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What Do Alpha Women Really Want?

We're outearning our men more than ever before. So what are we complaining about?

Still not sure if you're an [alpha female? Find out here](#). Plus, [one man's reasons for loving his alpha wife](#).

By Judith Newman



Growing up, I never played with Barbies or waited for a prince to wake me from my slumber with a kiss. Instead, in the complex, indeed operatic, world of my stuffed animals, I was the chief gorilla, leading a crack team of giraffes, cows, and badgers to — well, God knows what; but I was their leader, and I determined their daily adventures. And here's the key component of that fantasy: They were always grateful. They worshipped me. My animals didn't think I wanted to control them. They didn't look at me bitterly, thinking I was secretly competitive. Not one ever cocked his plush little head, wondering if I were trying to emasculate him. No, that would come later, *in every relationship I ever had*.

OK, not every relationship.

Just most. I wanted to be the source of pleasure and largesse. And I was — until I wasn't. As one artist hipster boyfriend once snarled at me, "You want gratitude? Get a dog."

I'm the main breadwinner in my marriage. And now it seems I'm part of a national trend. (Although sometimes I wonder if that trend might be titled: "Women! We're Idiots!") In January, the Pew Research Center, a Washington, D.C.-based "fact tank" that conducts polls on contemporary American issues, released a study showing that 22 percent of married women ages 30 to 44 make more money than their husbands — as compared to 4 percent in 1970. From 1970 to 2007, when this data was collected, married men, married women, and unmarried women saw gains of about 60 percent in household income. Unmarried men showed gains, too — but relatively speaking, a pittance: 16 percent. What this shows, says Richard Fry, one of the study's coauthors, is that "in economic terms, marriage is a much better deal for young American men than it was 30 years ago." In other words, I'm not alone.

We so-called alpha wives and our beta boys are everywhere: Julia Roberts and Danny Moder, the cameraman. Dolly Parton and her mysterious husband, Carl Thomas Dean, who did, and perhaps still does, pave roads. Sandra Bullock and Jesse James, the former *Monster Garage* host and bodyguard. And then there's Madonna, an alpha extreme. (Who knows? Maybe Jesus Luz is a keeper. I actually think he's living the male equivalent of the Sleeping Beauty fantasy: You're a pretty schmo with a six-pack, going nowhere. And then, galloping in on her steed, The Most Famous Woman in the World.)

But forget about celebrities for a moment; there are plenty of civilians living la dolce alpha. In February, Janice Min, the former editor of *Us Weekly*, who reportedly made more than \$2 million a year, wrote an article for the *New York Post* about what it was like living with her stay-at-home husband, a former high school teacher. Considering he was a trained chef and a man who actually enjoyed his life at home with their two toddlers, the arrangement worked pretty well — though Min also confessed she was still the one who did the grocery shopping and answered the middle-of-the-night crying. "[I was] occasionally annoyed and exhausted ... a feeling which usually bubbled up on a

Tuesday morning after a 3 a.m. late night putting the magazine to bed."

And as irritating as it is to still be buying the groceries (and planning dinner and picking up the dry cleaning and buying presents for your son's friend's birthday party), I admit, I feel I have a certain license that comes from making the big(ish) bucks, and I would be appalled to have to report to my husband how I spend my money. Karen Karbo, who wrote an essay in the anthology *The Secret Currency of Love: The Unabashed Truth About Women, Money and Relationships*, agrees. "I do feel I have more license to do whatever the hell I want. But since I work about six days a week, 'whatever the hell I want' usually means buying two mascaras at once."

So feminism has given us more opportunities, more parity with men than ever before. It's all good, right?

Um.

Last year, Betsey Stevenson, professor of business and public policy at the Wharton School, who studies the economics of marriage, published a paper with the National Economic Bureau of Research titled "The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness." Examining social survey data collected over decades, Stevenson uncovered this unsettling news: "The lives of women in the United States have improved over the past 35 years by many objective measures, yet we show that measures of subjective well-being indicate that women's happiness has declined both absolutely and relative to men."

And PS, Stevenson adds, men are just as happy as they were decades ago.

Great.

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Of course, it's not just married women or higher wage earners who are less happy: it's all women. But in her alpha wife article, Min says this: "I'd guess that about 60 percent of those [alpha] women are perpetually annoyed about their breadwinner status." She's pulling that number out of the air, but her anecdotal observation is probably not far wrong.

"Making more makes me resent him and feel he's not pulling his weight and should figure out something else to pursue," says Elizabeth D., a computer executive in Silicon Valley, of her husband, who holds a lower-level job in the industry.

"When my husband stopped having sex with me, he said that my haranguing him about his lack of income killed his desire," notes Lisa R., a recently divorced publicist in Vail, Colorado.

Indeed, fury isn't pretty. I know one television executive who walked out of her 25th high school reunion "when one too many women said something like, 'Your husband does what? Oh, that must be ... creative.'"

Still, it's only money. If women are making more money than ever before and therefore are not as reliant on their husbands financially, why are they so much less happy?

"Well, more money can mean more choices," says Stevenson. And a less clear sense of what our role should be. "This is what I see happening in my practice," says Jane Greer, Ph.D., couples therapist and host of *Doctor on Call* at healthylife.net. "When a man makes a lot of money and a woman doesn't, there may be fighting over money — the actual dollars and cents of living and how she spends it. When a woman makes a lot of money and the man doesn't, the fight isn't exactly over money but over power: She expects to have more of it ... It's more about who gets to choose the vacations, the cars, the furnishings — and also, who takes up the slack at home."

While there's data to suggest that men really have picked up the slack in the households — they are doing more domestic work and more child care — they're still not doing enough. According to a 2007 study, women are working on average 12 hours less a week on domestic and child-care tasks than they did 40 years ago, while men are working four-and-a-half hours more than they did. Good. But what happened to those last seven-and-a-half hours? My hunch is that if women aren't actually doing that extra work, they are frantically trying to get to it — and feeling guilty.

Is there any peace for us alphas? If my husband started making more money than I did — or, indeed, any money at all (he's a lot older than me, and retired) — would I be considerably happier? That's where my self-righteousness falters. Because here's the unpleasant truth: Even if I don't have all the gratitude I seek, I still like being the boss. The thought of being Betty Draper terrifies me. I want to be Don. Out in the world in a cloud of smoke with my highball glass, brilliant ideas, and adoring throng. And the big(ish) paycheck that makes it all possible.

This is the advice I'd give to any man who likes his alpha wife: Step it up a little. Don't walk in the door and ask (as

my husband does most nights), "What are you making the kids for dinner?" Don't let your wife be the social director as well as the bill payer; make that horrid trip to Toys R Us yourself and buy all those gewgaws for the birthday parties. Yes, it is true, in bed I want my husband to play, as the Proclaimers say, "the boy to the girl"; in every other way, he is welcome to my job. Is that too much to ask?

Maybe it is. But I'm asking it anyway.

Judith Newman is an alpha wife and the author of *You Make Me Feel Like an Unnatural Woman*.

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