

Most super-rich couples have breadwinning husbands and stay-at-home wives, contrasting sharply with everyone else

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Men are the sole breadwinners in over half of super-rich heterosexual couples—defined as those in the top 1% of households—while the

women are not employed, according to [our new peer-reviewed study](#). That's twice the rate of less affluent heterosexual couples.

Our finding is based on 30 years of data, from 1989 to 2019, from the Federal Reserve's [Survey of Consumer Finances](#). We examined how couples divide work, focusing on three different wealthy groups—the super-rich, the just plain rich and the upper middle class, as defined by their wealth percentile, and compared them with those of less affluent couples.

To get a better sense of how much money we're talking about and the extreme differences among these groups, super-rich couples in the U.S. had a median net worth of US\$17.6 million in 2019. That compares with \$2.3 million for rich couples—those in the next 9% of the wealth distribution—and \$796,000 for the upper middle class, who were in the 10% after that. Our fourth group comprised everyone below the 80% threshold, with median wealth of just \$67,000.

We found that, in 2019, 53% of super-rich heterosexual couples had arrangements in which the woman was not gainfully employed, compared with 27% of rich couples, 20% of upper-middle-class couples and 26% of less affluent couples.

On the flip side, just 28% of super-rich couples had both the man and woman working full time. In rich, upper-middle-class, and less affluent households, that figure was 51%, 61% and 50%, respectively.

Looking at the data over time is revealing. Whereas the share of couples in which only the man worked has modestly declined over the last 30 years for the other groups, it remained high among the super-rich.

The uniquely high prevalence of sole male-breadwinner arrangements among the super-rich is a symptom of stark class and gender inequalities

in the U.S. economy.

Rising class inequality between the super-rich and all others [has been driven](#) by a handful of men's incomes and wealth rising exponentially compared with everyone else's.

And even though [women have made progress](#) in entering professional jobs that pay \$100,000 or more, the glass ceiling—or perhaps more appropriately, the [diamond ceiling](#)—is still firmly intact.

Accordingly, a woman's objectively high income may seem less consequential to the overall household finances when her husband earns an exorbitantly high income of a million or more. Or, it may seem trivial when the [couple](#) has massive amounts of wealth exceeding \$10 million.

The absence of women at the top of the economic ladder has many implications.

The super-rich are inordinately powerful in the [workplace](#) and in [politics](#). If the majority of the wealthiest married women are not in the workforce, it is unlikely they have the same degree of public influence as their husbands. So men continue to exercise the majority of societal power associated with the super-rich.

We also know that [family structure](#) shapes people's worldviews and behaviors. Previous research shows that men with stay-at-home wives [are less supportive of women](#) in their own workplaces, including being less likely to promote them. This suggests that the most powerful leaders in the workplace and in politics may not be as eager to support women's career advancement or family-friendly workplace policies as some might hope.

What we still don't know

We don't know what exactly drives super-rich couples' work-family decisions.

We believe that at least some of the women in these couples exit the [labor force](#) after their partner achieves economic success—and their incomes are no longer needed to maintain their lifestyle.

It's also possible that some super-rich men's [wealth](#) accumulation was made possible, in part, by their wives' unpaid labor throughout their careers.

The most highly compensated jobs in the U.S. economy tend to require [long hours](#), frequent travel and the ability to be on call 24/7—all of which tend to be incompatible with raising children and managing a household.

Men may have been able to meet these intense job demands and become financially successful because they have wives who stepped back from their own careers, freeing them from the majority of household responsibilities—a dynamic that few women have access to.

More information: Jill E Yavorsky et al, Separate Spheres: The Gender Division of Labor in the Financial Elite, *Social Forces* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/sf/soad061](https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soad061)

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