

Relative Income in a Partnership and Satisfaction: The Role of Gender Role Attitudes and Housework Division

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Introduction

Research on relative earnings within couples - often referred to as the partner pay gap - consistently shows that men tend to out-earn their female partners, despite women's advances in education and employment (Gash & Plagnol, 2021). Across Western societies, women's earnings typically constitute about one-third of household income, a pattern that endures even amid growing gender equality (Gihleb et al., 2024). This earnings imbalance has been linked to multiple dimensions of subjective well-being (SWB), including life satisfaction, marital happiness, and health outcomes (Gash & Plagnol, 2021; Gihleb et al., 2024; Hajdu & Hajdu, 2018).

Two main theoretical perspectives guide this research. The male breadwinner or gender norms framework emphasizes the social expectation that men should be primary earners (Gash & Plagnol, 2021). Violations of this norm—when women out-earn their partners—may lower marital quality and happiness due to perceived status inconsistency (Gong, 2007). Men, in particular, may experience a psychological cost from being secondary earners, while women often receive no psychological benefit from higher relative earnings (Gash & Plagnol, 2021).

In contrast, social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) and the relative income hypothesis (Duesenberry, 1949) suggest that individuals' well-being depends not only on absolute income but also on comparisons with relevant others, including one's partner. Under this framework, individuals should feel more satisfied when they earn more than their spouse. Evidence from U.S. data supports this view as both men and women report greater satisfaction with their family's financial situation when they are the higher earner (Eirich & Robinson, 2017). However, this effect is largely confined to financial satisfaction and does not extend to broader life or relationship domains.

Empirical findings across Europe remain mixed. In countries with traditional gender roles, such as Hungary or Germany, men and women both report lower life satisfaction when the wife earns more (Gihleb et al., 2014; Salland & Dewenter, 2021; Hajdu & Hajdu, 2018; Salland, 2018). Conversely, studies from more egalitarian contexts, such as Sweden, find no evidence of a "male breadwinner premium" (Hederos Eriksson & Stenberg, 2015). Moreover, the moderating role of gender attitudes yields inconsistent results: in Hungary, traditional views amplify the negative association, while in the U.S., such moderation is absent (Eirich & Robinson, 2017).

While previous studies have extensively examined the link between partners' relative earnings and overall life satisfaction, much less is known about how income disparities shape satisfaction within the relationship itself. Moreover, the household division of unpaid labor has rarely been considered as a potential moderator of this association. Poland offers a particularly relevant setting for examining these questions. Although women's labor force participation has been steadily increasing and now slightly exceeds the EU average (67.2% in 2024; Eurostat, 2025), social norms surrounding gender roles and the division of domestic work remain relatively traditional. This combination of structural

change and enduring cultural expectations provides a unique opportunity to explore how economic and gender dynamics jointly influence satisfaction among partnered individuals.

Research Questions

This study examines how relative income within couples relates to two domains of well-being, i.e., overall life satisfaction and satisfaction with a partner. Understanding these relationships is crucial, as lower relationship satisfaction is a strong predictor of union instability and dissolution. Drawing on prior research and theoretical perspectives on gender norms and social comparison, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H1.** Both men and women will report higher life satisfaction when they earn more than their partner.
- H2.** Women will report lower satisfaction with their partner when they earn more than their partner, reflecting the potential costs of violating traditional gender norms.
- H3.** The effects of relative income within a partnership on both life and partner satisfaction will be stronger among individuals with more traditional gender role attitudes.
- H4.** The division of unpaid labor will moderate these associations: an unequal division of housework and childcare (with women performing a greater share) will strengthen the negative effects of women out-earning their partners on satisfaction outcomes.

Data & Methods

We use longitudinal panel data gathered annually for Polish respondents between 2021 and 2024 as part of the FAMILYDEMIC project (Kurowska et al., 2023). The analytical sample includes 1,559 partnered women and 1,166 partnered men who are currently in different sex relationships. To account for within-person change over time, we estimate panel regression models with random effects separately for men and women.

The dependent variables capture two aspects of subjective well-being: (1) overall life satisfaction and (2) satisfaction with a partner, each measured on an 11-point scale. The key explanatory variable is relative income within the relationship, measured by a question on who earns more. The reference category represents couples in which both partners earn about the same, while the two other categories capture situations where either the respondent or their partner earns more.

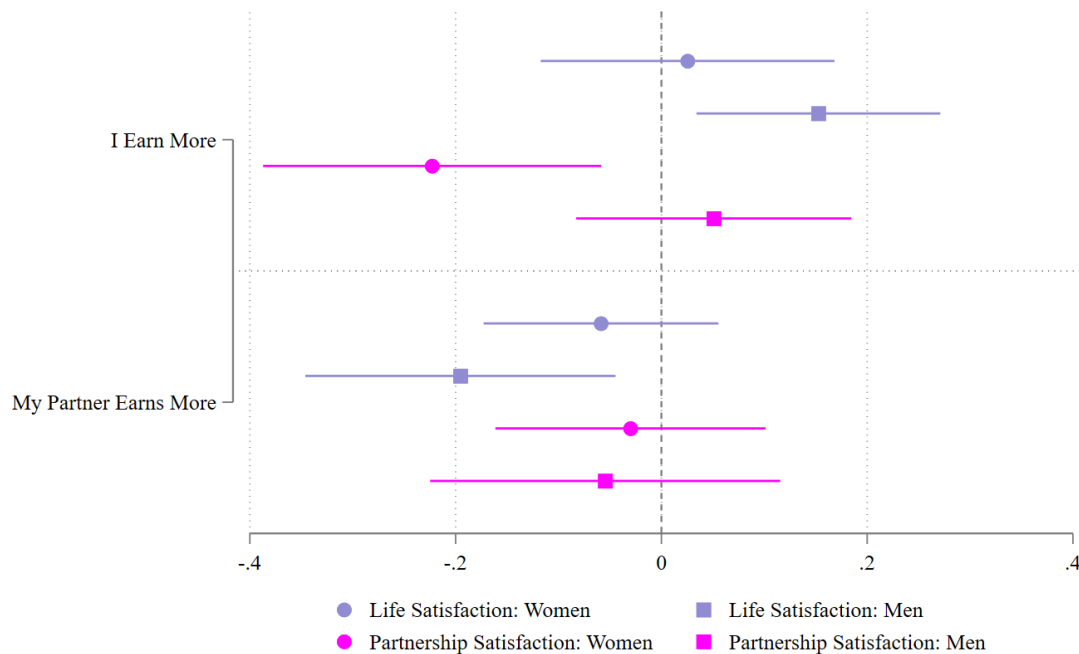
We further test whether the association between relative income and satisfaction is moderated by gender role attitudes and the division of domestic labor. Gender role attitudes are operationalized through an index constructed from statements such as “Mothers should be as responsible for income provision as fathers” and “Fathers are as well suited to look after their children as mothers.” The division of housework is based on the number of hours respondents and their partners report spending on household tasks during weekdays and weekends. For parents, we additionally include the division of childcare.

All models control for respondents’ subjective material situation (four levels), age, employment status of both partners, and educational attainment of both partners.

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results suggest that relative income within a partnership matters primarily for men’s overall life satisfaction (see Fig. 1). Men who outearn their female partners report higher life satisfaction, whereas those whose partners earn more experience lower levels of life satisfaction. For women, however, we observe significant negative effects of outearning their male counterparts on satisfaction with a partner. These effects are likely driven by women with more traditional gender role attitudes who adhere to the male breadwinner model. Alternatively, they may result from an unequal division of unpaid work between partners. When a woman earns more than her partner but also performs the majority of unpaid labor (i.e., housework and childcare), this imbalance may generate tension and lower relationship satisfaction. Interestingly, for men, relative income does not appear to influence satisfaction with a partner.

Fig 1. Effects of Relative Income Position in a Partnership on Life and Partnership Satisfaction



Notes: Models control for subjective material situation (four levels), age, employment status of both partners, and educational attainment of both partners. The reference category is “My partner and I earn about the same”.

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