



The new gender economics

Men are starting to think it's sexy for women to outearn them. How this seemingly small change may rewrite the rules of marriage

BY LINDSY VAN GELDER



It is a truth universally acknowledged that a man's wallet is directly wired to his testicles. If he is not older, taller and (especially) better compensated at his job than the woman in his life, said testicles will shrivel and wither away. And said woman will pay the price for her excessive success.

It seems, however, that not everyone got the memo. According to data published by the Pew Research Center in 2010, the wife now earns more than the husband in 22 percent of married couples, compared with only 4 percent in 1970. And the salary differences can be

substantial: The 2010 U.S. Census reports that over 4 percent of wives make at least \$30,000 more than their spouses. Once you add to the “wife outearns” group the 25 percent of couples whose incomes are pretty much equal, it's clear that the guy with the well-hung wallet is now just barely in the majority. The final blow to the old gender economics: A Match.com survey of men ages 26 to 36 found that 87 percent thought it would be “sexy” to date a woman who earned more money than they did.

Elizabeth Angell, a 37-year-old magazine editor from Brooklyn, met her husband when they were in graduate school. Back then, neither one was making money. But after she entered the job market, she outearned him by as much as \$50,000 a year. The discrepancy was partly a function of career choice—he became a freelance writer—and partly the result of their different temperaments. “I'm very type A; my nickname is Planny McPlan,” she says. “He's a live-in-the-moment guy who reminds me not to

get caught up in that.” When their two-year-old son was born, they agreed that the new dad was well situated to work part time and take care of the baby three days a week—a job at which, she says, he is “extraordinary.”

Angell has close friends and neighbors with similar arrangements, so she has never felt the pressure of being a trailblazer. The only negative for her is one that men have often faced: “Being the breadwinner is nerve racking. I make more than he does, but I don’t make a fortune, so I sometimes worry that we don’t have enough resources to sustain us as a family,” she says. “I searched my soul about this, and it’s not about wanting to be taken care of. But it’s a big responsibility.” Despite some money worries, the couple, who recently had a second child, are happy with their choices. “We’ve constructed a life that is much less about making money and more about making time,” she says.

Like Angell, many other women living the new gender economics always expected to be financially independent or even dominant. When Rebecca Saletan, a 52-year-old New York publishing executive, met her husband, now a high school English teacher, he was a freelance writer-editor, actor and musician. Saletan has outearned her mate from day one, and it was he who stayed at home with their twin daughters when they were small. “I’ve always been attached to my career,” she says. “That’s how I’m wired. I had my first job when I was 15, and I was used to paying my own way; for me that was the path to freedom. I made more money than anyone I ever dated.”

Saletan acknowledges her luck in being able to trade a little less money for a much better quality of life. “I’m painfully aware that we’re in the upper point-whatever percent of the economy,” she says. But with all the basics taken care of, having her kids looked after by their adoring father and coming home to a fabulous meal at the end of her workday were better than having a lot more money in the bank.

Thanks to the options offered by remarriage, even some women raised in the old gender economics are now experiencing the pleasures of the new. Mandy Aftel, 64, remembers being told as a girl that “you absolutely needed to get married—and to a breadwinner. If you didn’t, you failed.” It was only in her thirties, after she divorced a wealthy doctor, that Aftel focused more on her own work as a psychotherapist; eventually she became the founder of a natural-fragrance company in Berkeley, California. Independence was heady. “I liked knowing I could take care of myself,” she says. “I wanted the creative, independent and involved life, not so much the money that went with the life.”

Three years ago, she married a man 12 years her junior. When he lost his job (as a geophysicist) in the crash of 2008, Aftel hired him as head of operations. It wasn’t a decision that either made lightly. “He’s a techie, he’s thorough, he’s smart at dealing with people, and he’s a mensch,” she says. “But it’s my business, and I run the show here. He jokes that he’s Prince Albert to my Victoria, and he’s fine with that.”

Experts note there’s a new breed of men who not only aren’t threatened by a woman’s larger paycheck but are grateful for it. This attitude is not universal, especially among older white men who have no positive model for it, says Michael Kimmel, distinguished professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. But an increasing number of men are happy being outearned, he says—not only because gender roles are changing but also because of our sluggish economy: Three quarters of those who lost their jobs in 2008 and 2009 were men. “This is not your grandfather’s Depression, because men aren’t the sole providers,” notes Kimmel, whose specialty is the study of masculinity. “So men’s losing their jobs hasn’t been the calamity for the family that it was in 1931.”

Still, when a husband’s earning power collapses in midmarriage, adjusting can be tough. Michele Wells, 55, a market-

ing and public relations consultant from Boulder, Colorado, met her 66-year-old husband back in the early '80s. He was a high-tech industry analyst, she says, "a highflier who was always being quoted in *BusinessWeek*." He earned more than Wells and had gone to Harvard and Princeton, which dazzled her.

As he neared 60, however, Wells's husband lost his enthusiasm for working full time and devoted himself instead to managing the couple's investments. That was OK with her—until the market went belly-up in 2008. To preserve their precrash standard of living, she wanted him to get a job. He balked, suggesting they should just live more cheaply. So Wells had to consider her priorities. She stuck with him—and not just because his clever investing helped them recoup much of what they'd lost. "Love doesn't conquer all, but it helps immensely," she says. "I enjoy his com-

pany. He's a thinker and a reader, he's still handsome, and the sex is still great. Would I be better off divorcing? When I think about the women I know and the things they've been through with men, the answer is no."

Experts see this as a period of transition. "The general data indicate that gender norms are changing but that there's also still some ambivalence," observes D'Vera Cohn, senior writer at the Pew Research Center, which recently released several reports on gender and money. For example, she says, 67 percent of men and women polled in a 2010 national survey said a man needed to be prepared to support a family before he married—but only 33 percent felt that women had the same responsibility. And yet the change in attitudes has been huge. In the late 1970s, Cohn says, 48 percent of American men and women believed that the most sat-

isfying marriage was one in which both partners worked and shared chores and parenting; by 2010 that figure had jumped to 62 percent.

Even if the economy rallies, the new gender economics is likely to continue because we've reached a cultural tipping point. "Gen X and Gen Y men assume their wives are going to work—and work hard," Kimmel says. Experts assessing the new demographic data see important ways in which the changes are a boon to wives. "As women have brought more money into the marriage, their authority and decision-making power have grown," says Andrew Cherlin, a Johns Hopkins professor of sociology. "It's not that women are calling the shots. It's that husbands and wives are sharing the decision-making power."

And women can now choose a husband not because he's a good provider but because he's a good guy. ✿