

# MailOnline

## Lost your job, dear? I'll bring home the bacon... just don't expect our marriage to survive

By [Keren Smedley](#)

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Like so many women of her generation, Helen Kirby embarked on married life firmly believing in the traditional roles once assigned to men and women.

She was a teenage typist who worked her way up to the position of PA to the managing director of a shoe manufacturer. Her husband was the boss's son.

When they married 27 years ago, she happily handed over all responsibility for bread-winning to her other half and concentrated on raising the three children who swiftly followed.

The choices Helen made were by no means unusual.



**Role reversal: Many women are becoming frustrated about being the main bread winner in the family after their husbands were made redundant**

So many women growing up in the Fifties and Sixties expected to be swept off their feet by Prince Charming, then to settle down, have a family and be supported by their husbands - or possibly to have a part-time job when the children were older and at school.

It seemed like a fair and natural compromise and many - including myself - enthusiastically embraced the contract.

But none of us stopped to wonder what might happen if circumstances changed; if the money ever dried up, if a recession swept away thousands of men's jobs and forced their wives to take on the role of keeping the family afloat financially.

That's exactly what happened to 48-year-old Helen and her husband John, with devastating consequences.

'I never considered working. We had very traditional roles,' she says. 'John went to work at the family shoe business and paid all the bills.'

'I was happy being the homemaker. I did a bit of voluntary work when the kids went to secondary school, met my friends and joined John for company events. Looking back, it was idyllic.'

When John's business started to flounder, out of necessity Helen took a job as a solicitor's secretary to tide them over, eventually becoming a full time PA in the City to help fund their children through university.



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**Relationship stress: Some women are losing respect for their husbands as they feel they have been forced to go back to work to support their families**

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But things got worse.

Two years later, they were forced to swap their six-bedroom family home complete with a tennis court and an acre of land, for a four-bedroom semi in Hitchin, Hertfordshire.

More dramatic than that, however, is the fact that Helen now earns more than her 51-year-old husband.

John works in a low-paid position as an administrator in an insurance company.

Having worked in the family firm for so many years, he found it hard to begin all over again.

In effect, Cinderella is now taking care of Prince Charming, and Helen, who dreads the daily commute into London, readily admits she is uncomfortable with this role reversal and that it has placed a strain on their marriage.

'I resent John for letting me down, he feels inadequate and we row,' she says.

'I liked it when I was financially dependent on him. When we married, we agreed he'd earn the money and I'd look after the home and help him entertain his clients.

'I did my bit, and he's reneged on his part of the deal. I didn't ever want to work, let alone be the main earner. I don't like the pressure. I don't know what is going to happen. Now, I can't see this marriage lasting for ever.'

## It's a fact...

Fifty thousand men were made redundant from full or part-time jobs in Britain in the past three months, while more than

## 120,000 women found new part-time jobs

Helen is not alone in feeling like this.

As someone who counsels and guides people through mid-life crises such as these, I meet many couples who bought into the Fifties dream and thought they'd repeat the pattern laid out by their parents - a traditional recipe of husband, wife and children.

But the world has changed, and thanks to today's high cost of living, many couples simply cannot manage on one income.

Redundancy doesn't differentiate between those who are the main earners and those who aren't.

The current recession has placed a further strain on these traditional relationships.

And if such marriages are going to survive, it is essential to deal with the combined feelings of disappointment felt by women and the weight of failure felt by men when their previously well-defined roles become blurred.

Jacky Robbins, 49, is facing exactly this situation - and is struggling to come to terms with it.

At 19, she dropped out of University College London, where she was studying maths, to marry property developer Anthony and move into his Chelsea riverside penthouse.

'Anthony wanted me to drop out of university when we married, so I did. It wasn't unusual in our circle,' says Jacky.

'I was very happy being at home, looking after our four daughters and doing voluntary work in the local hospice.'

But then, in 2005, Anthony fell out with his business partner and turned his attention instead to a property rental business he had set up near the family home in Leeds.

When the recession struck last year, the rental property market crashed, leaving the business in crisis and forcing the couple to make staff redundancies. It could not have come at a worse time.



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**Holding the baby: The recession has created a shift in the traditional family roles**

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The couple were still financing their daughters, who are aged between 15 and 20, as well as taking on the burden of care of their elderly mothers.

'It became clear we'd either have to sell our home to keep the office fully staffed or I would have to go out to work,' Jacky says.

Reluctantly, she got a job two days a week as a receptionist at a hotel. Eventually, she was forced to work full-time.

'I'm cross with Anthony,' she says, 'Because I don't think he thought this through well enough, and I'm now landed doing a job I don't want to do.'

'I find myself wondering whether my choice to leave university was the right one. I could have had a proper career on the back of my degree, but it's too late now.'

'The sad thing is that what used to be a good partnership where we felt in balance with each other is now a relationship that gives me little joy.'

'If I'm honest, I've lost all respect for him.'

In situations like these, the power balance in the family shifts as the roles are reversed.

When a husband becomes financially dependent on his wife, it often leaves her feeling resentful. Men, meanwhile, feel emasculated and powerless, which leaves them depressed and lacking in self-esteem.

In fact, what they need to do is to learn new strategies to deal with the imbalance or face seeing their marriage falling apart.

Over the past couple of years, I have encountered more and more couples facing such problems. It's especially difficult if the husband no longer works at all.

Women who find themselves thrust back into the workplace grow even more resentful if they find that their now 'house-husbands' are not pulling their weight on the domestic front.

## **When a husband becomes financially dependent on his wife, it often leaves her feeling resentful. Men, meanwhile, feel emasculated and powerless**

Equally, those who embrace the change and find the return to work a welcome challenge can feel frustrated if their husbands are not keeping up with them.

At 60, Susan Roberts has found herself in this position. She worked as a teacher until she was 30, when she married Gerald.

He was 20 years older than she was and had two children from his first marriage.

The couple started a second family together, and by mutual agreement Susan stayed at home with her two sons.

As the director of a manufacturing company, Gerald expected a good pension when he retired at 65.

But bad investments left a smaller sum than expected, certainly not enough to fund the couple's Georgian house in Islington, North London, or their sons' private school fees.

Susan had little choice but to return to teaching.

'The first year back was grim,' she says. 'I was up till all hours preparing lessons. But I got into the swing of things after a while and I now quite enjoy it: it's given me a new lease of life.'

'Gerald, on the other hand, is at home all day and becoming more stuck in his ways and we have less in common.'

'I know he's older, but he's physically and mentally fit, so he could do something. He does the cooking and the household chores when asked, but often needs directing. I still feel responsible for it all.'

While Susan always knew Gerald would slow down before she did, she had not anticipated having to work to supplement his pension.

Little wonder that women like Susan, Helen and Jacky feel so angry about their domestic situations.

At a time when they wanted to look forward to retirement, they are having to support their families.

As a result, their marriages are under threat as never before.

• *Names have been changed.*

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This is a parody right?

- Michael Reader, Dorset, 19/11/2009 17:24

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One word... Pathetic.

- Emma, London, 19/11/2009 17:12

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I have worked for 35 years. albeit part time for the last 18 years, my husband had been at work also for 35 years, he has now had to close his manufacturing company due to the recession and also has been diagnosed with a rare degenerative metabolic disorder affecting all cartilage and bones in his body, so he is now in a wheelchair ( which he hates) if I can get him out of the house. So I have had "richer for poorer" and in "sickness and in health" we also have 2 dependant children, I have always been careful with my money and am not a big spender (inherited from my mother who lived through the war) I married him and now will stick with him, we just get on with it although life is hard.

- Jayne, Lichfield, 19/11/2009 16:49

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Wow... this article is full of self-absorbing women... I'm sorry I'm a very traditional person in many ways but like the old saying goes..."when the going gets tough, the tough get going"!!! you should be there for each other. It doesn't matter how much one makes... her more than him or vice versa... doesn't it all go to the both of you and your children, your home, your vacations... you should feel resentful that he broke the contract... it does not say this stuff in your vows... it says to love and cherish each other in good times and bad... helloo... anyone remember that!!! If my husband lost his job tomorrow I would be more than happy to give all I have to make things better!!!!

- Ruth, Ottawa, Canada, 19/11/2009 16:42

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"Two years later, they were forced to swap their six-bedroom family home complete with a tennis court and an acre of land, for a four-bedroom semi in Hitchin, Hertfordshire. "

Aw, diddums.

- Claire, Scotland, 19/11/2009 16:38

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This is utterly disgraceful!!!

It's not the guys fault if he gets laid off you selfish women, it happens!!!!

Go to work and do your bit without complaining until he gets back on his feet.

My husband has been made redundant so I'm now the main earner.....but I never forget that it was his work that got us where we are now and put all the savings in the bank to get us through these tough times.

And I also know that once it all gets back up and running he will go back to working 60 hours a week and supporting the family once again.

In the meantime I do what I can and I DON'T blame him for it....I still respect and look up to him as a man

Sheesh, some women really don't do the rest of us any favours.

- Angela., Staffordshire, England., 19/11/2009 16:27

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