

# Media Shapes Female Images

by Li Xing

A survey that looks into “the relationship between the income difference of spouses and marital quality” by two professors of psychology from Beijing Normal University has been spotlighted by newspaper editors recently.

“The latest research has found that the 2-to-1 income ratio between husbands and wives ensures the most stable marriage,” said the headline of *Beijing Morning News*.

A few other newspapers that covered the same survey also emphasised that spouses feel most satisfied in a marriage when the husband earns two times the salary of the wife.

But the newspaper reports of the survey appear flawed and disturbing for two main reasons.

Firstly, they mislead the general public by reducing a whole gamut of factors determining marital quality to one single variable: income or income disparities between husbands and wives.

Moreover, they continue to propagate the traditional stereotypes of male superiority and women’s dependence on men in spite of the fact that Chinese of both sexes have pushed for gender equality for more than a century.

What is marital quality and how does it determine a stable marriage?

Despite the subjective nature of

the question, many people—sociologists and psychologists in particular—have tried to find a suitable definition without success. There are just too many factors.

A search on the Internet for the phrase “quality marriage” with the Google search engine in English yields as many as 277 Webpages that contain the phrase. The string “quality and stability of marriage” yields 36 results.

Dr. Neil Chadwick from the United States offers his own advice on the Web on what he calls a “total quality marriage.” For him, the essential components are “companionship, communication, commitment, combat and compassion.”

In their research, the two professors from Beijing Normal University cited more than a dozen factors that scholars in the West have found to affect marriage. These include families’ life cycles, marriage, age, children, women’s employment, spouses’ social roles, religion, personal character, disparities in social status, and division of household chores.

Even a spouse’s humour that enlivens the family atmosphere, for in-

stance, is invaluable to a marriage.

Interestingly, income or money is mentioned sparingly on those Websites.

Jan D. Andersen from California State University did look into the “financial problems as predictors of divorce,” but found that money issues continue to be “the weak predictors of subsequent divorce.”

The media’s highlight of the marriage stability based on the 2-to-1 income disparity between husband and wife bears the message that women’s economic independence shouldn’t go too far beyond, Chen Benjian, a columnist with the *China Women’s News*, comments.

“The superiority of men over women exists in the society today, but the reality shouldn’t justify the notion that this would result in harmony between men and women,” she said.

It is common for researchers to examine only one single aspect of things or events, such as marriage. But news media, which are expected to provide the public with full information, should not err by ignoring the many factors that affect complex matters such as marriage.

One newspaper even quoted a woman railway worker as saying her husband’s income superiority gives

him “the right feeling.” “If I earned more than my husband, I would probably hurt his ego,” the woman said.

Showing ignorance is one thing, but advertising and enhancing the stereotypical social order is disturbing. For more than a century, many women and men have been working together to achieve gender equality to push for further social, political and economic development.

The media have a responsibility to help change traditional stereotypes, advocate gender equality and promote progress. “Media have the power to set the agenda,” writes Maria Victoria Cabrera-Balleza, Programme Manager of Media, Information and Communication Services of Isis International-Manila. “People tend to think that what they see in print and what gets to be broadcast are the more significant opinions of the day. Media practitioners should take advantage of this agenda-setting power (or potential) to give space to challenge the status quo.”

In fact, the media worldwide have been criticised time and again. A number of United Nations documents, for instance, reproach media for their portrayal of women from the perspective of traditional male-chauvinist culture.

Feng Yuan, one of the founding members of the national media watch network, points out that the media, in their search for things “newsy,” involuntarily become the spokespersons of old and outdated values.

The media reports of this current survey attempt to “put a ‘status quo’ spin on their interpretation of the statistics,” said Sylvia Spring, a TV producer from Canada.

Even the researchers concede in their study that their findings indicate that society, as well as many women themselves, is not ready to challenge the privileged status of men.

In fact, the 2-to-1 income disparity, regarded as the “balance point” that the researchers refer to in their research, “is evidence of an imbalance between the roles of women and men and their contributions to society,” Cabrera-Balleza points out.

“Couples who are changing the status quo will experience some stresses on their traditional roles and expectations,” said Spring. “That’s what comes with the struggle for equity in patriarchal societies.”

It is understandable that some people do not want to rock the boat by challenging the accepted values. But the media and journalists are duty-bound to promote social change and equality.

The media were asked by the Platform of Action passed during the UN Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 to provide portrayals of women who “exist as independent individuals and with independent values, rather than dependents of men.” They should trumpet those women who “should and actually develop into diversified

social roles,” and who are becoming “locomotives, creators and important operators of the process of advancement.”

“For the journalist to not see that or comment on it I think is a shame,” Spring said.

Source: *China Daily*, 18 July 2002

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ensure they comply with health standards and prevent criminals posing as teachers from conning the public.

It also demanded that existing schools suspend their activities and be subjected to health inspection before being granted licences to operate again.

Nurses, social workers and psychologists must be granted free access in these schools to assist in preventing more deaths. “To say nurses must not be allowed in these schools because they are predominantly women and that they have never undergone the initiation process is utter hogwash, which we reject with the contempt it deserves,” the statement said.

In some provinces and communities, the local government has trained legitimate traditional leaders how to perform circumcisions. As a result, the number of deaths and botched circumcisions—which leave young men scarred for life—has dropped.

Source: Inter Press Service, <http://www.ipsnews.net>, 4 July 2002