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Latest Dating Headache: Now Women Have to Worry About Gold Diggers, Too

By Sue Shellenbarger

IT WASN'T UNTIL her engagement party that Genine Drozd realized her fiance was a little too interested in her paycheck.

"I'm going to quit my job next year and just hang out," Ms. Drozd says she overheard her fiance, then 24, an accountant, boasting to friends. Ms. Drozd, who at 21 already had a successful career as a public-relations manager, says the notion nauseated her. "At that exact moment I felt like I was going to throw up. I looked at him and thought, 'Who are you?'" She soon broke off the engagement.

Now that women are snaring a majority of both college degrees and professional jobs, they're getting a taste of something else that used to be a male-only province: gold-digging dates. Many women are surprised to find their earning power has become a magnet for the opposite sex. And based on my e-mails some high-earning women worry that their slacker dates will always be just that: slackers who want to be supported. It's a growing concern for people in their 20s and 30s, not just because young women are earning more, but because young men feel less compelled to fit the mold of the traditional solo breadwinner.

Research by Megan Sweeney, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, shows a trend toward higher-earning women marrying at higher rates. Among white women, a \$10,000-a-year increase in income predicted a 6.8% increase in the likelihood that a woman will marry in a given year. Among black women posting a \$10,000-a-year income gain, the increase in the likelihood of marriage was 8.2%. This is a change from the past, when women's earnings affected their chances of wedlock far less, Dr. Sweeney found.

Match.com, a dating Web site with 15 million users, is seeing a rise in men who specify that they want to date only women above a certain income level. In 2004, more than half, or 51%, of men specified a minimum income for dates, up from 37% in 2001, a spokeswoman says.

More men are going a step further, insisting on women who make more than they do. More than one-third, or 35%, of male users of True.com, a dating Web site with 2.7 million users, are seeking females with higher incomes, says Herb Vest, True.com's CEO. Only 20% of male True.com users want a woman who makes less.

Some high-earning women fear attracting a live-in couch potato. Michelle Demus, 31, an account manager for a fashion wholesaler, won't discuss her income. But she is doing well enough to rent an apartment in a fashionable Manhattan high-rise. On dates, she says, "I've had the Sugar Momma conversation" with guys who fantasize aloud about her

supporting them. "Some guys say . . . `These ladies have it right'" in staying home, says Ms. Demus.

Her reaction? "It's not a positive one," she says. "I think, `Ah. You're already looking to stop working?'" She breaks off such encounters quickly. Ms. Demus doesn't rule out guys who make less, but they must enjoy their work. "For me the question is, are we intellectually compatible? Are you passionate about what you do?"

The pattern isn't limited to young singles. In a recent e-mail, a 41-year-old divorced mother frets that her fiance, who lives with her, feels no obligation to help pay the bills and seems offended when she asks, saying his income is needed for his real-estate investment business. "He's not supporting his fair share of the household budget and I worry about future entanglements," she writes.

For some women, the answer is to keep their incomes to themselves. Nicole Harris, 32, a partner in a Cincinnati real-estate firm, once dated a mortgage broker who knew her substantial income and assets and must have boasted about it to friends. "When we broke up, all of his friends were shocked" that he let her slip away, because of her money, Ms. Harris says. Now, she is more private about money. Her current fiance, owner of two small businesses, doesn't know what she makes. She doesn't know his income either. They each know the other works hard, and that's enough for now, she says.

Some women are wary of being trapped in the breadwinner role themselves. Some want the companionship of men who are as ambitious as they are. Others want the freedom to stay home with their children some day.

Men have their own conflicts over the issue. Not all men who seek high-earning dates want to be supported. David Morin is looking for relief from the pressure of the solo-breadwinner role. His wife stayed home with their two kids during their seven-year marriage, which ended in divorce. Working long hours then as a financial manager, he says he was so stressed that he found it hard to relax with his wife. "My emotions were on hold for a long time," leading to blow-ups, says Mr. Morin, 29, a Hampton, Va., investor and personal trainer. He has since sought out high-earning women through a dating site, who are "more independent and more motivated than most of the guys I know."

Other men pursue high-earning women because they are drawn to the personal attributes of go-getters. Success "comes with stories and experiences about how she grew her own business, took a financial risk, got herself through school," says Patrick Shaughnessy, 39, Chicago, a product-support manager who is successful in his own right, but enjoys dating high achievers. "This is the kind of woman I want to be associated with. At the end of the day, isn't it all about a laugh and a story? A shared experience?"