

- Go to gym
- Go to work
- Pick up dinner
- Clean up husband's mess
- Redo husband's CV

# IS THIS YOU?

## THE RISE OF THE WORKHORSE WIFE

She cooks! She cleans! She runs a company! And a family! Meet the exhausted breadwinner who supports her other half's dream (while neglecting her own)

**A**lice was dead on her feet. For five days she had risen at 6am, laced up her runners in the dark, gone for a jog, showered, changed, caught a tram to work by 8am where she raced to meet deadlines at her publicity job, before hunger forced her home 12 hours later. Now it was Saturday. As the morning sun cast striped shadows across the sheets, Alice's new husband, Nick, an aspiring filmmaker, rolled over and snuggled up to ... a pillow. Alice wasn't there. She was on the other side of town working on a freelance job. That night, as Alice collapsed on the couch, Nick had just one question for her: "What's for dinner?"

"While I was earning extra money to pay bills, Nick had been home all day watching movie trailers on YouTube in the guise of research," says Alice, 26, of her creative, but financially dependent, husband. "He won't take on extra work because he doesn't want it to interfere with his film stuff."

Meet the workhorse wife (WW). According to Pamela Haag, author of *Marriage Confidential* (HarperCollins, \$35.99), "She's the exhausted breadwinner to her dream-chasing husband. He's the partner treated as the creative talent in the marriage; the one who goes through life pursuing financially precarious ambitions."

This year, Alice will give up her job – in which she has recently been promoted – to move with Nick to LA. He will look for fame; she will look for work. "If I express doubts, Nick says, 'But I might be the next Martin Scorsese,'" explains Alice, herself an aspiring novelist. "And he might be. Or we might end up living with our parents." For now, "I have to step up the pragmatism because he's got dibs on the dream."

Haag says the WW is on the rise. Should Nick defy the odds, he may even make a film about her – though he won't be the first. Recent thriller *Limitless* opens with struggling writer Eddie Morra being dumped by his girlfriend for exploiting her financial handouts. ►

*I Don't Know How She Does It* sees Sarah Jessica Parker as a hot-shot banker to her distinctly beta-male husband, who is trying to make it as an architect.

Could art be imitating life? Nowadays, more and more Australian women are either outearning or financially supporting their husbands (a trend mirrored in the US and UK). Even before the 2008 global financial crisis, economists had noted male attrition from the workforce, with "personal choice" one of several reasons. The marriages fitting this mould now includes a variety of arrangements: dual-career couples, contented career women, stay-at-home dads – and the ranks of the WWs.

Haag says that, in a sense, the WW has become the 1950s husband, except that she does chores and childcare as well. A 2003 study\* found that when a wife contributes more than half the family income, the husband's share of the housework drops; when she's the sole provider, it drops even more.

Participants in an online survey that Haag conducted for *Marriage Confidential* wouldn't be surprised. Haag asked them if they agreed with the statement: "It's never really equal in terms of housework and chores – wives usually end up doing more." Of all the questions asked, this garnered the highest number of "I agree entirely" responses.

Not all wives resent the role reversal. When Eve's husband, Mark, ditched his job as a banker to pursue a musical career, it coincided with her elevation to CEO of the company she'd joined a year earlier. "It was fantastic for me!" says Eve. "I was doing a job that I loved, I was earning enough to support both of us, and he had the space to support me emotionally. He played a huge role as my confidante. He was always happy to workshop the issues I encountered in those early days. If he'd still been at the bank, I would not have coped with the role." Eve says when the couple subsequently decided to have children, she took a professional back seat and Mark dusted off his suit again. While Eve knows others who resent the WW arrangement, "It worked perfectly for us."

Haag doesn't regard Eve as a WW. "Eve clearly felt like she had a supportive househusband who helped her career,"

she says. "And then it sounds like the couple was trading off breadwinning responsibilities, which is also a very effective way to share the load in a marriage. For a few years, one partner is the sole breadwinner and then the other partner."

According to Haag, WWs are a throwback to the pre-feminist era when wives worked to support their husbands' ambitions. "A 1963 *New York Times* article used a familiar nickname for the wife who was supporting a graduate student husband, that she was going for her 'PhT' (Putting Hubby Through) by doing some sort of clerical work." She adds: "The WW feels like a new kind of PhT. Where supporting a husband's professional dreams used to involve menial labour and an after-hours life of soufflés, cocktail parties and vacuuming, today it might

“Women’s lib freed men to start seeing wives as meal tickets, if they wanted to. And some do.” Author Pamela Haag

mean making big money, but still doing the vacuuming. She has the shell of the feminist dream, in her career and pay cheque, but he has the soul of it – the fulfilling work and a marriage that supports a big dream.”

**A**bbey could smell dinner the second she opened the door to the inner-city Sydney terrace she shares with husband Luke. Her pleasure lasted roughly 10 seconds – the time it took to scan the living room, where he'd spent most of the past two years. "Newspapers were strewn about, there was a coffee cup on the arm of the couch, and a cereal bowl on the floor next to a pair of muddy boots," recalls the 33-year-old marketing manager, debating whether to laugh or cry.

Before he was retrenched, Luke worked in an industry that had reached its expiry date – a casualty of the digital age. Rather than retrain, or take a lesser position, Luke is holding out for a job like the one he had before – a job that doesn't exist. "He's lost his self-confidence," admits Abbey. She pays

for a cleaner to come around fortnightly "rather than fight and resent spending my weekends cleaning. And Luke wouldn't dream of cleaning up mess when he's there all day – he creates it!" Abbey is growing increasingly frustrated. "It's very hard to be supportive when you feel so resentful," she adds.

LA-bound Alice has questions, too. "I wonder if I'm relinquishing my dreams in order for [Nick] to pursue his," she muses. "And while it's OK for now, I don't know how he'll be able to put his creative goals ahead of earning a good salary when we want to have kids, or if I ever wanted to cut back on work and write that novel. Relationships are compromise, though."

Haag says that in marriages such as Alice and Nick's, "there is an overvaluing of his dreams and an undervaluing of hers, or perhaps just a habituated deference to male ambition".

According to Haag, "assortative mating" – where people choose mates similar to themselves – is fuelling the rise of the WW. "For the first time in history, men and women are marrying people almost identical to themselves in earning power, education and career."

The idea of "marrying up" has dwindled since the '50s. "Now, either could be the main breadwinner. So while women's lib freed women from having to see husbands as meal tickets, it also freed men to start seeing wives as meal tickets, if they wanted to. And, apparently, some do," she says.

As women are being urged to be less picky – relinquishing the "having it all" dream and settling for "Mr Good Enough" (as writer Lori Gottlieb urged us) – men seem to be getting pickier. It is what sociologists Dr Michael Kimmel and Kay Hymowitz identify as a quest for protracted bachelorhood. Ironically, the WW's husband *does* have it all: family, marriage, leisure and satisfying work.

"The husband's masculine identity doesn't now come from being the breadwinner as much as a creative entity," asserts Haag. "They're dreamy, but not lazy. They labour diligently, but theirs is a labour of love, supported by their wives' labour of, well, labour."

Abbey isn't sure about the "not lazy" part. As the months tick by with no sign of a career, let alone career ►

satisfaction, for her other half, “You start to wonder if you’re being taken for a ride.”

Haag acknowledges that “marriages are their own delicate ecology. Joe is a lawyer, but has no clients; Jack is a novelist, but has no publications. The husband pretends to work; the wife pretends to believe him (or not, in Abbey’s case). The elephant in the room – why doesn’t this man pull his weight? – is sidestepped. And thus these husbands are becoming more liberated by women’s liberation than their wives.”

But how does this happen? “Marriages end up this way for complicated reasons,” explains Haag. “The couple tends to see themselves as progressive and feminist. Ironically, it’s that sensibility that can paralyse the wife to the point she can’t make reasonable demands on the husband. What feminist woman would ‘impose’ the breadwinning role on her husband?”

Sometimes the wife is particular about how things are run, so she doesn’t want her husband to do more housework. And sometimes the wife feels so guilty for having an all-consuming career – even if

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it supports the family – that she overcompensates by tolerating the marital slacker.

So what’s a WW to do? Reinstate the husband as workhorse? Abandon the dream of having it all? Neither, insists Haag. “To get fairness, perhaps the WW has to trade perfection for equity, even if it means the occasional piece of burnt toast or unsightly toilet bowl.”

The compromise can take many forms. By the time Eve and Mark had children, Eve had cemented her place in the corporate world, Mark had scratched his creative itch, and both were happy to switch seats again. For Alice and Nick, perhaps his Hollywood aspirations could have a time limit, say,

when they have children? “Good luck with that!” cracks a clearly cynical Abbey.

“Fairness is a final frontier for marriage,” notes Haag. “We can arrange career and marriage any way we want, but while there isn’t a perfect marriage, there can be a perfectly fair one. Both spouses need to feel that each is doing enough of that unglamorous ‘life maintenance’ work.”

The bottom line? “One partner can’t always feel like the rock star in the marriage, and the other partner the backstage roadie who does all the unglamorous work, be it breadwinning or bread baking,” offers Haag. “As long as the couple feels that things are equitable and happy, then they are!” ■

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