

The Female Breadwinner Well-being 'Penalty'

Agnese Vitali and Helen Kowalewska



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Men report lower life satisfaction when the woman is the only earner compared to when both partners are employed or he is the breadwinner. Policies to increase levels of women's economic activity need to simultaneously address this potential fallout.

In recent years, 'women's employment' as a determinant and marker of gender equality has entered the development discourse so emphatically that the term is often interchangeably used with the more normative phrase 'women's economic empowerment'.

Relatedly, the share of heterosexual couples in which the woman is the main or sole wage-earner has increased across Europe, as well as other parts of the world. This trend partly reflects women's improved employment prospects and greater gender equality, but it also reflects poorer economic outcomes for men, including increased job insecurity and job loss.

We might expect the rise in female-breadwinner couples to have repercussions for wellbeing. After all, having a job is about more than earning an income. Employment has important psychological, social and symbolic implications. By contrast, joblessness - especially for men - is generally associated with psychological costs, self-doubt, uncertainty, loneliness, and social sanctions and stigma, which may result in low subjective wellbeing. In most parts of the world, for men in heterosexual relationships, having a working female partner may buffer the economic costs associated with being jobless, but the psychological costs associated with being a man in a female-breadwinner couple may be high.

Against this background, Kowalewska and Vitali (2023) analyzed the association between life satisfaction and heterosexual couples' employment patterns using European Social Survey data spanning a period of 14 years and across nine countries and found that men's employment status, independently of income, is an important correlate of their subjective wellbeing.

More interestingly, the analysis also found a distinct female-breadwinner wellbeing 'penalty': both men and women in heterosexual couples report lower well-being when she is the sole breadwinner compared to if he is, or if breadwinning is shared. For women, however, the association disappears after compositional characteristics (like age and ill health), gender-role attitudes, and partners' relative incomes are taken into account. For men, on the other hand, the female-breadwinner wellbeing penalty remains large even net of such controls.

Jobless men may be particularly vulnerable to isolation and loneliness and may experience lower levels of wellbeing than jobless women. They are less likely than women to have community and social networks to draw on, including those developed through engaging in childcare activities - tasks that remain the main responsibility of women, regardless of their employment status.

However, it is not just all about the man's own joblessness. Men report higher wellbeing when they are part of a jobless couple rather than a female-breadwinner couple. In other words, jobless men report higher wellbeing when their female partner is also jobless rather than employed. The woman's breadwinner status seemingly threatens jobless men's perceptions of their masculinity and amplifies the negative well-being consequences of their own joblessness.

The severity of the female-breadwinner wellbeing penalty varies across countries and with his employment status. Female breadwinning is particularly negatively associated with subjective wellbeing in countries with strong male-breadwinner norms – namely, Germany, followed by the UK, Ireland and Spain. But the pattern can be observed throughout Europe. Even in more gender-egalitarian countries like Finland and France, the gender-atypical nature of female-breadwinner couples is negatively associated with subjective wellbeing.

For both men and women, wellbeing is lowest in female-breadwinner couples when men are unemployed rather than inactive or voluntarily out of the labor force and not seeking employment for whatever reason. This may reflect that, whereas joblessness is always associated with a deviation from prescribed gender norms, this deviation is stronger among men who are able to work and unemployment is supposedly always undesired. Also, men report higher wellbeing when the wife is unemployed instead of him; but for women, his unemployment is as problematic as her own for wellbeing, even in the most gender-conservative contexts.

The characteristics of partners in 'pure' female-breadwinner couples –in which the woman is the sole wage-earner– are considerably different from those in 'one-and-a-half' female-breadwinner couples –in which the woman is full-time employed and the man is part-time employed. Therefore, the two couple types should be analyzed separately. First, the latter tend to have higher average household incomes and are of a higher socioeconomic status than pure female-breadwinners couples. In fact, pure female-breadwinner couples are the most economically vulnerable of all couple-types across OECD countries, including when compared with couples in which the man is the sole wage-earner (Kowalewska and Vitali, 2021). Second, net of absolute and relative income, men's wellbeing is lowest in pure female-breadwinner couples for all couple types, including jobless couples, particularly when the male partner is unemployed rather than inactive. On the contrary, no penalty is found for men in one-and-a-half female-breadwinner couples.

The observed gender differences in the association between wellbeing and couples' employment patterns indicate that men's adaptation to changing gender roles lags behind women's. These findings are likely to apply to more than the European context. Thus, while encouraging and facilitating women's employment in development policy, policymakers should pay particular attention to the potential psycho-social implications in female-breadwinning families.

More needs to be done to break the link between breadwinning and perceived masculinity: for instance, through policies including greater discussion of gender norms in the school curriculum and more generous parental leave –in terms of both time and pay– for fathers. The findings reported in this brief suggest that gender norms affect how couples cope with unemployment, with men placing more value on their own employment status than their partner's. Men continue to attach great importance to being the main breadwinner for their family and experience low wellbeing when they cannot meet this expectation, especially in conservative countries where providing financially for the family is linked to masculinity and being a 'good' father. The symbolic value of employment not only correlates with poor life satisfaction – but, as other studies suggest, it can also increase the risk of intimate partner violence, as jobless men with a female-breadwinner partner are more likely to perpetrate domestic violence (see, for example, Macmillan and Gartner, 1999).

Women's employment and earnings are not just an indicator of women's empowerment – they are increasingly necessary for families to make ends meet. Further progress toward changing gendered norms around breadwinning and the domestic sphere of life is critical. An increasing number of couples are likely to experience female breadwinning, at least for a period in their relationship, due to economic uncertainty and labor market instability.

CONTACT

Agnese Vitali, Department of
Sociology and Social Research,
University of Trento, agnese.vitali@
unitn.it

Helen Kowalewska, Department of
Social & Policy Sciences, University
of Bath, hk775@bath.ac.uk



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