Women, Money and Power

As female economic clout grows, it is changing how men and women work, play, shop, share, court and even love each other. By Liza Mundy

If you want to see what the future looks like, consider the Hawkins family of Michigan, whose choices, if they don’t already, may one day resemble your own.

The Hawkinses could have stepped out of a Hallmark card: back in the 1990s, Ford engineer Gary Hawkins supported six children while his wife Marcelle stayed home in suburban Detroit to raise them. Now grown, the Hawkins siblings can’t tell you when they noticed that everything had changed, only that they have become a family of female breadwinners.

Elder son Danny graduated from the University of Michigan and took a job in finance, but he rebelled at the crushing hours. So in the mid-90s, he left to become a stay-at-home dad to his two daughters. His wife Susan serves as a top executive at the Henry Ford Health System. He is a master of the shopping list, appointment

Photographs by Andrew H. Myers for TIME
calendar and household budget, he has served as treasurer of the PTA and the homeowners' association; and on Hallowe'en, just for fun, he did a statistical study of the risis of trick-or-treaters to gauge how much candy to buy the following year.

“I have told State several times that my job is to make her life easier, and I like doing it,” says Danny, whose sister Leslie married a man, Damon Alhomme, who everybody thought would be a hot-shot corporate lawyer. Instead he stepped back to become his family’s private banker, selling real estate, cookingambiously and coaching the kids. “We both have made sacrifices,” says Leslie, who expanded the definition of provider to include what Damon does. As a parent, she points out, “your priority is to provide a family—the love, the affection, the nurturing. For us, it’s about what’s best for the family.” Another sister, Rhonda, changed majors in college so many times, she lost count; now she is her company’s global director of marketing, “kind of by accident,” she says. When her job began to require extensive travel, often on short notice, her husband Hank reduced his hours at a restaurant management—she job he loved.

“She had to make up a lot of sacrifices to get where she is,” Hank says. “It would be wrong of me to say, ‘Oh, you’re not taking that next step, because I’m ready to do what I want to do.’ I didn’t think that would be fair.”

Two other Hawkins sisters are also in female-breadwinner households; one of them is the brother fills the role of primary earner. Six adult siblings, five households supported by women. One generation. One academic, economic, social and emotional change.

Assuming present trends continue, by the next generation, more families may be supported by women than by men. Not since women entered the workforce by the millions after World War II has America witnessed economic change on this scale. Some of this is driven by the dramatic rise in the number of women acquiring higher educations, but it is increasingly true in two-earner families as well. In 2007, the most recent year for which the Bureau of Labor Statistics figures are available, nearly 10 working wives outearned their husbands. This is an increase of more than 30% from 20 years before. There was a jump in the first decade of the 21st century, even before the subprime meltdown of 2004, because her income fell in 2007, suggesting it’s not a blip in the economic cycle.

Think about it. This portends the future. The primary roles have played since they departed the cave in pursuit of bison and woolly mammoths and marched forth in flannel suits to earn paychecks in the Mad Men era will be passed to women. The impact will be felt everywhere, from the classroom to the boardroom to the bedroom, in how men and women work, play, shop, vote, save and share and court and love each other.

While the change is rarely in the headlines, it is often behind them: much of what liberals are calling the Republi
can war on women centers on the Pill, whose arrival 50 years ago fostered the rise of female sexual freedom and eco

nomic power. Women could delay mar
riage and invest in education without worrying that an unplanned pregnancy would derail their pursuit of professional goals. As jobs have moved to the low and high ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, it is women who are better equipped for the higher ground: women today make up almost 40% of U.S. college students and earn the majority of doctorate degrees and master’s degrees. Some experts predict that in 35 years, law and medicine will be female-dominated professions.

Already, according to Census Bureau data crunched by Reach Advisers, an investment research firm, single childless women ages 23 to 30 in the majority of large U.S. cities now have a higher median income than their male peers.

Before women—or men—start cele
brating, some cautionary notes: some academics and women’s rights activists talk about a stalled revolution and warn that a premature declaration of victory will backfire. Women are going to pay and working conditions. Although the portion of wives outearning their husbands has risen, the wage gap persists: women working full time earn a median wage that is 8% of what men make. This suggests that many women are supporting households on less than what a man might command. The glass ceiling remains solid, according to Philip Cohen, a sociologist at the University of Maryland, the percent
age of managers who are women has risen from 14% to only 18% in the past 20 years. It is still possible for a judge to reject a sex-discrimination suit by a woman who claimed she was fired for asking if she could pump breast milk at work and to say the claim would hold up if the woman had been fired for being pregnant. In this econ
omy, millions of women as well as men are too worried about falling out of the middle class to dream of rising above it.

But over the long term, the outlook is brighter—especially if a growing, global information economy favors an educated woman’s skill set. Which raise the inevi
table question, if women in the next genera
tion are poised to do better, does it mean that men are going to do worse? Or is there a chance, if people come to think differ
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The Old Deal Is Off

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The New American Pocketbook. Within a generation, a majority of working wives will outearn their husbands.

In dual-earner couples, women contributed an average of 44% of family income in 2008—up from 39% in 1997

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<th>Women</th>
<th>$1.18</th>
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<td>Men</td>
<td>$1.41</td>
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Economists report that dual-earner families are on the rise, with women contributing more to family income in 2008 than in 1997. However, the rate of increase varies by gender and occupation. Women in higher-paying jobs, such as doctors and lawyers, have contributed more to family income than women in lower-paying jobs, such as nurses and clerical workers. Despite this, women still earn less than men, on average, which has implications for family planning and financial planning.

Marriages in which a woman makes more than a man

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<td>Men</td>
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As for child rearing, men have become significantly more hands-on over the past generation.

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Winfrey, it can be toxic when partners are in the same field and the woman emerges as more successful. “I think somewhere inside, something happens to a man when a woman has that much control or has that much voice…if he doesn’t have his own,” she said. Alternatively, men can give up. But there is a third option, in which men rise to the challenge, trying harder in the workplace, competing with women but in a good way. It means adapting but also broadening the definition of masculinity to include new skills and pleasures. Hunting but also cooking. Golf but also child care. We are all too quick to think masculinity is finished. As far back as the 1950s, historian Stephanie Coontz has pointed out, Look magazine announced “the decline of the American male.” So far, the keepers of popular culture don’t sound much more optimistic. In 2010 the Atlantic magazine announced “the end of men” with a provocative cover story whose theme was echoed in books with titles like Man Down and Manning Up and movies and TV shows that depict men drowning in their irrelevance—coverage that raised important issues but dwelled on men’s failure to adapt to a new world. But by confronting their tired efforts to smooth the way forward, women appear to doubt the ability of men to handle the changes ahead. Successful women can go to extravagant lengths to conceal the status gap. One university vice president admitted that when she was dating a man she took pain not to let men walk her to her car, or let her BMW make him feel inadequate. When men asked what she did for a living, she would vaguely say she worked in administration. A doctor at a Midwest hospital said she never pays her salary or even her profession in her online-dating profile. A group of young women at lunch in a downtown restaurant riled: One entrepreneur owns a car, and her boyfriend does not; when they go on an excursion, she makes some excuse for why she’s rather he drive and toses him the keys. Another, after staying over at her boyfriend’s apartment, quietly rests in the pantry. Still another buys movie tickets in advance and says they were given away at work. A Washington-area software consultant says men even in that well-educated city can be put off by her geek credentials, so at the outset she tells romantic prospects she teaches music.

Married women, meanwhile, go to great lengths to please their partners. A survey of 1,100 husbands for what they do, to suggest that identity can attach to sources other than salary. Activities that might have been considered hobbies will achieve a higher status. A wife talks about her husband’s love of antiquing as if it were a book project. Heavy meals and showy cooking are gratefully received and complimented, even if eaten for a day or two. A simple meal of steamed vegetables. Time with kids, the coaching, the homework help is expected. The message: The ability to generate income is not the only measure of value.

But some women may be trying harder than they need to. There is strong evidence that earnings make a woman more, at least, lessirable as a partner. A study published in 2010 by University of Texas at Austin psychologist David Buss and his colleagues found that in just over five decades, there was a huge jump in the weight women gave to men’s earnings when ranking traits important in a mate and a sharp drop in the value they placed on domestic skills. In February 2012, an analysis by the Hamilton Project at the Brookings Institution found that in the past four decades for the highest-earning women. Part from being unwilling to commit, demographer Christine Schwartz has noted, “men are
increasingly looking for partners who will pull their own weight economically in marriage” and are willing to compete for them.

They would be foolish not to. Research by the Families & Work Institute shows that fathers today spend much more time with their children than fathers once did and that fathers in dual-earner couples feel greater work-family conflict than mothers. Men may come to understand that life as a co-earner or secondary earner will give them more time for hobbies, leisure and children or for work they find fulfilling rather than lucrative. “When culture runs up against economic trends, usually economic trends win out,” says economist Gary Becker, meaning that even if men had been brought up to feel they should be breadwinners, pragmatism will prevail if their wife turns out to have the better job prospects.

As for women, with success and independence come uncomfortable discoveries that may test some cherished feminist principles. Up to now, feminists have argued that breadwinning—for men—should carry no special privilege, that male earners were wrong to think their paycheck bought them out of sorting socks. Now women are having to ask what privileges, if any, their own breadwinning buys. One woman, whom I’ll call Rose, struggled with the balance of economic power after her husband, whom I’ll call Michael, lost his job. Michael was doing as much housework as possible—cooking, cleaning, shopping, litter-box emptying—and Rose was working harder than ever. Was she entitled to sign up for travel whenever she needed to? When Michael did get a new job, Rose still earned twice as much as he did. Should she continue to let him do the bulk of the housework? Or was she obliged to make sure it was 50-50? Even though he was a better cook and cleaner?

While he was still unemployed, Michael took their cat to the vet and approved an expensive procedure without asking Rose. “I was kind of upset about it,” she says. “I don’t know if I would have expected him to ask my permission, but at least tell me before spending it. I did kind of feel like, You just spent a bunch of my money without telling me.”

More than one woman had a hard time embracing the idea that her earnings were not entirely hers. One lawyer in Washington is married to a consultant who took the slow track, with her wholehearted approval. Even given their careful egalitarianism, the wife acknowledges secret, almost illicit proprietary feelings about her income. “I have friends where it’s the man who’s earning more money, and the woman says to me, ‘He gets really upset when I want to redecorate the kitchen,’ and I’m supposed to be very sympathetic to the woman because I’m a woman,” she says. “But I also understand the husband’s point of view much better than I would like to. I understand the feeling that I’ve earned it.” The lawyer is aware that feeling more entitled to the money undermines the sharing inherent in a marital partnership. “If I caught myself feeling [that way], I would censor it, but I think it’s there—it’s there from the culture.”

Already these questions and tensions reach down into the next generation, as girls hear a new message about their future responsibilities. This goes beyond the girls rule-and-you-can-grow-up-to-be-whatever-you-want message. Supporting a family is a far greater burden than just supporting oneself, and it is now one that women and men are equally likely to bear. As the number of single-parent families grows—41% of babies are born to single women—young women are acutely aware that they may be the sole earner in their household. Even women with boyfriends who are prepared to step back, take the slow track and stay at home are not necessarily feeling empowered by it. One young woman was both gratified that her boyfriend was willing to move for her career and leery of getting “boxed in as the higher earner,” which sounded to her like “a lot more work and a lot less play.”

But in many families, there is a new realization setting in. The notion of perfect equality in all tasks, work, wages and power was never realistic; men and women, especially when they form households, are complex creatures with individual gifts and needs. It would be nice to imagine a world where employers make it possible for all mothers and fathers to work reasonable hours. But some jobs will always require more than eight hours a day. For a woman, like a man, reaching the highest levels of achievement may depend on a spouse willing to downshift. What’s new is that the decisions about who dials back will be based on personal aptitude and what works best for each couple rather than outdated notions of which sex is better fitted to what.