

Breadwinner Wives – a response for the “Ask the Expert” section in Sarie Magazine

I earn more than my husband – and its hurting our marriage

My husband was retrenched three years ago following a restructuring process. He is working again, but now earns considerably less than I do. It really doesn't bother me. We're not rolling in cash but we're better off than most. However, it's a huge issue for him. I've always seen him as liberal and enlightened since we've never had traditional gender roles but maybe I've been wrong. It's obvious that it is affecting his self-concept as a man. He is touchy and explodes if I bring up the subject of money, offends me and berates himself when we speak about work or finances. He also doesn't find his work stimulating and fulfilling. It's having a negative impact on our relationship and family. What should I do?

In today's economic circumstances and shifting family roles, “breadwinner wives” are becoming more commonplace with some researchers suggesting that this is the norm in up to a third of American households. The high rate of unemployment and downturn in the South African market following worldwide trends may well be shifting our more traditional cultural notions of gender roles too and many couples are battling with the uneasiness that initially comes with such shifts.

Researchers have found that men do feel emasculated when their women earn more than they do as their role as family provider forms such a big part of their identity. On the other hand, women may feel resentful of the responsibility that comes with being the main breadwinner, especially as research suggests that this does not come with a lighter load on the home front.

The pressure of social expectations can weigh heavily on relationships – even with more liberal couples. Thus, the relationship dynamics you describe are quite normal and understandable under the circumstances. Think of the upheaval that gets created when companies restructure or sports teams shift players into new positions. It takes concerted effort, a mutual understanding of the vision and goals of the team and positive commitment by all members of the team to regain the success of that team or organisation. The same can be said of your marriage and the key lies in the two of you sitting down for a frank and constructive discussion around the following:

- 1) What are you trying to achieve as a family?
- 2) Who is best placed to play what role right now?
- 3) How might this change in the future? i.e. what are you working towards
- 4) What needs to change in order for all the members of your team to be playing to their strengths?

You will need to reassure your husband that you don't consider him any less capable of adding value to you family unit and encourage him to find meaning in his current work situation and in the roles he plays outside of work. Both of you need to acknowledge your feelings about your situation so that you may respectfully support each other through this time. Schedule specific time to talk about finances, rather than making it the basis of every conversation. Most importantly, keep the conversation going.

As you learn to adjust to your new “normal” you will consciously be dealing with old role models, your own and your parents' expectations for what it means to be successful, and your own and

generations' worth of opinions about what it means to be a real man or a real woman. You will need to commit to provide comfort and support as you both explore such deep and emotional territory.

Should you feel out of your depth to keep the discussion constructive, hire a coach to collaborate with you both to plot your path ahead.

Michelle Stewart is an Industrial Psychologist and Professional Coach

Cell: 0845562944

E-mail: lifeinspirems@gmail.com

Web: <http://lifeinspire.yolasite.com>