

# Households where the woman is the sole earner are significantly poorer, says research

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Households in the UK where the woman is the sole earner are significantly poorer than those where the man is the only breadwinner, bucking the trend in western Europe.

The findings disprove the assumption that British [women](#) breadwinners are high-earning and empowered, says new research.

Dr. Helen Kowalewska, of the University of Southampton, and Dr. Agnese Vitali, University of Trento, Italy, analysed [survey data](#) on 171,697 people in the United States, Australia, Canada and 17 European countries.

Dr. Kowalewska told the British Sociological Association's annual conference in Glasgow today [Thursday 25 April] that the average (median) disposable income of UK households where the woman was the only earner was \$13,983 [US dollars—see Note 1 at end]. Where the man was the sole earner, it was around \$17,095.

In Western Europe, the US, Canada and Australia, households with women as the sole breadwinners earned more than those with just the men in employment, with only Germany and Norway as exception.

In southern and eastern Europe, the opposite was true – households with women as the sole breadwinners earned less than those with just the men in employment, with only Slovenia an exception.

"Our findings shed doubt on popular depictions of female breadwinners as high-earning, empowered women – instead they are often lower-educated," Dr. Kowalewska told the conference.

"Rather than reflecting women's empowerment or greater gender equity, female breadwinners are in this position by default, forced to take up employment when their partner loses his job.

"One reason why the UK bucks the trend for western Europe is that women who are the sole breadwinners work significantly fewer hours, an average of 34 a week, compared with sole men breadwinners who work

43.

"They are also less likely to be in managerial or professional occupations – 29% – compared with 26% for men sole breadwinners."

By contrast, the researchers found that where the main earner in UK households was the [woman](#) and her partner worked part-time, the total disposable income was around \$25,968, slightly more than where the man was the main earner and the women worked part-time.

Households where both partners worked were the best off, with a disposable income – defined as the total [income](#) after tax – of around \$32,505.

Provided by British Sociological Association

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