

Yes, some wives have been
outearning their husbands for years.
But now it's one in every three.
So why, in their dogged fight
for gender equality,
are women their own worst enemy?

By Kris Frieswick

Photographs by Dina Rudick/Globe Staff

The Job Without Benefits

Susan Luongo is exhausted, and after listening to what she goes through every day, I am too. She runs her own firm, Stellar Technology Consulting in Boston, and works between 40 and 80 hours a week, depending on how many projects she has going. Luongo, 41, who lives in Revere, earns double what her husband, Peter, 42, makes as a systems analyst for State Street Corp., but she's still the one who usually picks up their 9-year-old son at his after-school program each day, comes home and makes dinner, does some laundry, helps her son with his homework, and gets him ready for bed. "By the time he and my husband are asleep, I'm working on projects again," she says.

I've heard rumors of a mysterious race of neat freaks who enjoy housework, although I've never met one. Many men and women genuinely love full-time parenting. Single working parents do both whether they like it or not. This article is not about any of them. This is about breadwinning wives like Susan, uber-women who claim they want their husbands to carry their own weight around the house—but, well, Susan's very particular about how things get done, and she's better than her husband at housework, and he likes to relax more than she does, and so she just does it herself.

"OK, I don't know what drives women like me to do it all," she says. "We're crazy. We don't know how to stop. I do get that I'm letting this situation continue."

Susan is locked in a prison that she designed and built herself. She even has the key. She just won't use it. And she's not alone in there.

Women are the maids-in-chief in the average American home (18 hours a week of housework on average, about 40 percent more than men, according to a 2001 study by University of Maryland sociologists). This made sense, sort of, back when women's occupations were limited to variations on caring

AROUND THE CLOCK By day, Susan Luongo runs her own consulting firm. By night, she tends to her family and home. After her son and husband go to bed, she often works again on company projects.

for other people, usually the ones living at home with them. But it makes no sense today. Women, who compose 49 percent of the American workforce, are now outearning their husbands in 32.6 percent of American married couples, up from 23.7 percent in 1987. Wives brought home 34.8 percent of the average family's annual bacon in 2004, up from 26.7 percent in 1980. In another generation, if this pace of change continues, wives will contribute half. Although there are no local statistics, it would seem likely that Boston has an even larger percentage of these women who earn more than their husbands, thanks to a saturation of industries, like financial services and healthcare, in which women are statistically more likely to be top company earners.

Some might argue that the paid hours each spouse works, not salary, should dictate the distribution of housework. Some dual-earner families, mine includ-



ed, divvy it up this way. But we're the anomaly. For years, men have used their higher incomes as the rationale for not doing more at home. Now that more women are in the financial driver's seat, these breadwinning wives are positioned to claim some of that power, and have every right to expect a more equitable division. But they're not getting it. Research indicates that even in homes where women dramatically outearn their men, housework is still broken down based on traditional gender roles. In other words, women do most of it.

After 16 years of marriage, Kate Adams, 39, a staff scientist at a nonprofit foundation, now makes twice as much money as her husband, David, a ju-

nior high school teacher. Because of his schedule, he's head child-wrangler for their two kids, age 9 and 11, during the week. But housework?

"During the course of the week, the house just gets into a progressively bigger disaster area. It's a race to the bottom," says Adams, who lives in Medford. "Men don't intend to do less housework, they just don't notice that they are doing less, and it's a matter of standards." She adds: "Women notice there's a mess and take ownership of it. Men aren't programmed for it."

It's the breadwinner wife's mantra - I'm so busy at my job, but somebody has to do the work at home, and I'm the only one who seems to notice that it needs to be done, and he doesn't do a very good job, and it's easier to do it myself than have a big fight over it, blah, blah, blah.

Breadwinning wives, of all women, should be demanding, protesting,

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NO END IN SIGHT Susan Luongo picks up her husband and son, both named Peter, in the North End, where the son attends an after-school program. After that, it's home for cooking and, later, cleaning, before she puts the younger Peter to bed. Why does she insist on doing it all? Even she doesn't know for sure.

Many women are making a lot of money, Suze Orman says, “but we haven’t emotionally adapted to what that means, and neither have the men we live with, so we are in true crisis. We are in a power crisis.”

striking for a fair division of household labor. But instead there are excuses and the sound of vacuum cleaners at 11 p.m. So why should other women care if these control junkies choose to do it all to the point of delirium? Because the home is site of the final skirmish in the battle for gender equality, a struggle whose outcome profoundly affects all women. And many breadwinner wives, who have the power to lead the charge, are giving in without a fight.

DESPITE WOMEN’S STRIDES IN EQUALITY throughout society, one aspect of our lives remains stubbornly resistant to change: gender roles. These have traditionally defined what it means to be a man or a woman – although a chicken/egg argument still rages. Some say we’re biologically programmed to embrace these roles (a contention that my own profound disinterest in housecleaning and reproduction, shared by millions of American women, argues against). Some say we’re all gender-role slaves to society and the media. However we got stuck with them, gender roles are still the predominant socially acceptable ways to express our femaleness or maleness.

“It’s not so much the biology” that forces women to take on the gender roles, says Sara Raley, a researcher in the sociology department at the University of Maryland who has studied gender distribution of income among married couples. “It’s all the expectations about what you’re going to do as a mother, and what fathers are supposed to do.”

These rules dictate that women tend the hearth, home, and children, and men provide – precepts since the dawn of civilization, even though the tonnage rule (loosely translated, “the biggest and strongest calls the shots”) is no longer in effect in most of the developed world. “No matter how successful we are at work, women are judged by the condition of our households. We feel guilty if our homes aren’t beautiful,” says Randi Minetor, author of *Breadwinner Wives and the Men They Marry*. “We assume we’re the point person for this stuff. We’ve got hundreds of years of tradition telling us that we are.”

It wasn’t supposed to work this way. When women embraced the role of providing for the family, they were also expected to take on some of the family power that flows from economic might, and men were supposed to start acting like co-caregivers by performing more of the female roles, tending home and offspring. Sociologists predicted they’d see the effect of an “exchange theory” in families: The more money a wife contributed to the family till, the more unpaid household and childcare work she could “buy” out of. They long believed that exchange theory would eventually be the undoing of gender roles. They were wrong. Some husbands of breadwinner wives have embraced their role as keeper of the hearth and home, but they are few and far between.

Exchange theory works to a point. Men increased their housework by a maximum of 2.5 hours a week (to 20 hours) when their wives’ contribution to family income rose from zero percent to 50 percent, according to a study done by a team of Australian and US sociologists, published in the July 2003 issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*. But even when they earned 50 percent of the household income, wives in this study group did 40 hours of housework a week, double what their husbands did at their peak housework performance.

So why aren’t men taking on an equal share of the housework, even in homes in which women are now equal providers? You don’t need a study to

figure it out. Why do something you don’t want to do if the person who was doing it before is still doing it, *and* bringing home more money?

The same study showed that when women start contributing more than 50 percent to the family income, the amount of housework the husband does actually begins to fall and continues to fall as the wife’s earnings climb. And here’s the really depressing part: The study also reported that when a wife becomes a family’s sole provider, she often does even more housework than when she contributes half the income.

Some experts attribute this phenomenon to what they call “gender deviation neutralization.” By “deviating” from established gender roles by outearning the husband, the wife believes she is emasculating him. Men largely define their maleness by rejecting femaleness, so he refuses to be further de-maled by doing housework. The wife, meanwhile, feels so guilty for emasculating her husband that she overcompensates by taking on even more of the traditional female roles to act more “feminine” so her husband will feel more “masculine.” Et voila! We’ve got a female CEO cleaning her toilets at 2 a.m. because she feels too guilty to hire a housekeeper or demand that her husband do it.

WITNESS GENDER DEVIATION neutralization theory in action. Marney (who asked that her last name not be used) is a sales operation manager in New Hampshire. She is the primary breadwinner in her family. Her husband, who earns half of what she does, handles the after-work child care for their young daughter because he gets home hours earlier than his wife. But when it comes to housework, she still does it all. She says she’d like him to contribute more, but “that’s a conversation that hasn’t happened because it’s just understood because of how tired he is after a day at work and time with our daughter that he’s just too tired to do the housework, so I do it.” Isn’t she tired, too, after a 12-hour day at work? “Yeah, but I still manage to get things done around the house.”

But there’s more to the story, and it explains why Marney’s voice is taut, controlled, and flat, yet on the verge of tears as we speak. “My husband is from a family of stay-at-home moms with husband breadwinners,” she says. “They don’t understand what my life is like.” She says her mother-in-law has “called me selfish to my face” for working so many hours, and the entire family is highly critical of the amount of child care her husband does, especially when she travels for work. I ask why they don’t respect the fact she’s the primary breadwinner. Turns out her husband’s family has no idea she’s the breadwinner because neither she nor her husband has told them. “I promised my husband we would never have that conversation with his family,” she says. (Hence her request not to use her last name.) “I don’t want to embarrass him. He doesn’t want that information to get out.”

Here’s a woman willing to put her sanity in jeopardy to protect her husband’s ego. She is convinced she is setting a good example for her daughter by working so hard and because her husband feeds her dinner every night. It doesn’t occur to her that she’s also teaching her daughter that protecting a man’s ego is more important than defending her own right → PAGE 42

Breadwinner Wives

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to pursue a satisfying career and, oh yeah, *support the family*. This is how gender roles get perpetuated.

"Women are nurturers and caregivers, and that is their undoing," says finance guru Suze Orman, whose latest book, *Women & Money*, explores the reasons that many women put their own interests behind those of others. "They need to be takers to thrive financially. But women cannot say no if we think that saying no is going to hurt somebody."

Women are making a lot of money, she adds, "but we haven't emotionally adapted to what that means, and neither have the men we live with, so we are in true crisis. We are in a power crisis." She doesn't blame men. "This isn't male bashing. They're going through as much of an identity crisis."

Orman argues that inequality in the home will continue until women start valuing themselves and their time the same way that men do, and stop putting themselves "on sale." "What I'm trying to get women to understand is what the airlines try to get you to understand. You have to put the oxygen mask around your own face before your kid's face," she says. "You have to turn that nurturing instinct on yourself. I'm not asking you to go from nurturer to narcissist. But we can't continue to pass this message of 'We're less' on to [our daughters]. When you undervalue who you are, the world undervalues what you do."

The implication of that thought - that women undervalue themselves, and that's why they continue to do most of the unpaid work even though their time is increasingly valuable in the paid workplace - may go a long way in explaining the persistent wage gap, a gap

that affects all women and has stalled the cause of economic gender equality. Even when statisticians adjust for all variables between men and women, women still made 80 cents for every dollar earned by a man in 2000. Experts cannot definitively explain it. A 2003 study by the General Accounting Office, an internal government watchdog, concluded that if this difference is due to work/life personal choices by women, the gap doesn't really represent much of a social problem, since it's the result of free will. However, the study also supposes the gap might stem from some inherent bias against women in the workplace.

The study never states what I believe, and some research suggests, to be the cause of the gap: that one fuels the other in a perpetual cycle. The inherent discrimination, in the form of an unconscious socially ingrained undervaluation of women's contributions, is a direct result of the choices women (and not men, overwhelmingly) keep making – to reduce hours, lower career aspirations, stay home with the kids – all in an effort to fulfill these gender roles because they can't shake the programming that tells them that no matter how successful they are, their time and energy is less valuable than their husbands'.

WHEN IT'S 10 P.M., and a breadwinner wife and her husband are sitting on the couch exhausted after a long day at work, and there's a sink full of dishes, and eight loads of laundry, and the wife gives in and does it all anyway again even though it's his turn, it doesn't feel like undermining the cause of equality. It feels like doing the dishes and laundry.

That is the moment when the personal becomes political. Women have to learn to stay on that couch.

Randi Minetor, the author, says women are afraid to take hold of the power that being the breadwinner gives them. They don't tell their husbands what they need done because "we don't look for power. We look for partnership, which is why we're so successful in business." But breadwinning women are disasters in assigning responsibility for a task and then letting go of it. "We plead, we mask the order as 'Please do me a favor.' We don't say, 'You are now responsible for the laundry.'"

The solution, says Minetor, is not to ask for help. That language signals that the asker realizes she is still fundamentally responsible for those things. Breadwinner wives, or any wife packing a 36-hour day into 24 hours while her husband watches ESPN, must learn to slice off everything she can't handle and assign it elsewhere – housecleaner, husband, kids, errand boy, whoever. "She needs to sit down and tell her husband what she needs," says Minetor. "Don't walk away without his commitment to take over those things."

Then let the chips fall where they may, for better or worse. Minetor suggests women who try this prepare for "worse."

"Let him do things his way, and if he fails, lower your standards," she bluntly says. The key to making it work is not to sweat the small stuff.

Lisa Silva, a 33-year-old insurance broker from Weymouth, is her family's sole breadwinner. Her husband, Carl, stays at home to care for their three children, ages 6, 3, and 5 months. "I had to learn to let [things] go, and he had to learn to up his standards," Silva says. "You have to learn to see the bigger picture." She says that even though he's at home, she still does about half the housework.

Kate Adams, the scientist, is starting to see the light. "I said at one point, 'I'm doing all I can here.' I don't see it as my job to do more because he's doing all he can do. If two people can't do it all during the week, it's an impossible job. I have had to learn to walk away from a mess."

It might not be a feminist march on Washington, but in the final fight for gender equality, walking away from a mess might be the most effective protest march of all. ■