



THE NEW AMERICAN FAMILY

How economic realities and shifting attitudes are changing the dynamics of marriage today

By **Katherine Reynolds Lewis** for USA TODAY

W

HEN CHERYL SHEEHY RECEIVED A PROMOTION

that required moving from Wisconsin to Illinois, her husband, Matt, willingly quit his job to relocate. The decision was best for the family's bottom line: As a sales manager, she earns three times as much as he does as a physical therapist assistant. "I've always made more than he has, and he's always been more than willing to support me, whatever that means," says Sheehy, 38, who now lives in Fond du Lac, Wis. "He sacrificed a lot for me, having to move several times and switch jobs."

The couple, who have a 5-year-old son and an 8-year-old daughter, split chores and child rearing pretty evenly. He does the house cleaning and supervises the kids' homework; she grocery shops, pays the bills, and organizes the children's activities.

A generation ago, an arrangement like the Sheehys' would've been unusual. But as an increasing number of women prioritize their careers, many are earning as much as—if not more than—their husbands. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2009, 38 percent of employed married women (a whopping 13.9 million women) earned more than their husbands. That's up from 24 percent (7.6 million) in 1987.

The recent recession only magnifies this trend, with men experiencing more layoffs and unemployment than their counterparts. At the peak of job losses, in the last quarter of 2009, 9 million men were unemployed compared with 6 million women.

This gender disparity stems from two factors. The industries hit hardest by the recession—such as construction, finance, and real estate—are male-dominated fields, so as companies laid off staff, more men received pink slips. But even before the recession, fields that disproportionately employ women, like health care and education, were growing in importance to the economy while traditionally male-dominated sectors, like

manufacturing, were fading.

"Women have been holding their own in the job market while men have seen their prospects decline," explains Andrew Cherlin, a sociology professor at Johns Hopkins University and author



For the first time in history, men and women have a chance to divide the paid work and the housework in ways that make sense for them. How can that not be positive?

Stephanie Coontz, author of *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*

of *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*.

Decades after Gloria Steinem and the women's liberation movement encouraged millions

of women to enter the workforce, women are finally beginning to draw even with men when it comes to earning potential and career prospects. Their earnings are no longer considered "mad money" for family vacations and shopping sprees. They're central to the household budget. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, married women contributed 37 percent of family income in 2009, up from 26 percent 30 years earlier.

And as women's role outside the home changes, so does their role in marriage and family. Men are gradually handling a greater share of chores and child care. While historically, women did 75 percent of the housework and child care, Cherlin notes, the current split is 60-40. Women also have a greater say in family decisions and finances.

"There's a new marital bargain in America," Cherlin says. "The old marital bargain was the man earns the money and the woman takes care of the home. Now, they both earn money, and they both share the child rearing tasks."

Growing pains

But dramatic societal changes rarely come about smoothly. Individual marriages do not always evolve to reflect the changes in society, and many women resent shouldering a greater burden in the working world while remaining the

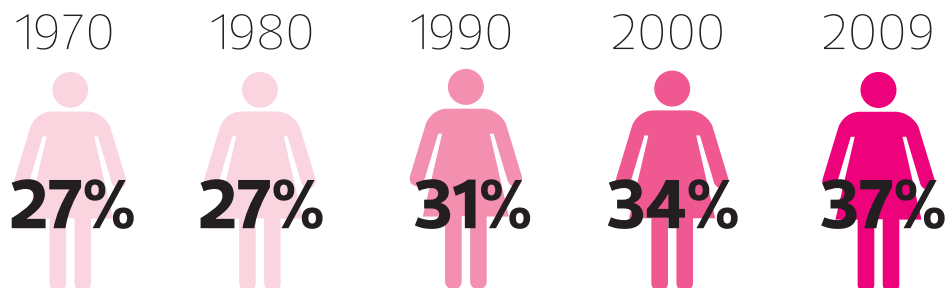
CONTINUED >>



38%

of employed married women earned more than their husbands in 2009

WOMEN'S AVERAGE CONTRIBUTION TO FAMILY INCOME
from 1970-2009



SOURCE: BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS



“
There's a new marital bargain in America. The old one was the man earns the money and the woman takes care of the home. Now they both earn money and share the child rearing tasks.

primary parent and housekeeper at home. Meanwhile, many men struggle with their personal definition of masculinity when they're replaced as the family breadwinner.

By the time Kimberly Foss, 50, of Roseville, Calif., married, she had built a successful career as a certified financial planner. So when her husband, Charles Landry, was laid off from his position as a technology executive, she was confident that the family could get by on just her earnings. She didn't anticipate how he might chafe at being expected to take on more household chores while he was unemployed.

"That caused a lot of resentment in our marriage early on. I wasn't as sensitive to the guy side, the ego side," Foss says. "I was coming home to the expectation that I had to get the food together, the children together, and everything

together for the next day." Finally, she recalls, "I said, 'I'm exhausted.'"

Through marriage counseling, the couple learned to communicate better about their needs and to appreciate each other's perspective and contribution to the family. "He's now really looking at me as a partner," Foss explains. "It's not a power struggle anymore."

When the woman becomes the breadwinner because the man is laid off, it's a very different situation than when a man decides to become a stay-at-home dad.

"Just because the American family has changed doesn't mean it's changed for the better," says Beth Burkstrand-Reid, an assistant professor at the University of Nebraska College of Law. "The changes are being propelled by the economy. We're seeing a lot of men at home. ... Oftentimes, it's not a choice: people have lost their jobs

or they don't have adequate child care."

Burkstrand-Reid's research has found that when men become the primary caregiver, they sometimes feel stigmatized for their nontraditional role. Some encounter a cold reaction in taking children to playgroups or afterschool activities. Men also tend to approach caregiving differently. Stay-at-home dads are reluctant to give up all ties to their careers in the way that some moms do, according to Burkstrand-Reid.

"A lot of these men really struggle to hang on to this notion of what it means to be a man and still be a caretaker," she says. "I don't think we can overestimate the power that gender has on all of us as a society. ... It's trying to reject hundreds of years of socialization that has resulted in women being at home and men being at work."

Changing values

Experts differ on whether changing societal values are shaping the new American family or whether the new economic realities are the driving force. Most likely, it's a little of both.

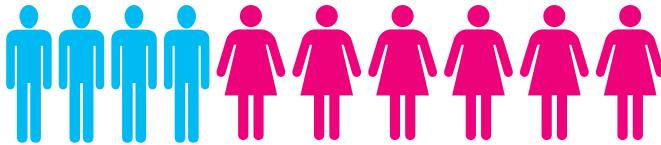
"We've had a sea change in our attitudes towards women's roles in society. We have very different values now about what men and women should be," Cherlin says.

"In the last 10 years, the approval of working mothers has reached new highs. It's higher than it's ever been," says historian Stephanie Coontz, co-chair of the Council on Contemporary Families and author of *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*.

Most experts believe that rather than swinging to the opposite



40%



percent of housework and childcare done by men

"I don't think this could have happened with just labor market trends or just cultural change. The two of them together have produced this package we see today."


Statistics confirm that the perception of women in society is changing. In 1977, only 49 percent of Americans surveyed believed working moms and stay-at-home moms could form equally secure relationships with their children. In 2010, that figure rose to 75 percent, according to the Council on Contemporary Families.

extreme, society will continue toward equilibrium. "I don't think we're going to see women become the main breadwinners in a majority of families," Coontz says. "The real switch has been toward co-provider families."

Research shows that the more women earn and contribute financially to the family income, the more power they have in the family, while their husbands perform more household work and child care. This shift is likely to continue as the societal and economic forces already underway

accelerate further.

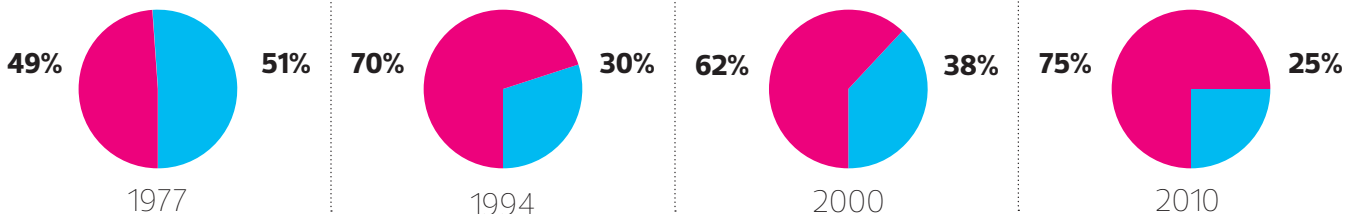
Despite some ambivalence in modern society about all these changes, Coontz is confident that the two genders will reach a comfortable balance.

"We know there are many, many families where this works really well," she says. "For the first time in history, men and women have a chance to divide the paid work and the housework in ways that make sense for them as individuals, as opposed to the gender stereotypes. How can that not be positive?" 

The more women earn, the more their husbands perform household work and child care duties.

AGREE OR DISAGREE: A WORKING MOTHER CAN ESTABLISH JUST AS WARM AND SECURE A RELATIONSHIP WITH HER CHILDREN AS A MOTHER WHO DOES NOT WORK.

■ agree ■ disagree



SOURCE: COUNCIL ON CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES.