Helen and Colin have a thoroughly modern marriage, of a particular sort. She works in a busy law firm. He's also a lawyer, but doesn't have a job, instead just harbours intentions to take on the occasional fascinating client. Helen returns from work late most nights, drags herself upstairs and passes out exhausted in front of the TV while Colin prepares dinner — marshmallows, popcorn and Nutella. He isn't much of a cook and hasn't tried to learn. When they eventually had children, Helen paid for day care — never mind that Colin was at home.

Meet the workhorse wife — or WW — the exhausted breadwinner to her dream-chasing husband, treated as the creative talent in the marriage, who goes through life chasing financially precarious dreams.

Take Tom, whom I met at a coffee shop, where he sat with large unfurled maps of Fiji. Was he planning a trip? No, he said. He was an (unpublished) novelist, who wanted to travel to Fiji to write about radical whale-savers. He had no children, no responsibilities, no paid employment, and the wife who supported him was a full-time hospital doctor. Nice work if you can get it.

And guess what? The WW is on the rise, and starring in various Hollywood films. The recent thriller Limitless opens with unpublished writer Eddie Morra being dumped by his girlfriend for exploiting her handouts, while
Don't Know How She Does It sees Sarah Jessica Parker as a hotshot bankerto her distinctly beta-male husband, who is trying to make it as an architect. In
a sense, the WW has become the 1950s husband, except that she does chores and childcare as well. In the 1950s, women notoriously went to
college to snag their "Mrs Degree." New research finds that the Mr Degree is
the next wave: men now gain more than women financially from marrying a
college-educated spouse. Even before the 2008 recession, economists had
noted male attrition from the workforce, with personal choice one of several
reasons. Now, in almost one in four American marriages, women out-ear or
support their husbands. That 25% includes a variety of marriages — dual-
career couples, contented career women, stay-at-home dads — and the
discontented ranks of the WWs.

The WWs' husbands are not greeting their wives with dinner and a perfect
marital at the end of the day. A study in 2003 found that when a wife
contributes more than half the family income, the husband's contribution to
the household drops, when she's the sole provider, it drops even more.

Participants in an online survey that I conducted for my book on marriage
wouldn't be surprised. I asked them if they agreed with the statement: "It's
never 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. Had the survey been restricted to women, the
percentages would likely have been higher.

"Assorative mating" — where people choose mates similar to themselves —
is the big trend fueling 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, career and credentials. The idea of "marrying up" has
dwindled since the 1950s. Now, neither could be the main breadwinner. So, while women's lib
freed women from having to see husbands as
nagging, it also freed men to start seeing
wives as nagging, if they wanted to. And,
apparently, some do.

As women are urged to be less picky —
reinventing the Having It All dream and
settling for "Mr Good Enough" (as writer Loretta
Gottlieb urges us) — single men seem to get
pickier. This is what sociologists Michael
Kimmel and Kay Hymowitz identify as a quest
for protracted bachelorhood. Ironically, the WWs husband actually does have
it all: family, marriage, leisure and satisfying work.

In the pre-feminist era, 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." The WW feels like a new kind of PhT. Supporting her husband's professional
dreams is used to soufflés, cocktail parties and vacuuming. Today it
might 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.

Friend Gretchen has made a tedious commute to a lucrative job for more than 20 years. During this time, she has contemplated opening a
stationery store, becoming a journalist and teaching. These dreams are
stalled in a corner of the marriage, as her husband, Adam, moves effortlessly
through an obscure PhD. Needless to say, Gretchen supports both of them.
She once commented that his inability to repay student loans or "market
himself" for better jobs had stymied her life. Gretchen conceded an injustice
— she wanted mission-driven work as well. "But if I ask him to earn more
money, and he doesn't get to finish his degree," she said, "he won't have had
a chance at his dream." In these marriages, there is an overvaluing of his
dreams and an undervaluing of the wife's, or perhaps just a habituated deference to male ambition.

As for the husband, his masculine identity doesn't now come from being the
breadwinner as much as a creative entity. They're dreamy, but not idle. They
labour diligently, but there is a labour of love, supported by their wives' labour of
labour. On this point, some of my girlfriends disagree. "They're not following
any 'noses' except those leading to potato crisps and football," says one. But
most of them strike me as ambitious in ways that don't pay the bills.

Most marriages are their own delicate ecology, and the problem here is
discretely elided. 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. The elephant in the room — why doesn't he man his pull
weight? — is sidesteppe. And thus these husbands are becoming more
liberated by women's liberation than their wives.

Marriages end up this way for complicated reasons. The couple tends to see
themselves as progressive and feminist. Ironically, it's that very sensibility
that can paralyse the wife to the point that 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,
she doesn't want her husband to do more housework. Two separate WWs I
know have lamented that they cannot tolerate babies growing in their
urine bowls, implying that the husband is beyond learning this task. And
sometimes the wife feels so guilty for having a time-savvy career — even if it supports
the family — that she overcompensates by tolerating the marital slacker.

So what's a WW to do? The solution is not to
reclassify the husband as houseman. Not to abandon the Having It All dream, either. No, to
get fairness, the WW has to trade perfection for
equity, even if it means the occasional piece of
burnt toast or unsightly toilet bowl.

Others work to simplify their standard
of living. Kiera had just landed a job as a professor.
As an equally well-educated freelance writer, her
fiancé George had almost always been un- or
underemployed. It sounds like a WW marriage
in the making. But instead, Kiera and George
chose to simplify their standard of living dramatically. George realised that
he neither wanted to be "selfish" in his marriage by scrapping off his wife,
or a full-time worker. Kiera realised that she didn't want to be a stressed-out
sole breadwinner saddled with an ewsured lifestyle.

Fairness is a final frontier for marriage. We can arrange careers and marriage
any way we want, but while there isn't an ideally perfect type of marriage, there is
an ideally fair state of marriage. Both spouses need to feel that each is doing
enough of that unglamorous, dreary "life maintenance" work, whether it's
breadwinning or bread-baking, so that things feel fairly allocated.

Fairness is a psychological struggle, not a legal one. WWs don't feel
comfortable asking a quisique husband to take a day job. Conversely,
frustrated workhorse husbands might not feel comfortable confessing they didn't really want to end up the sole breadwinner. But perhaps that's what he
and she need to say. Before the WW bolts the stable.

Marriage Confidential. The Post-Romantic Age of Workhorse Wives. Royal
Children. Undersexed Spouses and Rebel Couples Who Are Defying the Rules
by Pamela Haag (HarperCollins £16.99). To buy it for £15.29 (inc. p+p), visit
thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop or call 0845 271 2134

YOU ARE A WORKHOUSE WIFE IF...