

Couples in which the woman is the only earner report lower life satisfaction, finds new research

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Many women will, at least temporarily, be the breadwinner [at some point in their relationship](#). Changing employment trends and gender roles will affect many households. But [our new peer-reviewed study](#) shows that for heterosexual couples, well-being is lower when the woman is the sole

earner, versus if the man is the breadwinner or if both partners are employed.

Over 14 years of European social survey data, men and women reported lower life satisfaction when the female wife or partner was the breadwinner, with men suffering the most. This is true even after controlling for income, attitudes toward gender and other characteristics.

We analyzed the [survey responses](#) of over 42,000 working-age people spanning nine countries. The data measures well-being by asking people to score how satisfied they are with their lives as a whole nowadays, from zero (extremely dissatisfied) to ten (extremely satisfied). Most people give a score [between five and eight](#).

These "life satisfaction points" give us a sense of how different groups' well-being compares. Before any controls, men's life satisfaction is 5.86 when the woman is the sole earner, versus 7.16 when the man is the only earner. For women, the corresponding figures are 6.33 and 7.10 respectively.

Couples in Germany seem to struggle the most with female-breadwinner situations, followed by the UK, Ireland and Spain. However, the issue is fairly universal across Europe, even in more gender equal countries like Finland.

Men struggle more

In female-breadwinner households, men appear to struggle mentally more than women. We found that women's breadwinning carries such a heavy psychological burden for men that they would prefer she was not employed at all. After accounting for basic characteristics, incomes and gender attitudes, out-of-work men report significantly higher life satisfaction when both partners are jobless.

Watching their partners go to the office (or work from home) every day might lead out-of-work men to feel worse about themselves. But when their partner is in the same boat as them, jobless men may instead feel like their lack of employment is less "deviant."

Men in female-breadwinner couples report the lowest well-being when they are unemployed rather than "inactive" (not actively looking for work and/or doing housework or other care responsibilities).

Unemployment is associated with the greatest [psychological costs](#), such as self-doubt, uncertainty, loneliness and stigma. In this study, we do not include people who are inactive for health or disability reasons.

In fact, [unemployed men](#) would rather swap places with their breadwinner wives. Men's well-being is significantly higher when the woman is unemployed instead of the man, whereas women report equally low well-being when either partner is unemployed.

Characteristics of female-breadwinner households

Certain factors may contribute to female-breadwinner couples' low well-being. For example, these couples [have lower average household incomes](#) than two-earner and male-breadwinner households, and are more likely to find it "difficult" or "very difficult" to cope on their current income. Additionally, more men in female-breadwinner couples report "fair," "bad" or "very bad" health and are less educated.

When we controlled for these and other basic characteristics (like age and children) as well as gender-role attitudes and each partner's share of household income, women's well-being is only marginally lower (-0.048 life satisfaction points) when the woman is the sole earner instead of the man.

Yet, even after accounting for these factors, men's well-being is still over

half a life satisfaction point lower (-0.585) when the woman is the only earner. In Germany, this difference is over one full life satisfaction point (-1.112).

So, while our study suggests the characteristics of female-breadwinner couples mostly explain women's lower well-being, they do not account for the discrepancy with men's well-being.

Masculinity, (un)employment and well-being

In many countries, being the breadwinner remains central to men's sense of self. Providing financially for the family is [key to masculinity](#) and tantamount to being a ["good" dad](#). When these roles are reversed, couples can experience [social "sanctions"](#) like gossiping, ridicule and judgment from family, friends, and other people they know, as well as [mental health difficulties](#).

Unemployed men may be particularly vulnerable to isolation and loneliness, since they are less likely than women to have community or care-based social networks [to draw on](#), like friendships developed at the school gates.

Meanwhile, [gendered expectations of selflessness](#) may lead women to go further than men in shielding a partner from the true extent of their distress. This could work the other way, too: when the man is unemployed, the woman may be more perceptive of and negatively affected by his struggles than he would be if these roles were reversed.

Yet, unemployment has become a normal part of working life, including for middle-class professionals who were traditionally more [protected from this risk](#). Our findings suggest that gender norms affect how couples cope with unemployment, with men placing more value on their own employment status than their female partner's.

Additionally, men's distress under the female-breadwinner arrangement may trigger women to hold themselves back from taking jobs or seeking higher-paying roles, further reinforcing gender inequalities in employment rates, career progression and incomes.

Clearly, there is still a long way to go to sever the link between breadwinning and masculinity. Challenging this idealization of male breadwinning is critical so that men no longer feel like failures when they fall short of this expectation.

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