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Women's divorce 'cur\$e'

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It's the money, honey.

High-flying career women who are the breadwinners in their families are nearly 40 percent more likely to get a divorce than cash-strapped ladies, a surprising 25-year study shows.

The access to dough makes it far easier for these gals to make it on their own, but bruised male egos could also play a part in the trips to splitsville, Western Washington University Sociologist Jay Teachman said yesterday.

There's plenty of examples of divorced celebrity couples with women in the driver's seat: Oscar-winner Sandra Bullock and her cheating biker ex, Jesse James, who complained her career kept her away too much; Madonna and director Guy Ritchie; and Jennifer Lopez, who first split with dancer hubby Chris Jud, and then waiter Ojani Noah.

In the study, published in the October issue of the Journal of Family Issues, researchers found the tipping point came when the wife pulled in at least 60 percent of the family's income. Couples in this position were 38 percent more likely in any given year to get divorced.

And it didn't matter how rich or poor the pair were.

Teachman said that many of the 2,500 women who participated in the study were of a generation, married between 1979 and 2002, that expected the man to be the breadwinner.

"When marriages form, there's expectations," he said. "So, if you get new information about the relationship, you're likely to think, 'This isn't what I bargained for.'"

"There's some wounded egos, too. The man is going to expect he'll make more money, and the wife is going to expect she's not."

When neither of those things happens, it strains the marriage, he said.

Successful women may resent a husband who doesn't appear to be pulling his weight -- "or suddenly decides to spend all his time making model planes," Teachman said.

A woman's higher income might also entail more hours at the office -- another stress, the researcher said.

Still, the cause-and-effect isn't always clear.

"You don't know which is leading to the divorce -- the rocky marriage or the decision to get a better job," he noted.

Teachman said he was "surprised about the strength of the effect" of a woman's earning power.

"I would like to do it again in 10 years with younger women, because it's a different generation," he said. "The group of women [in the study] are the last generation, who may not have expected to have the careers they ended up having."

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