

The surprising factor that impacts how young women see their futures as parents ^[1]

'Women's future role expectations were dependent upon what they thought men would be doing with respect to child care,' the study's lead author told Moneyish.

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EXCERPTS

Women anticipate their future partners' moves, new research suggests.

The caregiving or breadwinning role that heterosexual young women envision for themselves could rely on the extent to which they think men will be involved in taking care of their future families, according to a recent paper published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Women who were led to expect that men would increasingly take on more child-care duties were more likely to see themselves being the breadwinners of their future families, the series of studies found, and less likely to see themselves in the primary caregiver role. On the flipside, women who were "primed" to believe men were only slowly taking on caregiving roles were more likely to anticipate being the primary caregiver and less likely to see themselves as breadwinners.

"Women's future role expectations were dependent upon what they thought men would be doing with respect to child care," lead study author Alyssa Croft, an assistant professor of social psychology at the University of Arizona, told Moneyish.

The patterns found in the study, she and her co-authors wrote, "suggest that women's stereotypes about men's stagnant or changing gender roles might subtly constrain women's own expected work and family roles."

The researchers told young single women, who were on average 20 years old, that the study was about how changing trends affect people's life narratives. Participants were shown a fact sheet bearing graphs on various topics, including stay-at-home dads. But some were presented with a stay-at-home dads graph that suggested a more dramatic change — a manipulation of the y-axis using the same data — while others saw a slower change. The researchers also manipulated figure captions to offer two different narratives about stay-at-home dads.

Participants were then asked to imagine their lives 15 years in the future. Embedded in that visualization exercise about their future lives, Croft said, were the likelihood of their being the primary breadwinner for their future family and the likelihood of their being the primary caregiver.

"We basically found that our manipulation — that thing that was different between the groups — really had an effect on women's expectations for their future," Croft said. The perception that men's roles would stay stagnant, the authors wrote, "led our highly educated career-focused female samples to expect that their role would be as the primary caregiver rather than economic provider in their future family."

Female breadwinners are on the rise. Women in about one-third of married or cohabiting couples in the U.S. contribute half or more of the household earnings, a Pew Research analysis found; the share of women who do so increased from 13% in 1980 to 31% in 2017. Meanwhile, about seven in 10 people say the ability to financially support a family is very important for a man to be a good partner or husband — but only three in 10 hold the same view about women.

Stay-at-home fathers in the U.S. have also made gains. The number of fathers who stay home with their kids rose from 1.1 million in 1989 to 2.2 million in 2010, though that number decreased slightly afterward due to dips in unemployment, according to Pew Research Center. Stay-at-home dads made up 16% of at-home parents in 2012, compared to 10% in 1989. (Twenty-three percent of stay-at-home dads say they're at home primarily because they're unable to find work; 21% say they're home primarily to care for the family.)

While the data don't explain why exactly women in Croft's study had this reaction, she speculated it may have something to do with "the status hierarchy in gender roles."

"To the extent that men are kind of setting the tone for what roles are going to look like, that trickles down and has an effect on what

women think for themselves and what they expect to be expected of them,” she said. Women may take their cues from men, she suggested, since men have historically held greater power.

Or, Croft said, “maybe it is about women wanting to ‘have it all.’ And so when they believe that they’ll find a partner who is willing to contribute 50-50, maybe that frees them up to think, ‘Oh, maybe I can have it all if I have the right partner.’”

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