GIRLS are generally outperforming boys in high school, and then proceeding in greater numbers to attend and graduate from college. And as women take the helm as chief executives of more major corporations, including Hewlett-Packard, I.B.M. and PepsiCo, there are hints that the glass ceiling may be at least cracking, if not breaking.

Such developments should encourage aspiring young women to believe that social norms are changing, and that barriers to success are dropping. But a new study reveals that women’s gains on the economic front may be contributing to a decline in the formation and stability of marriages.

One reason for this decline may be that women with greater earning power have greater economic security that allows them to leave bad marriages. Yet another possibility is that many men seem to be clinging to a social norm from the “Mad Men” days: that the husband should be the primary earner in a family.

There is an obvious disconnect here. Those men who spent their teenage years goofing off and their college years drinking beer shouldn’t be surprised that women who consistently received higher grades and continued further in school might now be earning more money as well. But the evidence suggests that while men tend to applaud their spouses when they help to bring home the bacon, husbands aren’t always as enthusiastic when women start
bringing home the filet mignon. And it’s especially troubling that these old-fashioned social norms about gender identity appear to be adversely affecting family formation and stability.

This is the finding of an interesting new paper by Marianne Bertrand, Emir Kamenica and Jessica Pan, three economists who are colleagues of mine at the University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business. They found that traditional views of gender identity, particularly the view that the right and proper role of the husband is to make more money than the wife, are affecting choices of whom to marry, how much to work, and even whether to stay married.

Suppose that both men and women are happier — all else being equal — the more money their spouse makes. In such a world, couples wouldn’t care whether the man or woman earns more, so the population of couples would have what we call a “normal distribution,” and would be captured in a bell-shaped curve. But that’s not what we see in the real-world data.

Instead, there is a sharp drop in the number of male-female couples at exactly the point where the woman starts to earn more than half of household income.

This finding supports earlier research from speed-dating sessions, which found that while women prefer men to be intelligent and ambitious, men have these preferences for women only to the point where women threaten to earn more than they do. These preferences appear to be reflected in whom people choose to marry and in how much women choose to work outside the home.

Women’s earnings have been rising relative to men’s over the past 40 years — though, on average, women’s pay still lags behind. One sign of change is seen in a recent study from Pew Research, which finds that mothers are providing more than half the income in 15 percent of married households with children at home, up from 3.5 percent in 1960. Given such trends, it’s logical that problems would arise if men kept their desire to be the primary breadwinners.

This may be one of many reasons that the share of young adults in marriages decreased 30 to 50 percent across various racial and ethnic groups from 1970 to 2008. Clearly, a choice to marry later in life explains part of this decline, but Ms. Bertrand and her co-authors estimate that the trend in the percentage of women making more than men explains almost one-fourth of the marriage rate’s decline in the 40 years ended in 2010.
What happens when a man marries a woman who has the education and skills to earn more than him? The couple can avoid violating the “man earns more” social norm if the woman works part time or leaves the labor force altogether. The authors found evidence of both choices. But what if the woman stays in the labor force and does earn more than her spouse? How does this affect the marriage? The findings here are striking. In such couples, surveys show, both wife and husband generally report being less happy about the marriage.

Given these findings, it isn’t surprising that when a wife earns more than her husband, the risk of divorce rises, too. To study this, the authors used a survey conducted in two waves, 1987-88 and 1992-93. (There were no more recent data available for this particular test.) Then they investigated the likelihood of a divorce in the five-year interval. For this sample, some 12 percent of all couples were divorced during this period — a sobering fact about the stability of marriages in general. But the divorce rate rose by half, to about 18 percent, for couples in which the wife earned more than the husband.

How to explain the jump? Some people might think that a wife who earns more will do fewer household chores than her tradition-bound mate expects. Regardless of your opinion about men who harbor such feelings, the facts rule out that explanation: women who earn more than their husbands actually do a greater share of household chores, compared with couples in which the wife works but earns less.

The paper’s findings support the anecdotal complaints of many highly educated, high-earning women who say they can’t find suitable husbands. And as women continue to outperform men in school, these problems are likely to grow. Perhaps over time, men will catch on to this new world and accept the fact that hard-working girls may well turn into highly paid women.

Until that realization sinks in, problems arising from tradition-bound notions of gender identity will keep taking a toll on our economy and our families. Employers, however, may have opportunities to help.

For a variety of reasons, including the stubbornly persistent norm that women assume more than half the responsibility for raising children, many highly educated women would like to work part-time at a level commensurate with their skills. Businesses, however, have been slow to adapt, even as technology makes it much easier to do some or all of one’s work from home. I believe that there are substantial economic opportunities for companies that find ways to hire the millions of talented but underemployed mothers in our economy.
But now back to the notion of couples’ contentment: Is there any way to tell whether it’s the wife or the husband who becomes unhappy when the wife earns more? Does he think that she is threatening his manliness, or does she think that he’s a slacker?

That may be impossible to answer, partly because of something I learned long ago from Alvin E. Roth, a Nobel laureate in economics last year. I call it Roth’s rule: In equilibrium, it’s impossible for you to be happier than your spouse.

If you and your spouse both understand that rule, you’re both likely to be happier — regardless of how much money either of you make.

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