Do men want to earn more than their wives?
Inferring preferences from marriage market outcomes

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Abstract: Although there is substantial overlap in the earnings distributions of men and women in the United States, only a small proportion of women earn more than their husbands. This has been interpreted by some researchers (e.g., Bertrand, Kamenica, and Pan, in a forthcoming paper in Quarterly Journal of Economics) as evidence that there is a strong social norm that husbands should earn more than their wives. This paper argues that it is difficult to infer preferences about differences in spousal traits by observing the equilibrium sorting in the marriage market. The paper shows that when men have higher earnings than women on average, any set of preferences that generates positive assortative mating with respect to income will tend to generate marriage market equilibria in which wives seldom earn more than husbands. Even when there is a strong preference by both husbands and wives for equality in spousal incomes, differences in the distributions of men's and women's incomes will tend to generate sortings in which it is rare for wives to earn more than their husbands. The paper shows that the actual distribution of husband-wife income differences in U.S. census data can be generated using a wide range of preferences, including many that do not imply a that husbands want to earn more than their wives.