

The Double Standard: Marital Infidelity among Men and Women (1886)

Abstract

The double standard for men and women with respect to marital infidelity that has attracted such attention in the case of Victorian Britain was also much discussed in Bismarckian Germany. In this passage on infidelity in marriage, the author postulates that the infidelity of a husband, though also reprehensible, always had less serious social consequences than that of a wife. The argument was based on the fact that public roles (i.e., outside of the family) were ascribed exclusively to men. On this basis, women's infidelity was more "contemptible" because it undermined basic family values and could not be reconciled with existing social mores.

Source

The demand that men should have as little freedom as women is only unconditionally justifiable when it comes to one point: monogamous marriage. Its nature requires equal fidelity on both sides and equal moral control over any instinctual desire to be unfaithful. But even here the fact remains that a lapse in fidelity on the part of the man, as opposed to the woman, generates a completely different degree of disapproval, because it has totally different social consequences. For the one transpires outside of the family, the other inside of it; the one leaves the children's relationship with their parents and siblings unaffected, while the other destroys it completely or at least undermines it by introducing doubts. The husband of a notoriously unfaithful wife can only choose between fulfilling his parental responsibilities vis-à-vis falsely attributed bastards, or rendering his own children motherless through divorce. If he fails to prove her infidelity in legal terms, not even the latter option remains open to him; and instead he must submit to the outrageous necessity of granting children's rights to offspring he may not claim as his own. Even mere suspicion poisons family life, because it is always one's own nest that is fouled by the wife's conceivable infidelity. By contrast, because it falls outside the family circle, the husband's infidelity leaves the marital status and the wife's position as mother and head of the household intact, even though it inflicts moral damage on the rights and feelings of the latter and perhaps also material harm on the family's prosperity. Therefore, an injured wife has the free choice to either insist irreconcilably on her formal right to a divorce, or to forgive and preserve a common family life for her children. It is possible to forgive without detracting from her dignity, which is not the case for a wronged husband. Therefore, it is the wife's prerogative alone to adorn herself with the divine clemency of forgiveness, which would render a husband contemptible in the same situation.

Source: Eduard von Hartmann, *Moderne Probleme*. Leipzig, 1886, pp. 41–42; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, pp. 220–21.

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