

Confronting Contradictions: Exploring the Tensions of Women as Breadwinners

Over the past decade, U.S. women have increasingly taken up the “breadwinner” role in their homes.¹ This shift has been well documented across different groups of women. Today close to 40% of women with children, including single working mothers, are either the sole breadwinner or bring home as much or more than their working spouse/partner.² In 2009, 37.7% of wives outearned their husbands (whether the husband was working or not), up from 24.8% two decades earlier; 28.9% outearned their working husbands, up from 19.2% over the same period.³ In 2008, employed women in dual-earner couples contributed an average of 45% of annual family income, up from 39% just 11 years earlier.⁴

While women of color have a long history of serving as the sole or primary financial provider in their families,⁵ it has been the rise of primarily white, middle class, managerial women moving into the breadwinner role that has captured the imagination of the popular press. Dubbed “The Alpha

Female/Beta Male Syndrome,”⁶ the press has, not surprisingly, created extreme caricatures at both ends of the spectrum. On one hand, stay-at-home dads have been derisively called “trophy husbands” and “arm candy.”⁷ On the other hand, they have been praised as “the perfect husband”⁸ or sympathized with in their struggle to juggle work and family,

many for the first time. Women are castigated for emasculating men and abandoning their role as mothers, while their increased income has made them more attractive consumers, earning them the moniker “the richer sex,”⁹ and their rise to top leadership positions has been shown to

benefit an organization’s bottom line, sustainability, and ethics.¹⁰

Something significant is changing in our culture, evidenced by the ongoing vitriol negatively labeling both men and women found on the unconventional side of breadwinning or homemaking. The question is: why is it so disconcerting to find husbands taking care of the children and wives “bringing home the bacon”? Perhaps the answer is: because we are in a process of redefining femininity, masculinity, and the roles women and men fill in society today.

Behavior is shaped by a number of role and trait expectations for men and women. It has traditionally been assumed that men will be providers and women will be caretakers (differential social roles), and that men are supposed to be naturally aggressive, ambitious, competitive, and forceful, while women are supposed to be naturally affectionate, tender, soft-spoken, and sensitive to others (differential desirable traits).¹¹ These roles and traits are believed to have been socially constructed based on the long history of women in domestic roles and men in provider roles. Over time, these social roles and the traits of those occupying those roles became conflated: women became bound into homemaking roles and expected to exhibit “feminine” traits, while men became constrained into provider roles and expected to exhibit “masculine” traits.

Growing up, individuals have differentially absorbed society’s messages around what women and men are supposed to act like, what roles they can fill in society, and even what types of jobs they can hold, e.g., “masculine” jobs such as construction and “feminine” jobs such as teaching.¹² Choosing not to follow these expectations may lead to harsh judgment; caretaking men find their masculinity questioned, while breadwinning women find their femininity and their ability to be good mothers questioned.¹³ Trends, such as women’s increased education levels and participation in the labor force, and families’ increased

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dependence upon women's incomes, turbo-charged by the Great Recession, suggest that a breakdown of conventional social roles may be the "new normal."¹⁴

To better understand today's shifting realities, Simmons School of Management collaborated with Hewlett-Packard¹⁵ to explore the impact breadwinning/caretaking roles have had on women's lives and careers, as well as how those roles have been negotiated and with whom they share those roles. In April 2012, an online survey was available to the 2,771 conference attendees at the Simmons College Leadership Conference; 463 women responded. An additional 228 participants responded via a post-Leadership Conference email survey. Respondents were asked to "reflect on a committed relationship," which

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could be from the present or the past, involving either cohabitation or marriage, with either an opposite-sex or same-sex partner. Respondents then answered questions about that relationship while reflecting on their role as a "financial provider," identifying as either Primary Financial Contributor (PFC) if they contributed 51% or more of the house-

hold's total income, or Non-Primary Financial Contributor (Non-PFC) if they contributed 50% or less. Over 90% of the respondents reflected on a current relationship (98% of which were heterosexual relationships), and in those relationships, 59% were PFCs. Additional demographics of our sample are included in the endnotes.¹⁶

Findings

Given the turmoil that accompanies any change, it is not surprising that our research uncovered many contradictions and tensions our sample of women are facing. In this *CGO Insights*, we will discuss three of these.

Contradiction #1: Women are proud of their breadwinner status but keep it hidden.

The women in our sample were strong financial contributors. Female PFCs earned, on average, 88% of the household's income; female non-PFCs contributed 44% on average. When asked to select among eight possible emotional reactions to their breadwinner role, the top two emotions PFCs selected were "proud" and "satisfied". Yet most kept their role private from their family, friends, and employers. Hiding their breadwinner status manifested in two ways.

First, evidence of "hiding" occurs in how their breadwinner role was determined. Respondents were asked to indicate how and why roles were determined by rating their level of agreement with a number of statements. Regarding how their roles were determined, both PFCs and non-PFCs most strongly agreed that their respective roles evolved over time "without an explicit discussion," and second most strongly agreed that their "roles were created in response to a particular circumstance (i.e., layoff, illness, etc.) without explicit discussion." No action on their partner's part prompted action on the PFC's part. Even with this lack of explicit discussion, when asked why they got the role they did, both PFCs and non-PFCs agreed most strongly that the PFC's current (and future expected) income, along with the PFC's job's better benefits, were strong reasons why the PFC took up the breadwinning role.

The second example of "hiding" their role is evidenced in the selectivity with whom both PFCs and non-PFCs share their status. Close family or friends are most likely to know who carries what role; co-workers and employers are least likely to know. When asked why they keep their role private, both groups most strongly agreed that "it is not anyone's business to know." Our data show that this shared desire for privacy across PFCs and non-PFCs is *not* due to wanting to avoid criticism from others or being unhappy with their role. However, there is one reason where they differ: women PFCs also keep their own breadwinning status private out of a desire to not embarrass their non-PFC partner.

Contradiction #2: Women take on breadwinning but retain home and child care roles.

While 59% of our women claim the role of breadwinner, they continue to contribute significantly to childcare and homecare. When asked about homecare, 29% of PFCs claimed they did either all or significantly more than their partner, and another 51% said they contributed slightly more or equal to their partner. When asked about childcare, 26% of PFCs claimed they did either all or significantly more than their partner, and another 49% said they contributed slightly more or equal to their partner. In this way our PFCs straddle two roles: their "conventional" home/child care role while taking on their "unconventional" breadwinner role. The tension and exhaustion from doing both roles is well documented. As women have taken up work, much less the additional demands of breadwinner status, their time spent on home/child care, known as the "second shift," has not diminished and in many cases actually increased.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, our PFCs said they experience both the positive and negative sides of

straddling two roles: they were proud and satisfied, but also slightly overwhelmed.

Contradiction #3: Women are not slowing down their careers, but there are still few women at the top.

Whether our respondents were their households' breadwinners or not, neither group of women is slowing down their careers: all strongly denied turning down promotions, taking a demotion, keeping a low profile to minimize advancement possibilities, or actively avoiding promotions. In fact, both PFCs and non-PFCs believed their contributor role had a positive impact on their other roles as parents, partners, and community citizens. PFCs claimed being the breadwinner actually had a positive impact on their careers and on their confidence in making a contribution as a "worker". Additionally, our sample had no statistically significant difference in the presence of children: 65.5% of our breadwinner women have children as did 64.8% of non-PFC women. This suggests that, contrary to the expectation that breadwinners might delay and forego children as a way to focus on their careers, our breadwinning mothers work to find strategies to balance parenting and their PFC role.

While both our PFCs and non-PFCs denied engaging in actions that purposefully slowed down their careers, the numbers of women at the top of American organizations contradict their ambition. In the U.S., women constitute nearly half of the workforce, yet they hold just 3.2% of CEO positions and 16% of board seats in Fortune 500 companies.¹⁸ Even in our sample, after an average of 20 years in the workforce, only 17% of the respondents achieved VP or higher positions in their organizations. This gap between women's commitment to their careers and the lack of women at the top of organizations may be better explained by organizational barriers, such as rigid work schedules and gendered differences around what constitutes leadership, which have been the subject of much research.¹⁹

Implications of Findings and Recommendations

Consistent with any change and transition, the U.S.'s current redefining of femininity and masculinity and women's and men's social roles has been marked by conflict, anxiety, and confusion. As women move into the breadwinner role, conventional definitions of social roles are being challenged and new ones are being established. Ideally, a more egalitarian outcome may result: both sexes would be free to choose the role, breadwinning or caretaking, and the types of occupations deemed gender neutral they can and will take up.

In moving towards a more gender neutral and egalitarian society, the contradictions women are currently wrestling with need to be addressed. Female breadwinners need to challenge themselves to no longer be silent about their role, both in negotiating the role with their partners and in negotiating support with their employers. Naming and consequently claiming their role enables them to seek out support from their families, friends and employers. Clearly it is risky to claim this unconventional role, but by doing so, social roles will continue to evolve as "behavior is contagious" and others feel they can do likewise.²⁰

Second, women need to thoughtfully redefine the breadwinner role into a more sustainable work model than the historical one that men have followed for years. That conventional model, where work is assumed to be primary in one's life, freed up men to spend unlimited hours at work while a stay-at-home wife took care of his family. Some women, in taking up the breadwinner status, may choose to essentially swap conventional roles: many are putting in the long hours at work and may be relying on stay-at-home partners. Indeed, a third of the women on Fortune's annual "50 Most Powerful Women" list today have house husbands.²¹

However, our sample of women demonstrated a commitment to both work and family, taking up breadwinning while still carrying responsibilities on the home front. For those breadwinners, might not there be a middle role, rather than a work-only or family-only dichotomous choice in roles? During this transition, we might want to consider a "third path"²² where spouses/partners can share work and caretaking.

Finally, a critical player in seeking more sustainable, egalitarian, and satisfying roles for male and female breadwinners is the employing organization. As the battle for top talent continues to amplify, organizations need to provide family-friendly policies that will support both male and female breadwinners. Our sample responded positively to all possible flexible work arrangements (FWAs) when asked, "How can employers support you in managing mul-

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multiple roles?" In descending order, our breadwinners want the option to work at home, sabbaticals after blocks of employment, longer maternity leaves, and technology to minimize commute and travel time. Employers not only need to listen to the needs of female employees, but they also need to disconnect their mental association between FWAs and "women's issues." As long as these policies are seen as needed only by women, the policies won't be used: the career penalty for women or men who use them is too great. As the breadwinner role becomes normative for women as well as men, family-friendly policies will benefit all employees and organizations alike.²³

Closing

On the whole, despite all the contradictions and tensions highlighted in the media, played out in relationships, and captured in our sample, the bending of gender expectations represented by women as breadwinners is a positive step in a long line of positive steps. When the women in our sample step into the breadwinner role, they report being proud and satisfied with improved career and work performance. This choice positively impacts their partnerships and their employers as well.

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The results of our survey are promising, but certainly do not show the full picture of gender and role changes taking place in the U.S. More work is needed to understand the interplay of financial contribution and caretaking in other workforce strata, among men, among people of color, and within same-sex partnerships. One thing that is certain, however, is that suc-

cessfully navigating through a transition such as this one will take the efforts of both men and women – within partnerships and inside of organizations.

Author Mary Shapiro is Professor of Practice and CGO Affiliate at the Simmons School of Management. Author Stacy Blake-Beard is Professor of Management and CGO Affiliate at the Simmons School of Management. Author Suzanne Carter, Ph.D., is CEO of SMC Advisors. Author Regina O'Neill is Professor of Management at Suffolk University Sawyer Business School. Author Cynthia Ingols is Senior Lecturer and CGO Affiliate at Simmons School of Management. Author Alicia Margoles Bartolozzi is

Account Executive at Merck & Company. Author Mary E. Ogle is VP of NTE Global Strategic Marketing, Teva Pharmaceuticals.

Endnotes

¹We are using the conventional definition of "breadwinner" here, as defined by Hood, as "primary contributor of household income." See Hood, J.C. 1986. The provider role: Its meaning and measurement. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 48(2), 349-359. We recognize two limitations in the conventional use of this term: (1) "Breadwinner" has historically been assigned only to married heterosexual men. In its evolving use, the term will need to be expanded to include those with primary financial contributing responsibilities in households where adults are in unmarried or married partnerships, and in same-sex or heterosexual relationships. (2) The breadwinner role is evolving to include other parameters beyond financial contribution, such as the re-orientation in the relationship of whose career is primary and whose is secondary.

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⁹Mundy, L. 2012, Mar. 26. The richer sex: women are overtaking men as America's breadwinners. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2109140-1,00.html>

¹⁰Catalyst. 2011. The bottom line: Corporate performance and women's representation on boards (2004-2008). New York, NY: Author. Retrieved from <http://catalyst.org/knowledge/bottom-line-corporate-performance-and-women-s-representation-boards-2004-2008>

¹¹The seminal work regarding the masculine-feminine traits (those most valued by society for men and women to exhibit) is attributed to Sandra Bem. In 1974, she identified 20 masculine traits that people consider “desirable” for men to exhibit and 20 feminine traits desirable for women. She reports her findings in her 1974 article, The measurement of psychological androgyny. *Journal of Clinical and Counseling Psychology*, 42(2), 155-162. She later developed the Bem Sex Role Inventory, available in her 1981 book, *Bem Sex-Role Inventory: Professional Manual*. Palo Alto, CA: Counseling Psychologists Press, Inc. Regarding the persistence of those traits over time, see Prentice, D.A., & Carranza, E. 2002. What women and men should be, shouldn't be, are allowed to be and don't have to be: The contents of prescriptive gender stereotypes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(4), 269-281.

¹²For scholarship on social role theory, conflict, and ambiguity, see Bridges, J.S., Etaugh, C., & Barnes-Farrell, J. 2002. Trait judgments of stay-at-home and employed parents: A function of social role and/or shifting standards? *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(2), 140-150; Diekman, A.B., & Goodfried, W. 2006. Rolling with the changes: A role congruity perspective on gender norms. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 30(4), 369-383; Evans, C.D., & Diekman, A.B. 2009. On motivated role selection: Gender beliefs, distant goals, and career interest. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 33(2), 235-249; Perrone, K.M., Wright, S.L., & Jackson, Z.V. 2009. Traditional and nontraditional gender roles and work—Family interface for men and women. *Journal of Career Development*, 36(1), 8-24; Prentice, D.A., & Carranza, E., 2002; Wilbourn, M.P. & Kee, D.W. 2010. Henry the nurse is a doctor too: Implicitly examining children's gender stereotypes for male and female occupational roles. *Sex Roles*, 62(9-10), 670-683; Wood, W., & Eagly, A.H. 2002. A cross-cultural analysis of the behavior of women and men: Implications for the origins of sex differences. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(5), 699-727.

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¹⁴Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2009.

¹⁵We gratefully acknowledge Hewlett-Packard's support in the administration of these electronic surveys. SPSS was used to conduct frequencies, regressions, and correlations of the data.

¹⁶Regarding the demographics of our sample: Most respondents self-identified as Caucasian (78%), as married or in a committed relationship (68%). Median work experience was 11-20 years, with 49% of participants reporting 20 or more years' experience; the median highest position occupied was middle level (i.e., director, middle manager, assistant VP), with 17% having achieved senior (i.e., SVP, EVP, VP, COO, Dean) or top level (i.e., owner, president, CEO, partner); and median household income was \$100,000-149,000. Additionally, in comparing the demographics of the two groups, PFC and non-

PFC, significant demographic differences included: PFCs had slightly more years of professional experience (21 versus 17 years) and achieved higher positions (non-PFCs tended to be more entry-level or first-tier supervisors); and PFCs were slightly more likely to be employed full-time (97% versus 91%). The two groups were not significantly demographically different regarding education, marital status (86.6% married for PFC, 80.6% for non-PFC), and presence of children (65.5% for PFC, 64.8% for non-PFC).

¹⁷For scholarship on the division of household labor, see Bartley, S.J., Blanton, P.W., & Gilliard, J.L. 2005. Husbands and wives in dual-earner marriages: Decision making, gender role attitudes, division of household labor, and equity. *Marriage & Family Review*, 37(4), 69-94; Kroska, A. 2004. Divisions of domestic work: Revising and expanding the theoretical explanations. *Journal of Family Issues*, 25(7), 890-922; Lachance-Grzela, M., & Bouchard, G. 2010. Why do women do the lion's share of housework? A decade of research. *Sex Roles*, 63(11-12), 767-780.

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¹⁹For scholarship on the gendered barriers facing women in the workforce, see Deutsch, F.M., Roksa, J., & Meeske, C. 2003. How gender counts when couples count their money. *Sex Roles*, 48(7-8), 291-304; Rapoport, R., Bailyn, L., Fletcher, J.K., & Pruitt, B.H. 2002. *Beyond Work-Family Balance*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Valian, V. 1998. *Why So Slow?: The Advancement of Women*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

²⁰In their book *Switch* (2010, New York, NY: Random House), authors C. Heath and D. Heath argue: “It's clear that we imitate the behaviors of others, whether consciously or not. We are especially keen to see what they're doing when the situation is unfamiliar or ambiguous. And change situations are, by definition, unfamiliar” (p. 228).

²¹Morris, Munoz, & Neering, 2002.

²²Third Path Institute. n.d. Integrating work and family. Philadelphia, PA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.thirdpath.org/integrating-work-and-family/>

²³Shapiro, M., Ingols, C., O'Neill, R., & Blake-Beard, S. 2009. Making sense of women as career self-agents: Implications for human resource development. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 20(4), 477-501.

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Center for Gender in Organizations (CGO)
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Simmons School of Management
300 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115 USA
Tel: 617-521-3824 Fax: 617-521-3878 E-mail: cgo@simmons.edu
www.simmons.edu/som/cgo