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PERSONAL FINANCE

More Wives Now Outearn Their Husbands. They Also Stay Together Longer.

The share of marriages with women breadwinners tripled over the last 50 years

By *Julia Carpenter* [Follow](#)

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Marriages in which wives outearn their husbands are not only more common, but less likely to end in divorce than in the past.

Couples married in the late 1960s and 1970s were 70% more likely to divorce when wives earned the same or slightly more than their husbands compared with couples where the husband earned more, according to research from Christine Schwartz and Pilar Gonalons-Pons, sociologists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Pennsylvania, respectively. For couples married in the 1990s, however, the divorce rate for those with female breadwinners had fallen to 4% higher than male breadwinners.

The reasons these marriages are succeeding seem to be cultural as well as economic, Prof. Schwartz said. Growth in women's educational and career trajectories has removed some of the stigma of lower incomes for husbands. And the higher cost of building a life together has made it a necessity for more couples to maximize their two incomes.

Sarah O'Brien, a 35-year-old archivist in Palm Desert, Calif., overtook her husband in earnings five years ago. The couple first met climbing the ranks of the public library world together, but she worried he would be uneasy about what her higher income would mean for his role in the household.

When they sat down to have the conversation, Ms. O'Brien said her husband, David Murguia, a 36-year-old circulation manager, told her that he was proud of her.

“I don’t have the ego of ‘I need to earn more money,’” Mr. Murguia said. “More money for her is more money for us, and more money for me is more money for us.”



Sarah O'Brien and David Murguia in Newport, R.I., in 2021. PHOTO: SARAH O'BRIEN

Ms. O'Brien and Mr. Murguia are one of many more egalitarian marriages. The share of women outearning their husbands has tripled over the last 50 years, from 5% to 16% of all opposite-sex marriages, according to data from Pew Research Center.

Men used to worry that having a more financially successful wife could be detrimental to their own careers, said Johanna Rickne, professor of economics at the Swedish Institute for Social Research at Stockholm University. Women in the upper echelons of their professions were more likely to be divorced than women in less prestigious positions and were far less likely to be married at all.

“It’s changing, and now there is progress in the sensitivity to women’s economic empowerment within relationships,” Prof. Rickne said.

When Sally Mellinger, a 38-year-old director of content strategy in South Bend, Ind., first moved in with her fiancé, she said they both talked about their experiences as breadwinners: Ms. Mellinger as the wife outearning the husband in her first marriage and her fiancé, Luis Beltran, as the sole breadwinner in his own previous relationship.

Nearly three years later, Ms. Mellinger brings in nearly triple in salary what Mr. Beltran makes as the owner of his own barber shop. But she said talking about what their combined incomes can do for their shared future isn’t a loaded conversation but instead a hopeful one.

“When I was previously married, I was the major breadwinner and everything was on me,” Mr. Beltran said. “I see her as my equal, and I feel like at this point, because she is a boss, I admire that and I see a future.”

Despite the shifting viewpoints on female breadwinners, there remains a gender pay gap. As of 2022, women earned an average 82% of what men earned, according to a Pew Research Center analysis.

Over the same period, the overall divorce rate has declined, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and younger couples are entering first marriages at later ages.

Relying on a single breadwinner to bring home all the bacon is no longer a sustainable model for many couples, especially those raising children, said Jennifer Glass, professor of liberal arts and executive director for the Council on Contemporary Families at the University of Texas at Austin. The median cost of keeping an infant in daycare ranges from \$8,000 a year in more rural areas to nearly \$17,000 in major cities.

“The traditional family structure leaves you poor today,” Prof. Glass said.

Farnoosh Torabi, who hosts a personal finance podcast, said she’s spoken with couples who say they need two incomes to protect their household against a possible recession, the next round of layoffs or any other unforeseen challenges.

In her own marriage, Ms. Torabi said she had been primed to defend her newfound breadwinning status when she overtook her husband in earnings before they were married. But instead, the two celebrated her success—and the financial freedom it afforded them both. The conventional wisdom was no longer true, she said.

“I was told that would be a turnoff: Don’t tell guys you have ambitions because they’re not going to feel like they can take care of you,” she said.

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