

# Men's sacrifice on altar of matrimony

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It seems marriages last longer if the husband is the one who is miserable

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"Aussie men prefer the wife to stay home." How typical was this anti-male spin in the media's reactions to the latest research findings released this week from the annual Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey.

It's just extraordinary how common it is for social science research to be used to paint men as bad guys. That's the story that always captures media attention. Let's unpack what the findings actually said and what the journalists failed to report.

What HILDA found was men whose wives do paid work outside the home — both full time and part time — are less satisfied with their relationships than those whose partners do not work. This is actually nothing new — it has been showing up in the HILDA results for more than a decade. But contrary to many people's sexist assumptions it may have nothing at all to do with men hankering to have their little ladies safely installed behind the white picket fence. Rather, it may reflect the wisdom of that famous old dictum: happy wife, happy life.

The main reason for Australian wives to be out of the workforce is a very good one — they are mainly mothers of very young children. Most women in this situation don't want to work. They see it as a worthwhile job to take care of their infants and toddlers, and all the evidence suggests that overall many are happy to do just that.

Almost half (47 per cent) of mothers in couple relationships with children under five are not in the workforce, according to 2011 census figures. In her paper *Parents Working Out Work*, University of Queensland sociology professor Jennifer Baxter reports 69 per cent of non-working mothers say the reason they aren't looking for work is they prefer to look after their own children.

While most men are happy for their wives to care for their young

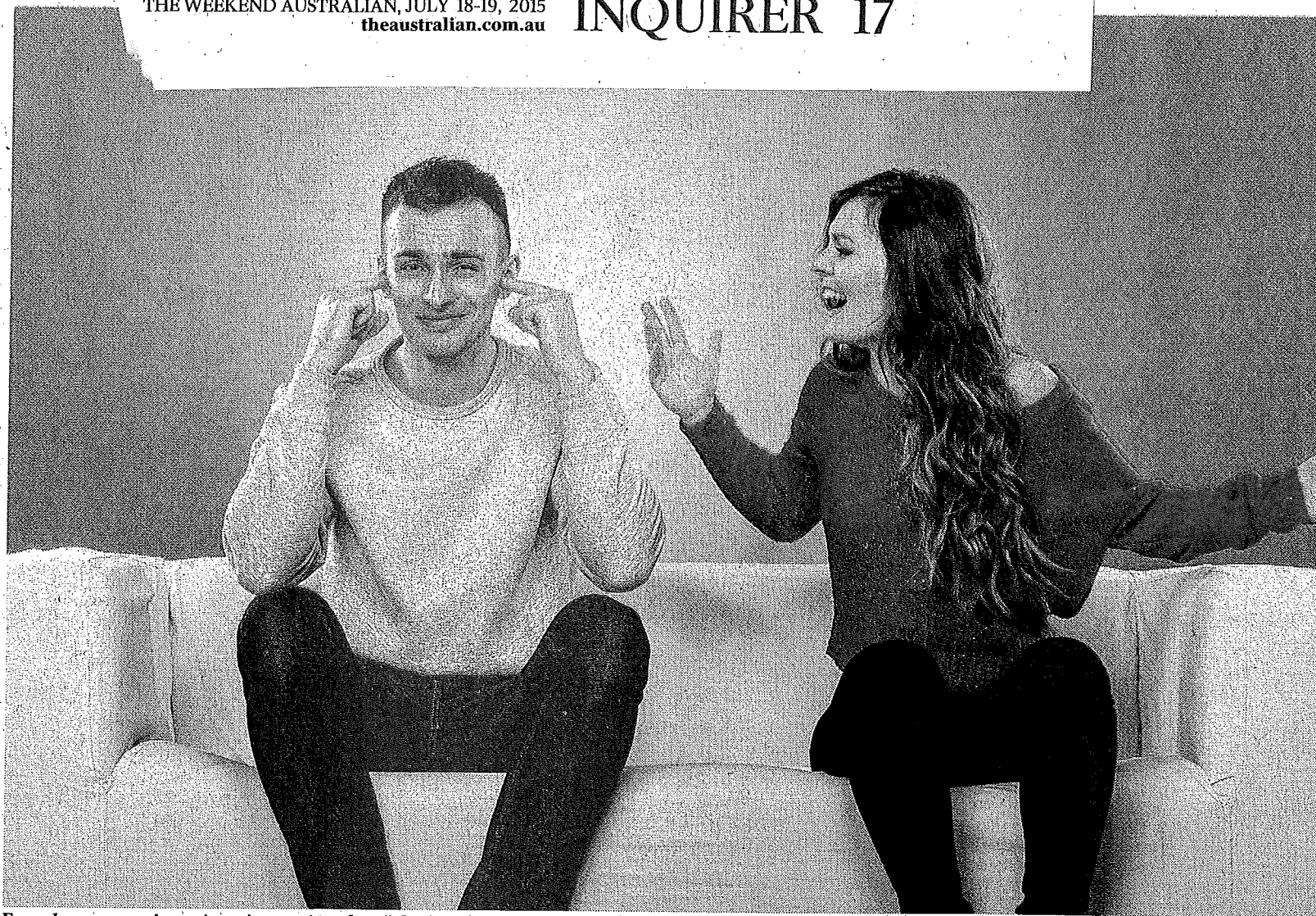
children it does force the fathers into the role of sole breadwinners, which is hardly all beer and skittles. Not that we ever hear much about the pressures a man comes under to intensify his work efforts, the fact he may get locked into a job he hates to pay the mortgage, and the lack of choices in his life. Oh no, all the research reporting is on the burden of child-rearing on the woman and how little the man contributes to home duties and childcare. "Parenthood makes men even lazier," trumpeted an article on this topic published in *The Age* this year.

"Men come off looking like a bunch of lazy, couch-lying, TV-watching sloths," Greg Jericho wrote for the *Guardian Australia*, selectively picking from last year's HILDA data comparing the total work done by men and women.

He chose to highlight only the worst-case scenario, where women earning the same as their husbands do far more total work. He failed to point out that overall there was only a couple of hours a week both fathers and mothers spent on paid plus unpaid work.

Most men are pulling their weight, with the average Australian man working twice as many hours as his wife, even if he does less around the home. The problem for men is there's still no guarantee that will keep her happy. And a miserable wife is a very risky prospect indeed, as social research clearly demonstrates.

"It's the marriage where the woman is far less happy than her husband which is really at risk. Marriages can survive quite well if the man is the one who is more miserable but unhappy wives call the shots — which accounts for the instability of marriages today," says Deakin University expert in wellbeing and economics Cahit Guven who, with a group of international researchers, published a paper on "the happiness gap". Using data from tens of thousands of relationships in three countries, they discovered that the bigger the difference in the happiness of husbands and wives the greater the risk of a break-up, but only when the husband was feeling better about life than was his wife.



For a longer marriage, American researcher John M. Gottman advises, men should 'just do what your wife says. Go ahead, give in to her'

That accords with advice given by John M. Gottman, one of America's foremost researchers on marriage. He conducted a study tracking newlyweds, following them up for six years to see which marriages were happy and stable and which ended in divorce.

Gottman and his colleagues recorded their surprise at the outcome, which they summed up in this advice to men: "If you want your marriage to last for a long time ... just do what your wife says. Go ahead, give in to her ... The marriages that did work all had one thing in common — the husband was willing to give in to the wife. We found that only those newlywed men who are accepting of influence from their wives are ending up in happy, stable marriages."

So men know they can't afford to have unhappy wives — it affects

their own life happiness if their wives are miserable. But women can be pretty oblivious when hubby isn't doing so well, according to a study published last year by Rutgers University sociologists. This research, looking at 394 older couples married an average of 38.5 years, found the married men were a lot happier when their wives rated the marriage more highly — even if the men didn't see their marriages as so great. But it didn't make much difference to the women's happiness if the men rated their marriages highly. "Women are the ones who drive the emotional climate of the relationship," says Deborah Carr, one of the researchers.

As Gottman points out, it all speaks to the loss of power (in marriage) that men have experienced in the past 40 years.

Marriage has become an in-

creasingly risky prospect for men, given how tough it is for men to live up to women's high expectations, how easy it is for an unhappy woman to leave the marriage and the high costs for men if that happens.

Perhaps the most powerful summing up of this changing deal comes from a female writer, a Canadian blogger, *girlwriteswhat*. The Canadian divorcee writes provocative social commentary on social issues affecting men, including *Good Men, Raw Deal*, her take on recent trends in marriage: "From a woman's perspective, marriage still provides significant benefits over single life — in fact, marriage as an enterprise has only improved for women since the 1950s. A woman now has the right to say no to sex with her husband. If he's abusive, she has an entire public-sector industry itching to help her.

If a woman decides she doesn't want to be married to that jerk who doesn't help with the dishes, has mommy issues and leaves his dirty socks lying all over the place, well, she doesn't have to be. She won't be stigmatised, she won't be financially destroyed and she won't lose her children."

Her conclusion: "For women, marriage is all benefit and zero risk, and that's why women are whining about men's reluctance to tie the knot. But for men, it's the other way around — no guaranteed benefit, and the kind of risk an adrenaline junkie would eschew."

One of the big unanswered questions is whether men are noticing that marriage is a dud deal for them. Marriage rates have indeed been dropping in Australia, with increasing numbers of couples living in de facto relationships, up from 1.5 million in 1996 to

2.9 million in 2012. No one really knows how much this change is being led by men, although the women's magazines are full of stories about men's reluctance to commit. The latest HILDA data points to some interesting trends in these de facto relationships. For a start the cohabiting couples tend to be happier than married couples — that's hardly surprising because at the first sign of trouble many de facto couples are still together after four years, compared with 74 per cent of de facto couples. After 11 years the figures are 80 per cent for marrieds and only 57 for de factos.

That's not good news for the increasing numbers of children being born into these de facto relationships, contributing to greater developmental problems in children with cohabiting parents.

Using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, Lixia Qu and Ruth Weston from the Australian Institute of Family Studies found children in cohabiting families lag behind children with married parents in overall socio-emotional and general development, show poorer learning, more conduct problems and experience poorer parenting. The number of dependent children living with cohabiting parents doubled from 0.9 million to 1.8 million between 1996 and 2012.

Long-married couples tend to get happier across time — happiness starts to rise for those who make it through the 20-year itch, although there recently has been a spike in divorces for such couples. With de factos it's different; across time both men and women tend to become increasingly dissatisfied, with the most unhappy group being women who have been with

**Women can be pretty oblivious when hubby isn't doing so well**

the same bloke for more than 10 years and never marrying.

Could it be that women in these relationships end up feeling they have missed out? Surely there's something irritating about living with a man who remains determined to keep the door that little bit ajar — although obviously sometimes it is the woman who still desires the escape hatch.

Many well-educated women in de facto relationships don't end up having children. Although in lower socioeconomic groups it has become commonplace for children to be born in cohabiting relationships, it's still rare for well-educated women to have children without being married.

As Monash University sociologist Bob Birrell suggested, writing about these emerging trends over a decade ago in *Men and Women Apart*, most well-educated women remain determined to provide that extra stability for their children.

What we see in HILDA's latest glimpse at the evolving pattern of family relationships is men and women making different decisions, all hoping to do well in the great lottery of life. But the corrosive effect of an unhappy wife is a powerful underlying story and one that's just not going to go away.

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