

RELATIONSHIPS

Battle of the bucks

*More money is good, right? Not always. When the woman earns more than her spouse, it can turn into a dangerously tricky situation finds **SAVIA RAJAGOPAL***

Traditionally, a man is viewed as the breadwinner who 'naturally' earns more than his wife. Cut to reality — an increasing number of women are earning more than their husbands. How does the infamous 'male ego' handle such a situation? Says, Ajay Shah, 37, healthcare professional, "My wife earned a lot more than me when we got married. I found myself despising her and thought she was overbearing. I used to get angry. There was a complete communication breakdown." Wife Sandali adds, "It took us a very long time to adjust. I couldn't understand why he was so insecure."

Throwing light on this scenario, Dr. Bharat Shah, psychiatrist, Lilavati Hospital, explains, "Men have been conditioned to believe that they are stronger, bigger and can protect a woman for generations. Today, he doesn't have to physically protect his wife. So power extends to money."

At the root of it all...

Problems arise when either the husband is insecure or when the wife throws a lot of attitude. There could be ego clashes and the situation could worsen when the man tries to control his wife's finances or denies her money. As a woman becomes economically independent, the husband feels his role as the provider is challenged. In such instances, the notorious male ego is under attack. He feels threatened and unimportant compared to his better half and reacts by being hostile and defensive. There is a definite psychological backlash that the woman has to face in such cases. Dr. Dilip Deshmukh, consultant psychiatrist, Lilavati Hospital, iterates, "Ultimately, there is competition between the couple. Men feel an element of insecurity and react with irritability. They try to cut the woman down to size, or show off. Men also react by withdrawing and fighting over petty issues. A woman has multiple roles to perform such as looking after the household, children etc. A man usually does not participate in these and so to counter that, he feels he should earn more money."

Dr. Anjali Chhabria claims, "Male reactions are more non verbal than verbal. For example, if the wife offers to pay and organise a holiday, the husband may refuse to go, or if she buys something, he may refuse to use it. These are passive-aggressive reactions that men give out by not participating."

And how should she react...

When it comes to dealing with an insecure husband, many high-earning wives resort to underplaying their achievements, and undermining their financial success. Though she is proud of her independent status, she still feels guilty. Dr. Shah opines that women too are culturally conditioned to believe that she needs to be supported. When the roles are fixed, she is comfortable and happier.

She's socially bound...

In addition, the social circle also influences relationships. It is often assumed that the husband earns more than his wife. If he doesn't, then people wonder what is wrong with him. Alternatively, people think of the woman as pushy or someone whose priority is solely her career. The couple may actually be comfortable and happy with their situation but people

around may look down upon them. Sometimes people assume that because the wife earns more, she dominates her husband and is in charge.

All's not lost...

But the picture may not always be so gloomy. There is an increasing trend that points towards men who are fully supportive and appreciative of their wives' higher earning power. Dr Chabbria adds that there are many young couples who discuss and accept that the wife earns more than her husband, and divide the responsibilities accordingly. In some ways, it is also a relief to share the financial burden, which men have shouldered alone for generations.

Dr. Shah advises couples to avoid power games. The pooled income is what counts and not who earns how much. Dr Chabbria emphasises the importance of communicating effectively and dealing with the situation.

Marriage has never been a bed of roses but money need not be a battleground. Ultimately both partners have to realise that marriage is a partnership and need not always be a 50-50 equation. Having said that, substitute screaming matches with honest communication and you might actually experience some of the marital bliss they talk about!

