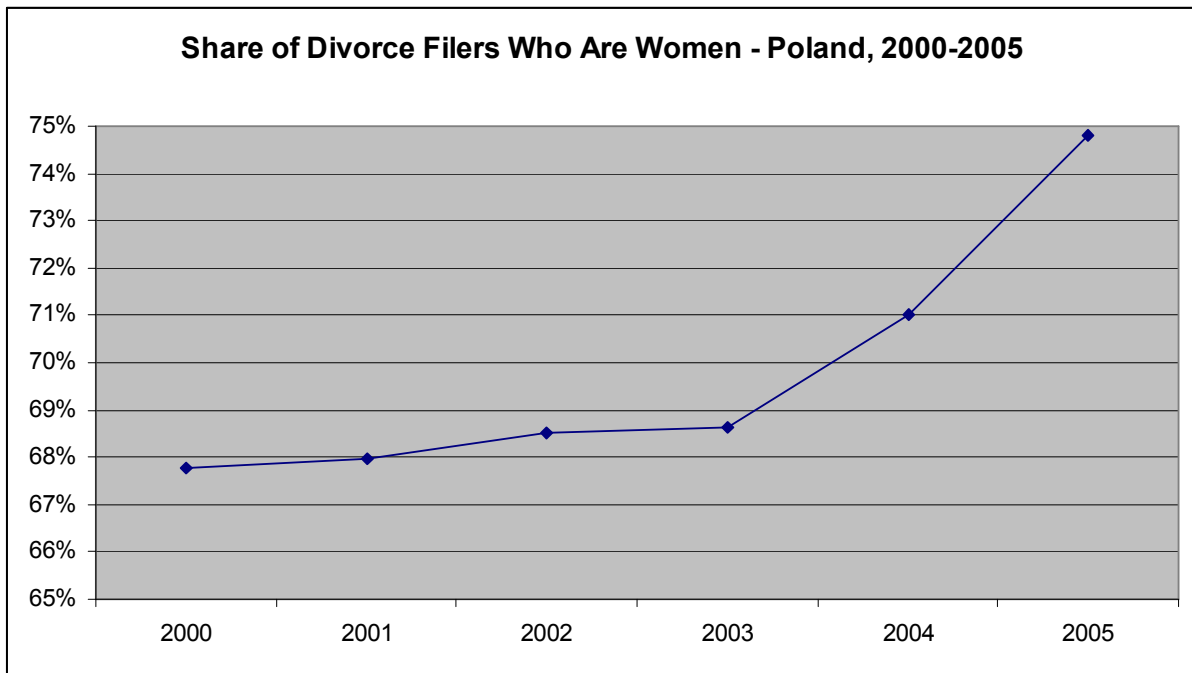
In Russia in the 1990s, women were saying they were initiating the divorce more often than men, but men were saying the opposite (Festy, Kortchagina 2002).

In the Netherlands in the late 20th century, most divorce filers were women.

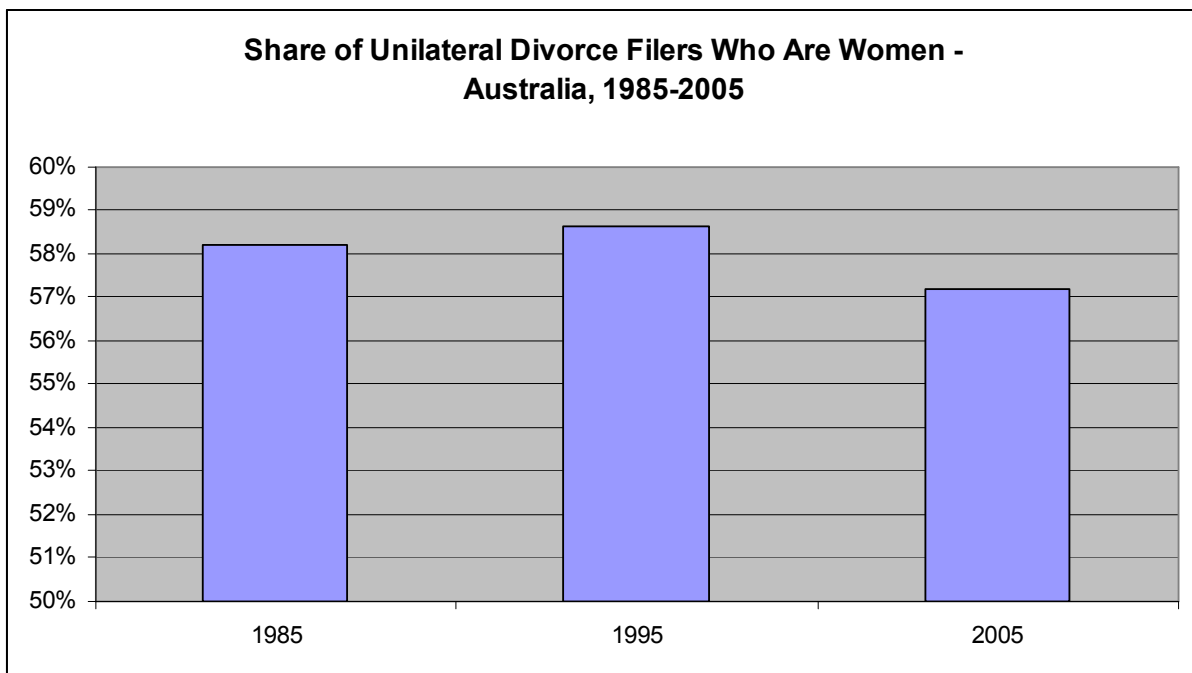
In Belgium in 2002 most divorce filers in unilateral divorces are women (Institut national de statistique 2003). This has been true since at least the 1980s and in each region of the country, as we can see.



Most divorce filers are women in contemporary Poland, too.



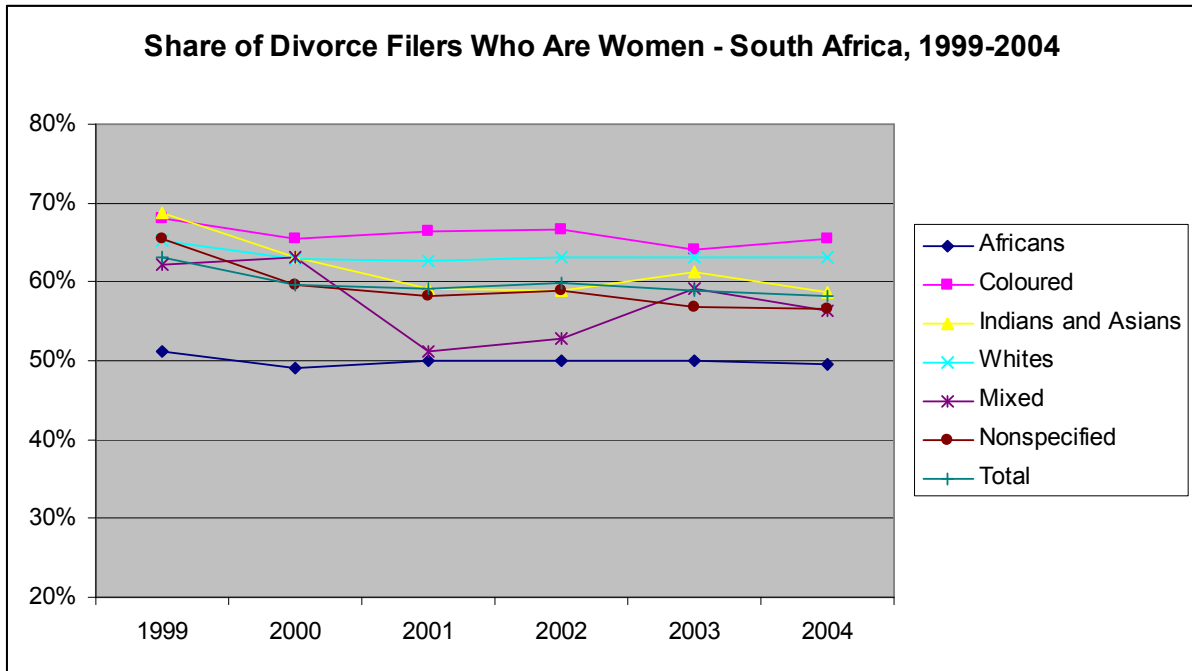
This is also true in Australia since at least the 1980s.



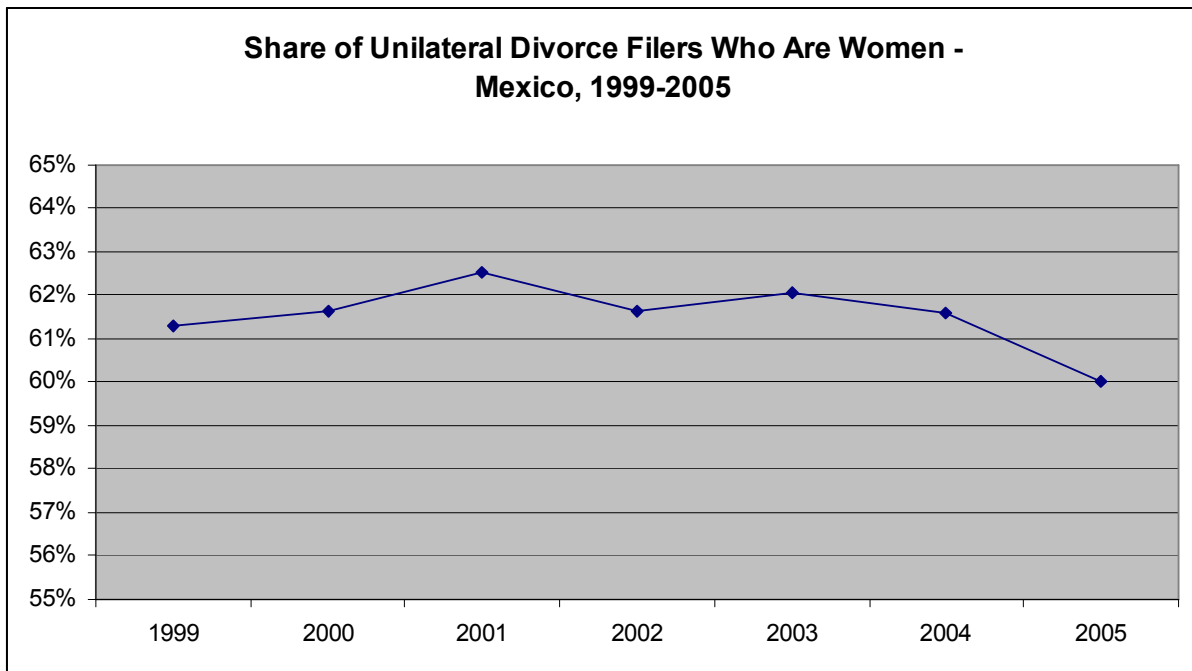
- **Nonwestern Countries**

Most divorce filers are women in Communist China since the 1950s (Tsui 2001), in Japan in the late 1970s (Sasaki, Wilson 1997), and in Singapore in 2003-2005 both among civil/nonmuslim divorces and among Muslim divorces (Singapore Department of Statistics 2006).

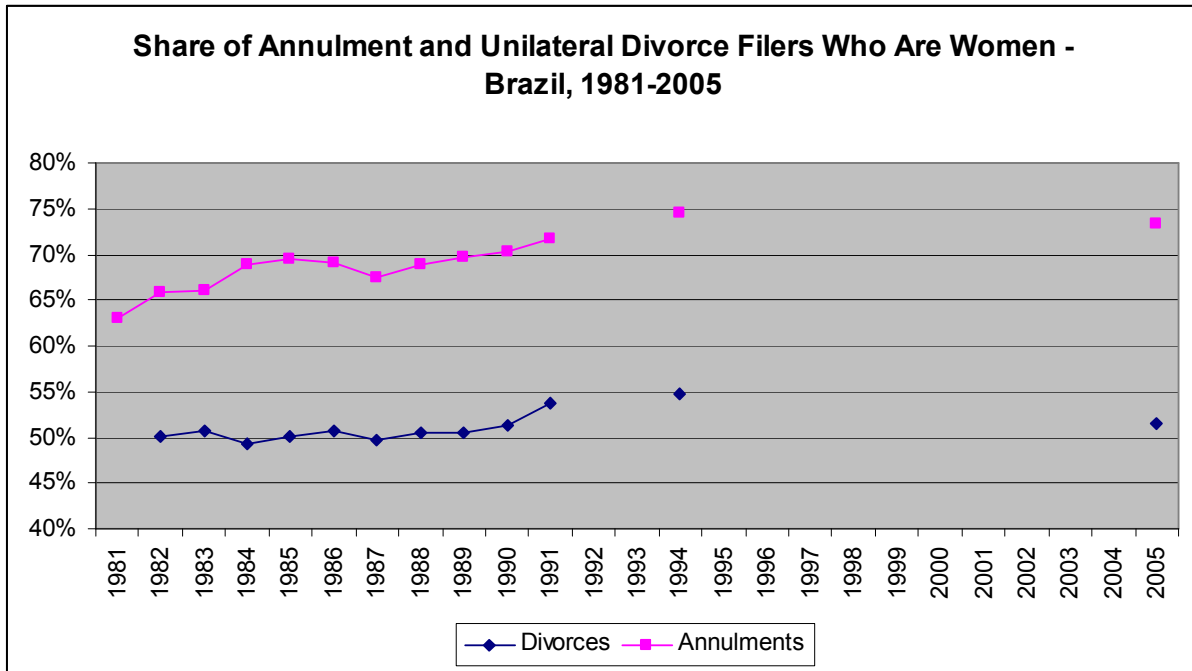
Most divorce filers are women in West Africa (Togo and Mali) in the 1980s (Locoh, Thiriart 1995) and in South Africa in 1999-2004.



In contemporary Mexico too, most divorce filers are women.

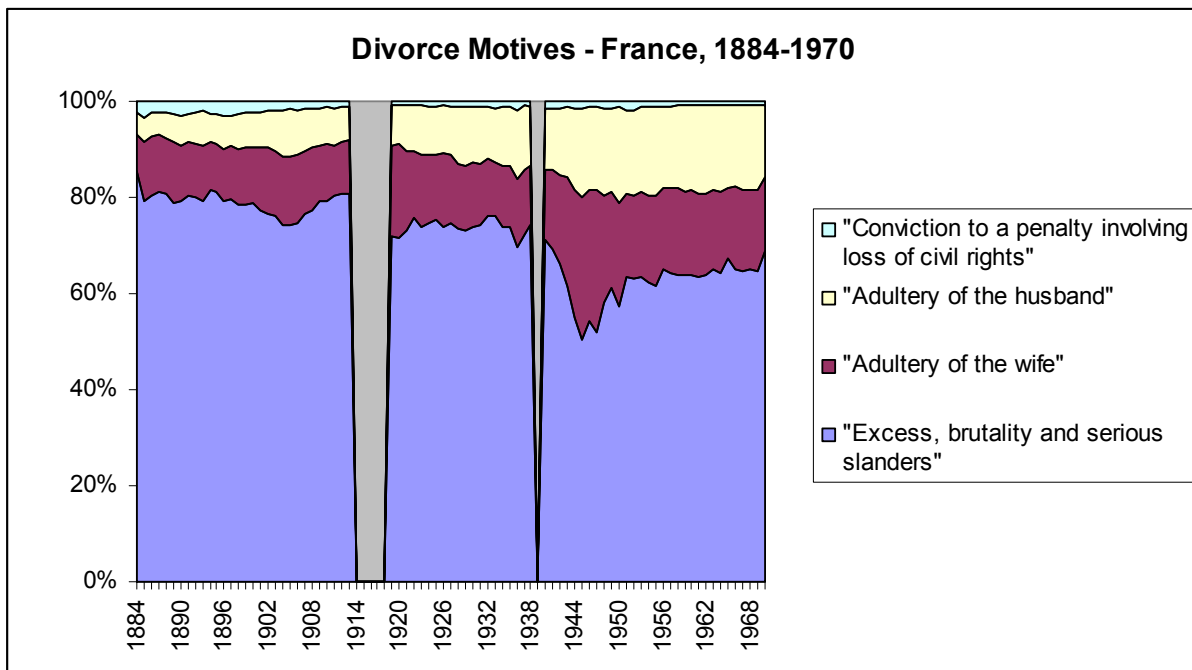


In Brazil, while divorce filers are equally men and women, most annulment filers are women since at least the 1980s.

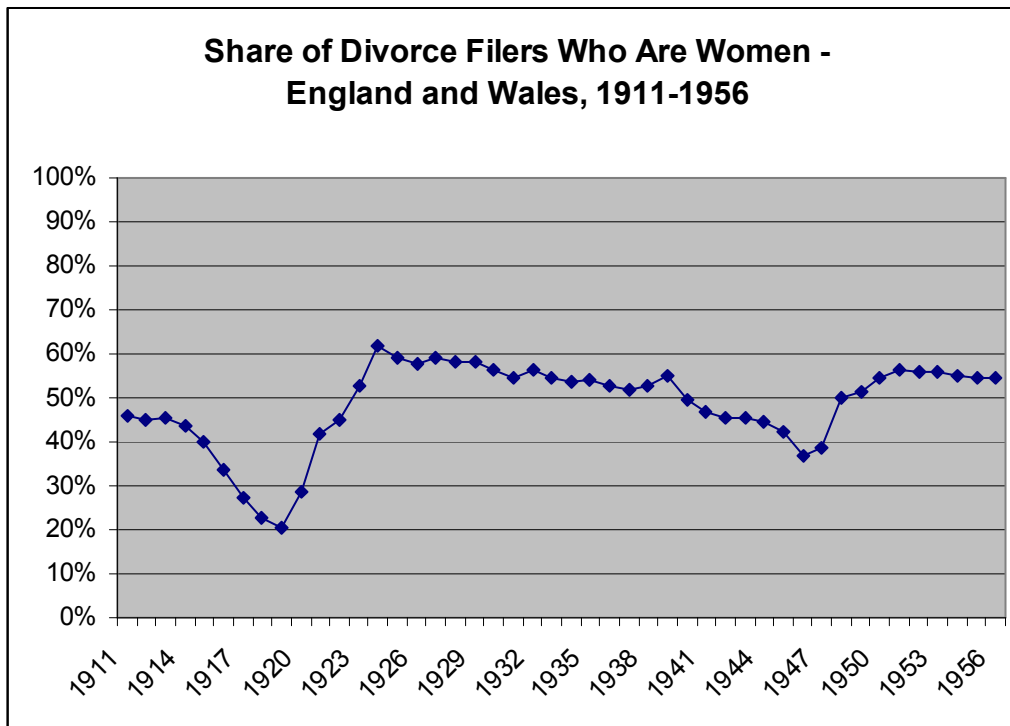


- **An Exception : Postwar Periods**

We saw that in France the share of divorce filers who are men rose sharply after the First World War and after the Second World War. Interestingly, the share of divorce motives which most increases after wars is the share of adulteries by the wife! After the First World War (i.e., contrasting 1920 with the 1909-1913 period), the share of divorces which were filed for adultery increased from 18,7% to 27,4%, and the share of those divorces which concerned the wife's adultery rather than the husband's increased from 60,1% to 70,6% (Desforges 1947). After the Second World War (i.e., contrasting 1945 with 1938), the share of divorces which were filed for adultery increased from 24.8% to 48%, and the share of those divorces which concerned the wife's adultery rather than the husband's increased from 50.8% to 61.8%.



We also saw that in England and Wales the share of divorce filers who are men rose after the First World War ; data for the post Second World War period were missing but another time series (Rowntree, Carrier 1958) tends to show that in England and Wales the same phenomenon may have occurred after the Second World War too.



In New Jersey the share of divorces which were granted to the husband rose by 10 points at the end of the Civil War (in 1864-1865). The same phenomenon also occurred after the Second World War in the United States and Australia (Friedman, Percival 1976).

## 2. Most Divorce Filers are Women in Most Contexts

In this section I want to show that most divorce filers are women not only in most societies (at an aggregate level) but also in most circumstances (at an individual and couple level). I have been able to find (only) three individual datasets on divorce filing, which concern the following countries and periods:

- **France, 1970-1982:** the sample is made of 1,610 women who resided in France in 1982 and got divorced by a unilateral divorce between 1970 and 1982; this sample of women is a subsample of a French 1985-1986 survey conducted by INED (“Femmes face au changement familial,” a survey which interviewed women who had declared in 1982 that they were divorced since 1970 or separated since 1968);
- **Mexico, 2000-2005:** the sample is made of 18,738 unilateral divorces which occurred in Mexico and were registered in 2005; not all of these divorces occurred in 2005, though, but more than 99,5% of them date from 2000 to 2005; although not all Mexican divorces which occurred between 2000 and 2005 are included in this sample I assume this sample reflects who filed for divorce in Mexico in the 2000-2005 period; this sample of divorces is available at the Mexican Statistics Institute website:  
[http://www.inegi.gob.mx/est/contenidos/espanol/proyectos/continuas/vitales/bd/nupcialidad/Divorcios.asp?c=6548;](http://www.inegi.gob.mx/est/contenidos/espanol/proyectos/continuas/vitales/bd/nupcialidad/Divorcios.asp?c=6548)

- **Poland, 2005:** the sample is made of the 67,578 divorces which occurred in Poland in 2005; this sample of divorces is available at the Polish Statistics Institute website:  
[http://www.stat.gov.pl/cgi\\_bin/demografia/xopt?wojew=101&temat=dr.html&wj=NOWE](http://www.stat.gov.pl/cgi_bin/demografia/xopt?wojew=101&temat=dr.html&wj=NOWE).

Three additional points should be noted. First, while the French and Mexican samples include only unilateral divorces (thereby excluding mutual-initiative divorces), the Polish sample is made of all divorces which occurred in the country in 2005 because in Poland mutual-initiative divorces do not exist. Second, while in the French sample unilateral divorces were 84.6% of all divorces, in the Mexican sample they are only 26.7%. Third, the share of divorce filers who were women was 78.5% in the French sample, 60% in the Mexican sample, and 75% in the Polish one.

I used each one of these samples to check if the fact that most divorce filers are women is robust across individual or couple characteristics such as spouses' ages at divorce, spouses' educational levels, number of children, divorce motive, etc. I performed tables crossing "which spouse filed for divorce" with each of these variables and I summed up all the results in the following table. It indicates, for each sample, in what situations most divorce filers are women. For instance, the first line shows that when one crosses "which spouse filed for divorce" with "divorce motive," in all three samples most divorce filers are women in *all situations*, i.e., whatever the divorce motive.

	<b>Situations in Which Most Divorce Filers Are Women</b>		
	<b>France 1970-1982, unilateral divorces (N=1,610)</b>	<b>Mexico 2000-2005, unilateral divorces (N=18,738)</b>	<b>Poland 2005, all divorces (N=67,578)</b>
Divorce motive	All situations	All situations <sup>1</sup>	All situations
Was any spouse judged guilty, and if yes whom?	All situations	When "husband guilty" but not when "wife guilty"	All situations except when "wife guilty"
Who got the custody of the children?		Most situations but not when "father gets custody"	
Did the wife get alimony for herself?	All situations	All situations	
Did the wife get alimony for the children?	All situations	All situations	
Age of the wife at divorce	All situations	All situations	Until 60-64 years old
Age of the husband at divorce	All situations	All situations	Until 65-69 years old
Age of the wife at marriage	All situations	Until 45-49 years old	
Age of the husband at marriage	All situations	Until 45-49 years old	
Educational level of the wife	All situations	All levels except the lowest two	All situations
Educational level of the husband	All situations	All levels except the second lowest	All situations
Did the wife have a job?	All situations	All situations	
Did the husband have	All situations	All situations	

<sup>1</sup> There is only one exception, which only reinforces the pattern according to which most divorce filers are women : "Si un cónyuge solicitó el divorcio por causa injustificada, el demandado puede divorciarse 3 meses después de la última sentencia."

a job?			
Social class of the wife	All situations	All situations	
Social class of the husband	All situations	All situations	
Prior marital status of the wife	All situations	All situations	
Prior marital status of the husband	All situations	Most situations but not “divorced” and “widower”	
Frequency of religious practice of the wife	All situations		
Frequency of religious practice of the husband	All situations		
Place of residence: urban/rural		Urban places only, not rural places	All situations
Duration of marriage at divorce	All situations	All situations	All situations
Was the spouses’ home rented or owned, and if owned which spouse owned it?	All situations		
Number of children of the couple	All situations	All situations except “7 children” and “9 children”	
Number of children of the couple who are minor at divorce	All situations	All situations	
Did the wife have a lover at the time of separation?	All situations		
Did the husband have a lover at the time of separation?	All situations		

The main conclusion of this synthetic table is that the fact that most divorce filers are women is impressively robust across situations. In all three samples most divorce filers are women whatever the duration of marriage at divorce. In the samples where data are available most divorce filers are women whether or not the woman receives alimony (for herself or her children), whether or not the husband or wife worked during marriage, and whatever the husband or wife’s social class or their number of minor children at divorce. In France and Mexico most divorce filers are women whatever the spouses’ ages at divorce, and one has to consider divorces of people above 60 in Poland to find couples in which most divorce filers are men. Perhaps even more strikingly, in France most divorce filers are women not only when only the wife has a lover at separation but also when only the husband has one and even when none of them or both of them have lovers at separation!

It should be noted, by the way, that the robustness of the fact that most divorce filers are women has already been alluded to in some analyses. In the United States in 1887-1906, even though the share of divorce filers who were women was much lower in the South than in the North or the West of the country, most divorce filers were women in each region (Friedman, Percival 1976). In the United States in 1975-1988, even if the share of divorce filers who were women was (a little bit) higher among couples who had children, most divorce filers were women both in couples with and without children (National Center for Health Statistics 1991). In France in the 1960s more than 70% of divorce filers were women when the wife had a job but still 60% of divorce filers were women when the wife did not have a job (Jaulerry 1971).

This table also shows that, contrary to what Hartmut Esser (2004) suggested, the “gender bias in divorce initiative” cannot be due entirely to multiple selection effects.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Why Most Divorce Filers Are Women: Theoretical Considerations

In this section I want to make clear what explanations could – and which *cannot* – make sense of the robust fact that most divorce filers are women.

- **Unsatisfying, intuitive explanations**

When one asks people how they would explain the fact that it is women who file for divorce, no matter who they are (married and/or divorced or not, working in a field related to divorce or not) they propose many explanations... which actually are not explanations at all! Therefore, before proposing some explanations to the pattern we have observed, I want to dispel these unsatisfying “explanations” – and to make explicit why they are not satisfying.

One popular explanation of why it is women who file for divorce is that men beat and abandon and cheat on their spouse more often than women, so that women would gain less from marriage – and thus, lose less from divorce. However, this “explanation” is by principle unsatisfying, because it simply begs the question: why would a husband do such things? How could a violent husband not have been told by his wife that the next time he beat her she would file for divorce? If he knew beating his wife would lead her to file for divorce and he indeed preferred getting divorced to staying married, why not simply file himself? And if he knew beating her would lead her to file for divorce and he preferred to stay married, why beat her (or why start drinking, if he knows drinking makes him want to beat her)? Therefore, this “explanation” is unsatisfying because it is not self-sufficient: even though it is empirically evident that many women file for divorce because their wellbeing has been worsened by their spouse, we would still have to understand why someone would deliberately worsen his or her spouse’s wellbeing.

Another relatively popular explanation is that women do a disproportionate share of the domestic work (including child care and emotional support of one’s spouse), so that women gain less than men from marriage – and thus, lose less from divorce. However, once again, this “explanation” is unsatisfying, because it begs the question: when women do a disproportionate share of the domestic work they do it deliberately, so why do women who do a disproportionate share of the domestic work file for divorce instead of stop doing more than half (or any other share) of it?

One explanation which some sociologists might propose is that a norm according to which it is the wife rather than the husband who should file for divorce – or a norm according to which the man should do a courtesy to his wife by letting her file first – has emerged and persisted, and many people obey it. However, like most other norm-driven explanations of human behavior, this “explanation” is begging the question: why would such a norm – instead of an opposite norm or of no norm at all – have emerged and persisted over time?

Yet another explanation, which is relatively popular among women – not men! –, is that “men are cowards,” so that they would not want to take any initiative – be it marriage or

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<sup>2</sup> “Because age reduces the chances to find an alternative, and because of the fact that the average wives are younger than husbands, at least part of the female-gender bias in divorce should be explained simply by this difference in the average age-structure of marriages. This hypothesis additionally is proved for similar effects of structural aspects in the gender-biased organization of marital gain – like household chores, in the control of resources – like social and economic power, or in gender-biased features of (re-)framing of marriages and (non)production of marital gain – like certain kinds of “significant” misbehaviour in marriages (like drug abuse or marital violence).” (Esser 2004)

divorce – in marital relationships. Although much too widespread to be completely senseless, this explanation also begs the question: why is it that in loveless relationships – or in relationships in which only the man is not in love any more – men do not want to take the initiative to divorce?

One final explanation, which is more popular among men, is that divorce laws favor women, so that women would have less to lose than men from divorce. Although *by principle* a plausible explanation – i.e., an explanation which would make sense of the observed phenomenon if it were true that divorce laws favored women –, this explanation is empirically not plausible. Indeed, as researchers know, the financial consequences of divorce are worse for women than for men, which means that alimony (even when it is paid) does not compensate for women's loss of living standard (compared to men's loss of living standard if there indeed is any loss) after divorce. Only for children's custody are women advantaged at divorce (they are advantaged in the sense that the children's interest is compatible with their interest more often than with their husband's), so this explanation is one of those which I mention in the next table.

- **Possibly satisfying explanations**

In the next table I present nine possible explanations of why it is women who file for divorce. Several points should be noted. First, these are theoretically meaningful explanations, not necessarily empirically accurate ones. Second, some combinations of two or more of these explanations are possible, while other combinations are theoretically impossible. Third, the table classifies these explanations in two families (I and II, in columns), each of these families contains three different explanations (1, 2 and 3), and some of these explanations contain more than one version (a, b or c).

# Reasons Why Wives Would File for Divorce More Often than Husbands

## I. Wives prefer to divorce more often than husbands do...

### **1. Because women gain less than men from marriage**

a. Given that women's value on the marriage market decreases more rapidly than men's with ageing, women have an incentive to marry in a relatively precipitous way, which makes them less satisfied with their marriage than men.

b. Given that women have evolved to be not only "choosier" *before* marriage but also more anxious about the quality of their mate choice and more demanding about their mate's emotional investment *during* marriage, women suffer more from loveless relationships than men, which makes them less satisfied with their marriage than men.

c. There exists a strategy in which the spouse who prefers to divorce tries to induce his (or her) partner to file for divorce herself (or himself) because in that case she (or he) will get less from the divorce: a worse distribution of assets, less alimony, etc. Given that men have more physical and financial power than women, it is easier for them to follow this strategy and degrade their spouse's life satisfaction until *she* files for divorce.

### **2. Because women lose less than men by divorce**

Given that women get the custody of their (minor) children more often than men, divorce is (emotionally) less costly for wives.

### **3. Because women, not men, lose less by precipitating rather than waiting for divorce**

Given that women's value on the marriage market and fecundity decrease more rapidly than men's with ageing, wives who anticipate that their marriage may not last forever or may not produce (enough) children have an incentive which is stronger than husbands' to precipitate their divorce so as to reduce its costs on the remarriage market or to have children.

## II. When both spouses prefer to divorce they agree relatively often that it is the wife who should file...

### **1. Because it makes getting divorce more likely**

When mutual-consent divorce does not exist, both spouses agree that it is the wife who should file for divorce and accuse the husband of some fault (cheating, beating, etc.) because the configuration in which it is the husband who committed some fault is more credible to judges so it raises the probability that judges will grant them a divorce.

### **2. Because it is better for the spouses**

Given that women's value on the marriage market decreases more rapidly than men's with ageing, men who divorce their wife send the message that she has become worthless, which both humiliates her and makes people see him as heartless, while women who divorce their husband send the message that their relationship is not satisfying anymore, which does not humiliate him and makes people see her as courageous. So, both spouses agree that it is the wife who should file for divorce (especially if the husband is still altruist toward her).

### **3. Because it is better for the children**

a. When spouses have children and both of them know that child custody will be given to the mother, they both agree that it is the wife who should file for divorce because this will make it easier for her family and friends to see her as an innocent victim, which will increase the probability that those people help her educate the children.

b. When spouses have children and both of them prefer that child custody be given to the mother but mutual-consent divorce does not exist, they both agree that it is the wife who should file for divorce because if the husband files and accuses her of some fault judges may not give her custody of the children.

Now I have listed explanations which could, by principle, explain why most divorce filers are women, I have to check them empirically.

## 4. Why Most Divorce Are Filers Women: an Empirical Test on France, 1970-1982

In this section I want to perform an empirical test of some of the abovementioned explanations on the French data I have (given that I cannot perform such a multivariate test on the Mexican or Polish data). First I mention which testable predictions can be derived from these explanations, and second I perform the empirical test.

Although there are many informal indications that explanations II.1 and II.3.b have some validity they apply only to societies which do not have mutual-initiative divorce so they do not have enough generality to explain why most divorce filers are women *even when mutual-initiative divorce is available*. Therefore, I do not test them and focus on the remaining seven explanations.

- **Empirical predictions derived from each explanation**

**Explanation I.1.a**, which was proposed (but not tested) by Landsburg (2000), is the following: given that women's value on the marriage market decreases more rapidly than men's with ageing, women have an incentive to marry in a relatively precipitous way, which makes them less satisfied with their marriage than men. If this explanation was valid, the share of divorce filers who are women would be all the greater since the wife married earlier (i.e., more precipitously) and similarly the share of divorce filers who are men would be all the greater since the husband married earlier. This is why I introduce both spouses' ages at marriage in the logistic regression and expect a negative correlation between wife's age at marriage and female divorce initiative (the later she married the less *she* should file for divorce) and a positive correlation between husband's age at marriage and female initiative (the later he married, the less *he* – so the more *she* – should file for divorce). It should be noticed that in four American states in 1995 (Connecticut, Virginia, Oregon and Montana) (Brinig, Allen 2000), although it was all the more often the wife (rather than the husband) who filed for divorce since she married at an earlier age, it was all the more often the husband who filed for divorce since he married at a *later* age, which is not compatible with this explanation.

**Explanation I.1.b**, which may be derived from evolutionary psychology, is the following: given that women have evolved to be not only “choosier” *before* marriage but also more anxious about the quality of their mate choice and more demanding about their mate's emotional investment *during* marriage, women suffer more from loveless relationships than men, which makes them less satisfied with their marriage than men. One particular consequence of this general fact could be that when women have (or would prefer to have) a lover they would prefer to divorce to be able to invest in the relationship with him whereas when men have (or would prefer to have) a lover they would prefer *not* to divorce *not* to be able to invest in the relationship with her – i.e., to just have sex. I derive a testable prediction from the general explanation and another one from the lover-related version of this explanation. First, if the general explanation was valid, the share of divorce filers who are women would be all the greater since the intensity of mutual love has declined – and/or is going to decline – more over time. This is why I introduce the variable “number of months of disagreement before the final separation” in the logistic regression and expect a positive correlation between this duration of disagreement and female divorce initiative (the more hopeless the relationship the more *she* would file for divorce). Second, if the lover-related version of this explanation was valid, the fact the wife has a lover (rather than mutual

faithfulness) would increase female divorce initiative more powerfully than the husband's lover would increase male divorce initiative, and the fact that both spouses have a lover (rather than mutual faithfulness) would increase female divorce initiative too. Therefore, I introduce the variable "which spouse, if any, had a lover at the time of divorce" in the logistic regression and I expect the (positive) correlation between the wife only having a lover and female initiative to be stronger than the (presumably negative) correlation between the husband only having a lover and female divorce initiative, and I expect a positive correlation between mutual unfaithfulness and female initiative.

**Explanation I.1.c** rests on the assumption that there exists a strategy in which the spouse who prefers to divorce tries to induce his (or her) partner to file for divorce herself (or himself) because in that case she (or he) will get less from the divorce: a worse distribution of assets, less alimony, etc. This assumption indeed makes sense because, as a logistic-regression model of "wife getting alimony or not" (not shown here) reveals, the fact that she (rather than he) filed for divorce significantly increases the likelihood that she will *not* get alimony (even when one controls by several variables such as the type of divorce, which spouse if any was judged guilty, each spouse's age at divorce, the duration of marriage at divorce, each spouse's level of education, whether or not each spouse worked during marriage and if yes in which kind of job, whether or not each spouse had a lover at the time of divorce, and the number of children of the couple and their last child's age). Admitting this assumption, the explanation becomes the following: given that men have more physical and financial power than women, it is easier for them to follow this strategy and degrade their spouse's life satisfaction until *she* files for divorce. If this explanation was valid, any spouse's fault (compared to no fault by either spouse) would increase the other spouse's divorce initiative, and both spouses' faults (compared to no fault by either spouse) would not bias initiative towards either wives or husbands. This is why I introduce the variable "which spouse, if any, was judged guilty of some fault" in the logistic regression and expect a positive correlation between husband's fault and female divorce initiative, a negative correlation between wife's fault and female initiative, and no correlation between both spouses' faults and female initiative.

**Explanation I.2** is the following: given that women get the custody of their (minor) children more often than men, divorce is (emotionally) less costly for wives. If this explanation was valid, the share of divorce filers who are women would be greater if the couple had one, two or more children rather than none. This is why I introduce the number of children of the couple in the logistic regression and expect a positive correlation between the number of children and female divorce initiative (the more children they have, the less *he* – so the more *she* – should file for divorce). Previous multivariate tests of the effect of the number of children on the share of divorce filers who are women produced opposite results: while among Germans who got divorced between 1995 and 2000 (Andress, Lingnau 2004) having children did not influence the share of divorces which were filed by the wife or the husband, in four American states in 1995 (Connecticut, Virginia, Oregon and Montana) (Brinig, Allen 2000) it was all the less often the wife (rather than the husband) who filed for divorce since they had more children (supposedly because children impair wives' careers and thus make them more financially dependent on their husband). Cross tables performed on Belgium in 2002 (Institut national de statistique 2003) suggested that it was all the more often the wife (rather than the husband) who filed for divorce since the couple had more children (from no child to three children).

**Explanation I.3** is the following: given that women's value on the marriage market and fecundity decrease more rapidly than men's with ageing, wives who anticipate that their marriage may not last forever or may not produce (enough) children have an incentive which is stronger than husbands' to precipitate their divorce so as to reduce its costs on the

remarriage market or to have children. If this explanation was valid, the wife should precipitate (rather than wait for) divorce all the more since she wants (additional) children. This is why I introduce an interaction between the variables “number of years of disagreement before the final separation” and “number of children of the couple” and expect a negative impact of this interaction on female divorce filing (the fewer children she has the more each additional period of disagreement should induce her to precipitate divorce). This explanation also entails that at each age women have a stronger incentive to precipitate (rather than wait for) divorce, but unfortunately this prediction seems hard to test.

**Explanation II.2** is the following: given that women’s value on the marriage market decreases more rapidly than men’s with ageing, men who divorce their wife send the message that she has become worthless, which both humiliates her and makes people see him as heartless, while women who divorce their husband send the message that their relationship is not satisfying anymore, which does not humiliate him and makes people see her as courageous; so both spouses agree that it is the wife who should file for divorce (especially if the husband is still altruist toward her). If this explanation II.2 was valid, the share of divorce filers who are women would be all the greater since the wife was older (i.e., more prone to being humiliated by a “repudiation”). This is why I introduce the wife’s age at divorce in the logistic regression and expect a positive correlation between wife’s age at divorce and female divorce filing. This prediction might sound strange since it would be more intuitive to predict that the older the wife the more the husband would want to file (Cohen 1987), but this “opportunistic male divorce filing” prediction could not explain why most divorce filers are women – and this is the reason why I maintain the abovementioned prediction, according to which the wife’s age would *increase* female divorce filing. In Germany in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the spouses’ ages at divorce did not influence the share of divorces which were filed by the wife or the husband (Andress, Lingnau 2004).

**Explanation II.3.a** is the following: when spouses have children and both of them know that child custody will be given to the mother, they both agree that it is the wife who should file for divorce because this will make it easier for her family and friends to see her as an innocent victim, which will increase the probability that those people help her educate the children. If this explanation was valid the share of divorce filers who are women would be greater if the wife had family or friends who could help her raise the kids. This is why I introduce the variable “whether or not after separation the wife had family or friends who could take care of the children” in the logistic regression and expect a positive correlation between this variable and female divorce initiative.

- **A logistic-regression model of female divorce filing in France, 1970-1982**

To test these predictions, I extract a subsample of 1,433 couples which divorced by unilateral initiative between 1970 and 1982 from the French survey mentioned in the previous section, and I perform a logistic regression of female rather than male divorce initiative on the explanatory variables mentioned above.

The results of this analysis are presented in the last column of the next table. Before reviewing these results, two things should be noted. First, once one has introduced basic variables such as the wife’s ages at marriage and divorce and the husband’s age at marriage, the introduction of some additional explanatory variable does not modify substantially the estimated effect of any other explanatory variable; in other words, the estimated effect of each variable is relatively robust across specifications. Second, variables which correspond to none of our predictions (such as the wife and/or the husband’s level of education or work status, the spouses’ levels of religious practice, or the distribution of household labor between spouses during marriage) do not have any significant effect on whether it is the wife or the husband who files for divorce, and introducing them does not change the significance, direction or

strength of the estimated effect of the variables which do correspond to our predictions; therefore, not including these variables in the model does not reduce its explanatory power or bias its estimations.

### Odds ratios of female rather than male divorce initiative

		Each variable separately	All variables together
Wife's age at marriage		0.999	1.061*
Husband's age at marriage		1.005	0.997
Wife's age at divorce		0.970***	0.938***
Number of children of the couple		0.897*	1.082
Number of years of disagreement before the final separation		1.047**	1.395***
Number of years of disagreement before the final separation *		1.001	0.925***
Number of children of the couple	<i>No</i>	-	-
	Yes	1.088	0.927
Whether or not after separation the wife had family or friends who could take care of the children	Sometimes only	0.995	0.847
	No children	0.886	0.766
	No answer	0.711	1.013
	<i>None</i>	-	-
Which spouse, if any, was judged guilty of some fault	Husband	1.993***	2.837***
	Wife	0.330***	0.207***
	Both	1.045	0.961
	<i>None</i>	-	-
Which spouse, if any, had a lover at the time of divorce	Husband	0.441***	0.390***
	Wife	0.697	1.398
	Both	0.395*	0.553
	No answer	1.031	1.374

\*Significant (<.05) \*\*Highly significant (<.01) \*\*\*Very highly significant (<.001)

Several conclusions emerge from this model. Several explanations are relatively clearly invalidated, and some others seem more promising.

**Explanation I.1.a is not valid.** Indeed, while this explanation predicted that each spouse would file all the more since he or she married earlier, it appears that divorce filing does not depend on the husband's age at marriage and that, to the extent that it does depend on the wife's age at marriage, it is not in the predicted direction.

**Explanation I.2 is not valid.** Indeed, while this explanation predicted that it would be more often wives (rather than husbands) who filed if the couple had children, it appears that divorce filing does not depend on the number of children of the couple.

**Explanation II.2 is not valid.** Indeed, while this explanation predicted that wives would file (i.e., their husbands would let them file) all the more often since they are older at divorce, it appears that wives file less often when they grow older, although the effect is weak. Actually, as we saw, given that women's value in men's eyes falls more quickly with age than men's value in women's eyes – so that the older the woman the more the husband has to gain and the more the wife has to lose by divorce and remarriage –, such a pattern is not astonishing, and the reason why this effect is not very strong may well be that it is partly

compensated by explanation II.2. However, it remains clear that the reason why most divorce filers are women apparently cannot be that men let them file to save their self-esteem (and not appear as heartless).

**Explanation II.3.a is not valid.** Indeed, divorce filing does not depend on whether or not the wife has family or friends who could take care of the children, so that the reason why it is wives who file for divorce cannot be that husbands let them file in order to make them appear as innocent and leave them with as much help as possible to raise the kids.

**Results are only partly compatible with explanation I.1.b.** Indeed, it turns out to be true that the more the couple has been disagreeing before separation the more it is the wife, rather than the husband, who files for divorce – the effect being very highly significant and of moderate strength. However, while a version of this explanation predicted that having a lover at separation would influence divorce filing more when it is women (rather than men) who have a lover it appears not to be the case (it is not significantly more often wives who file when they have a lover whereas it is very highly significantly more often husbands who file when they have a lover – and this effect is strong), and while it predicted that both spouses having lovers would increase female divorce initiative it also appears not to be the case. It should be noted that in Germany in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century too (Andress, Lingnau 2004) having a partner after the breakdown of the union increased the probability of filing for divorce *especially for men*.

**Results are compatible with explanation I.1.c** because, as predicted, each spouse's guilt increases the other spouse's propensity to file and both spouses' fault (compared to no fault by either spouse) does not bias initiative towards any spouse. This could suggest that there indeed is a strategy in which the spouse who prefers to divorce tries to induce his (or her) partner to file for divorce herself (or himself) because in that case she (or he) will get less from the divorce. This would help explain why most divorce filers are women because, given that men have more physical and financial power than women, it is easier for them to follow this strategy and degrade their spouse's life satisfaction until *she* files for divorce.

**Results are compatible with explanation I.3** because, as predicted, the fewer children she has had the more each additional period of disagreement induces her (rather than him) to file for divorce (the effect is very highly significant and of moderate strength). This suggests that wives who anticipate that their marriage may not produce (enough) children precipitate their divorce to have (additional) children. This would help explain why most divorce filers are women because, given that women's value on the marriage market and fecundity decrease more rapidly than men's with ageing, wives who anticipate that their marriage may not last forever or may not produce (enough) children have an incentive which is stronger than husbands' to precipitate their divorce so as to reduce its costs on the remarriage market or to have children.

Therefore, the last two explanations seem to be more promising than the others. Further empirical tests need to be performed in order to ascertain this conclusion and also, maybe, evaluate the relative importance of each of these mechanisms.

## Conclusion

In this paper I showed that most divorce filers are women

- at an aggregate level, i.e., in most societies in which data are available: from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, on each of the five continents; and also
- at an individual or couple level, i.e., almost independently of the spouses' ages at marriage or divorce, educational levels or types of activity, number of children, etc.: this was shown for France in 1970-1982, Mexico in 2000-2005, and Poland in 2005.

This observation is striking because, as is well known, women have more to lose than men by divorce both economically and on the remarriage market. Therefore, I elaborated nine explanations for this pattern, and tested seven of them. Although this empirical test still needs to be improved in several ways, it seems that the two most promising explanations are the following:

- women prefer to divorce more often than men because women gain less than men from marriage; more precisely, there exists a strategy in which the spouse who prefers to divorce tries to induce his (or her) partner to file for divorce herself (or himself) because in that case she (or he) will get less from the divorce: a worse distribution of assets, less alimony, etc.; given that men have more physical and financial power than women, it is easier for them to follow this strategy and degrade their spouse's life satisfaction until *she* files for divorce.
- women prefer to divorce more often than men because women, not men, lose less by precipitating rather than waiting for divorce; more precisely, given that women's value on the marriage market and fecundity decrease more rapidly than men's with ageing, wives who anticipate that their marriage may not last forever or may not produce (enough) children have an incentive which is stronger than husbands' to precipitate their divorce so as to reduce its costs on the remarriage market or to have children.

Further empirical tests should be made to check if one of these explanations is better than the other, at least concerning France in 1970-1982.

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