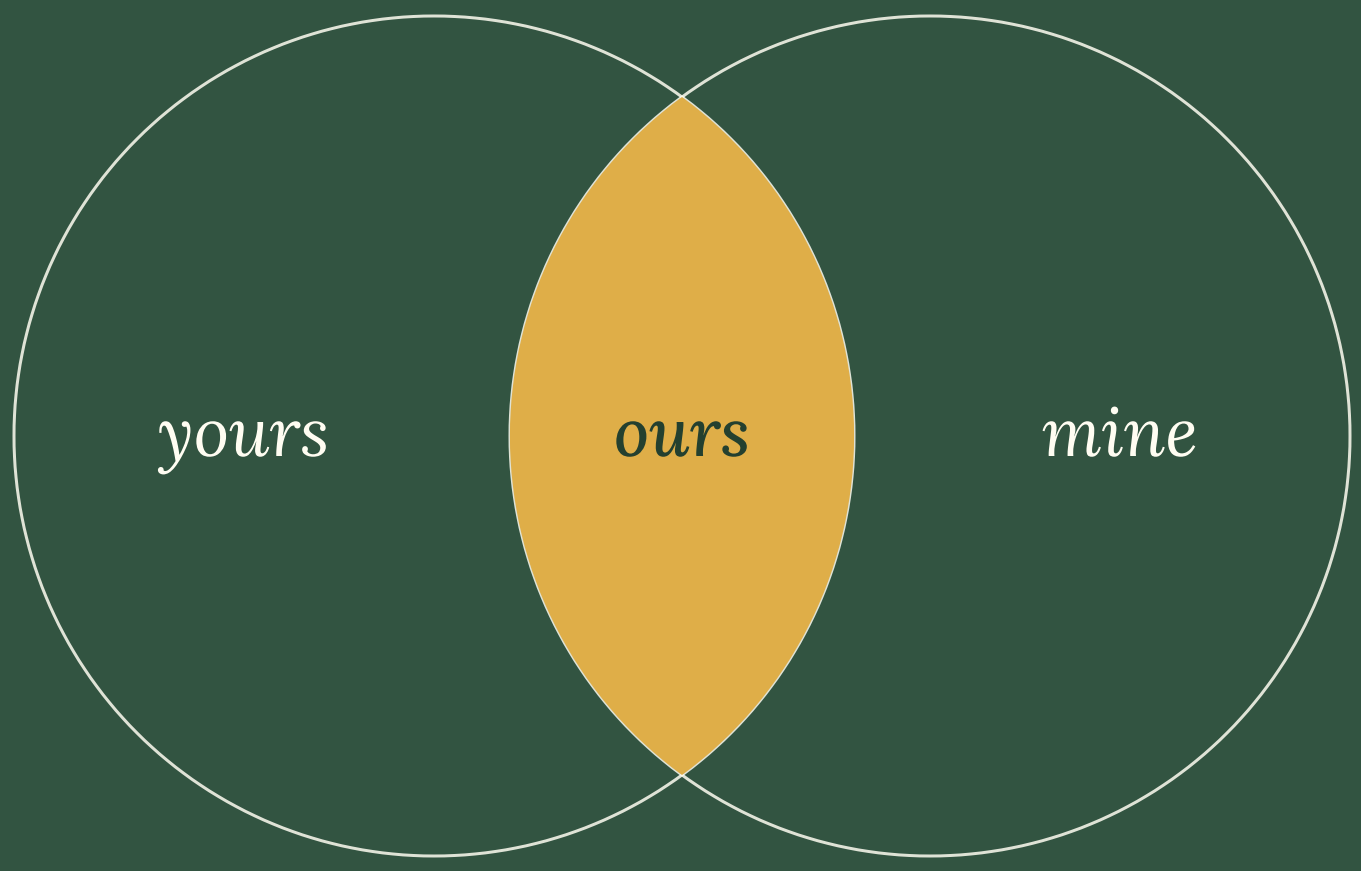
Elfina Health

A RESEARCH REPORT · OCTOBER 2026

The Psychology of Money *in Relationships*

How couples in India negotiate power, autonomy and family through the way they handle money.



INTRODUCTION

Money is how couples negotiate power

Every relationship runs a small economy. Who earns, who decides, who gets consulted and who gets supported are questions of power long before they are questions of arithmetic.

In India, that economy rarely stops at two people. Parents, siblings and children sit inside the budget, and long-held ideas about who should provide are being renegotiated in real time, often without anyone saying so out loud.

This report examines how people in relationships think about that economy: what money stands for, where it causes friction, and what partners expect of one another.

> *Conflicts about money in a marriage aren't really about money.*
>
> The Gottman Institute, *5 Rules for Having a Constructive Conflict Conversation About Money* (2016)

We've made an effort to find what these conflicts might *really* be about.

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A NOTE FROM OUR CLINICAL ADVISOR



Money is never just a number

Richi Parasrampuria · Clinical Advisor, Elfina Health

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M.Phil. Clinical Psychology · MA Applied Psychology · Diploma in Clinical Hypnosis

Money is not just about a number on a piece of paper. It is about safety, freedom, power, worth, belonging, status, control and love. These are core human needs that get linked to money in our heads, often without us realising it. For each of us, money comes to mean something different.

Our relationship with money starts taking shape while growing up. It is influenced by how much money our family has, how our parents behave around it, what they say about it, and what money allows or prevents us from doing. These beliefs get passed down across generations, sometimes changing in form but carrying the same underlying fears. A parent's restraint around spending may come from growing up with very little. Their child may grow up with financial security and still feel that same sense of restriction. Over time, these beliefs become so familiar that we stop questioning them. We simply see them as the "right way" to spend, save or earn.

This plays out when couples fight about money. One partner may see saving as essential to feeling safe, while the other may see spending as a way to enjoy life and feel free. The conversation seems to be about a purchase or a financial decision on the surface, but underneath it are different histories, beliefs and emotional needs. For one person, spending may bring up the fear of losing security. For the other, being told to save may bring up a familiar feeling of restriction or not being allowed to have what they want.

When we cannot see these deeper meanings, we believe that our way of relating to money is the right one. We see our partner as irresponsible, controlling or unreasonable, without really understanding what is driving them. And the more we try to convince each other, the more stuck we become. What could be a conversation about our needs and fears turns into a fight about who is right.

Perhaps understanding our relationship with money means looking beyond the numbers to the experiences and beliefs that shape it.

> *Ask yourself, what if understanding each other's relationship with money matters as much as deciding what to do with it?*

ABOUT ELFINA HEALTH

Elfina Health is a mental health platform that connects people in India with the therapist best suited to the situation they are navigating. Every match begins with a conversation, so care is shaped around the person rather than chosen from a directory. Our network includes couples therapists who work with the very questions this report explores: money, family, fairness and power.

AT A GLANCE

Six findings that complicate the familiar story we know

53%

of people say the hardest money fight is a big decision made without them.

72%

define compatibility as thinking alike about independence, not earning alike.

79%

of women feel pressure to keep earning more, more than men do.

2×

as many men as women feel at ease talking about money.

1 in 3

expect a partner to share everything about money, but struggle to talk about it themselves.

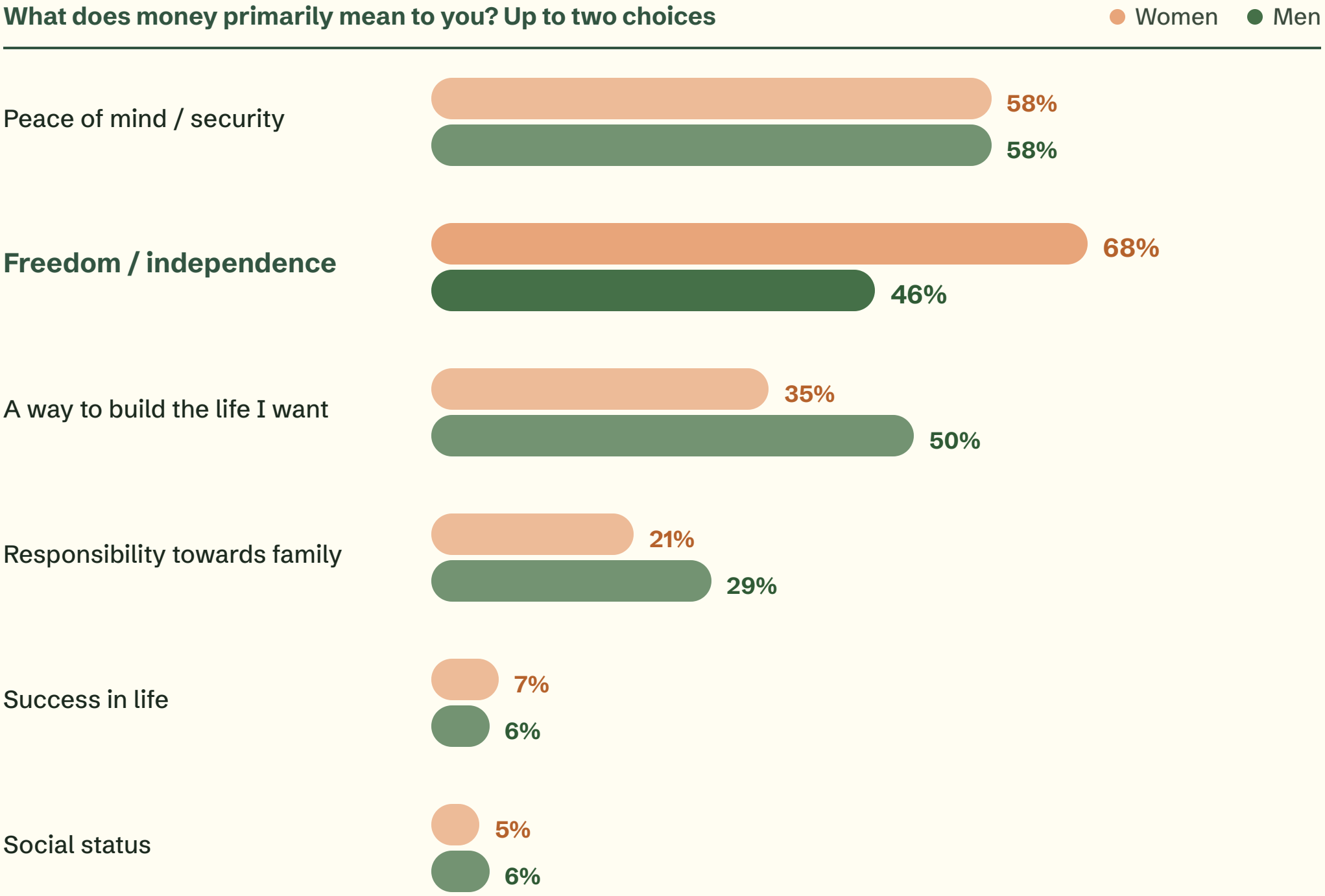
28%

of higher earners want fully pooled money, more than twice the share of lower earners.

Money buys freedom, not status

When asked what money means to them, people split evenly between security and freedom. Status and success, the traditional markers of wealth, were chosen by barely one in twenty.

The sharper divide is by gender. More than **2 in 3 women choose freedom**, against **fewer than half of men.** For women, **money first signals autonomy**: in a relationship, earning power is also bargaining power.



5%

of people say money means social status.

68%

of women see money as freedom, far more than men.

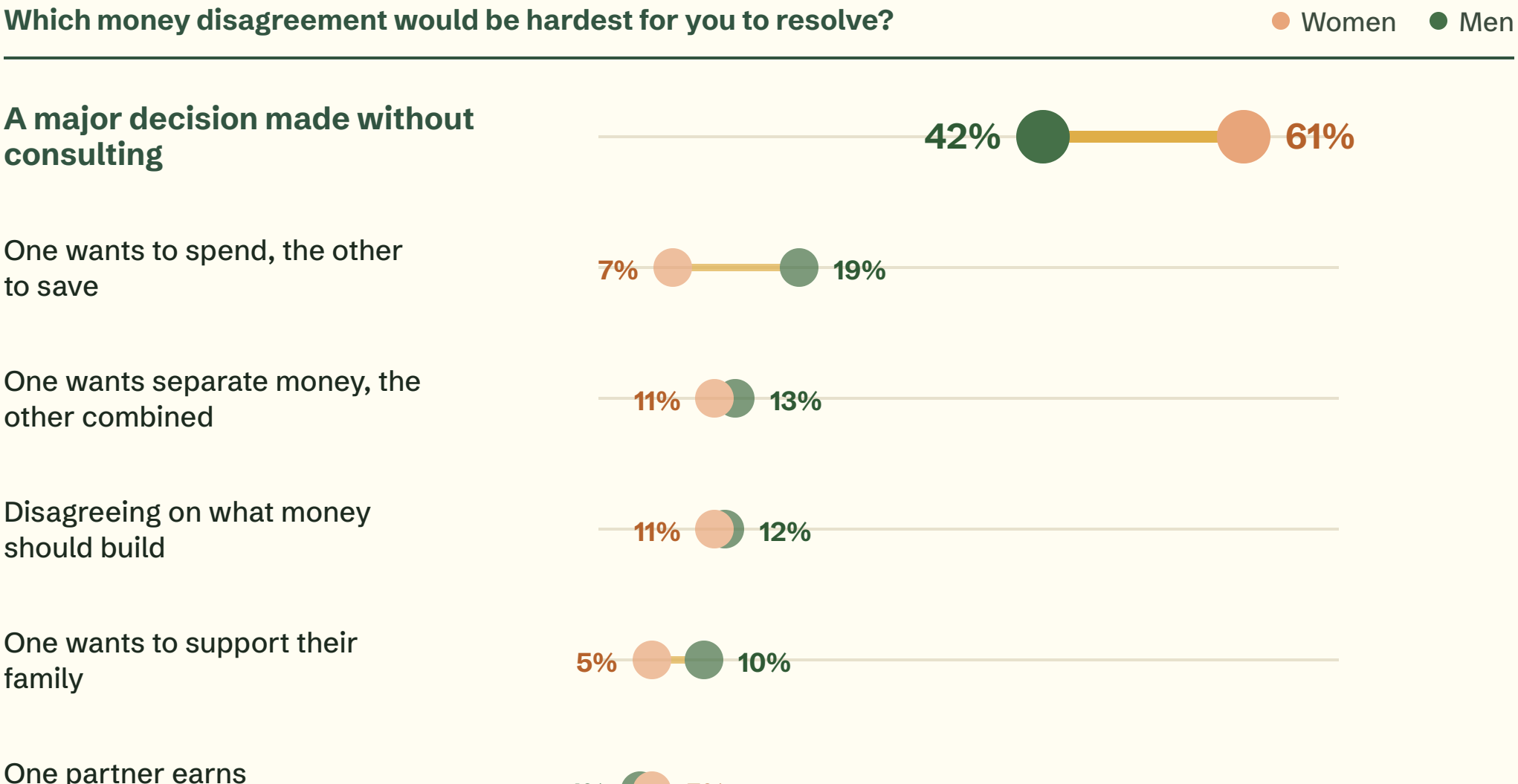
Base: 57 women and 52 men. Percentages add up to more than 100% because people chose up to two options.

The hardest fight isn't about money. It's about being asked.

More than half of respondents name one conflict above all others: a partner making a major financial decision without consulting them. That is ten times the share who point to an earnings gap, the conflict most people assume drives couples apart.

Gottman's research identifies a willingness to accept a partner's influence as a hallmark of stable couples. Our respondents endorse that idea more readily than they practise it: of those who name this as their hardest fight, **fewer than half consistently chose the joint option themselves when we put them in shared-money dilemmas.**

Which money disagreement would be hardest for you to resolve?



10×

as many people fear being left out of a decision as fear an earnings gap.

45%

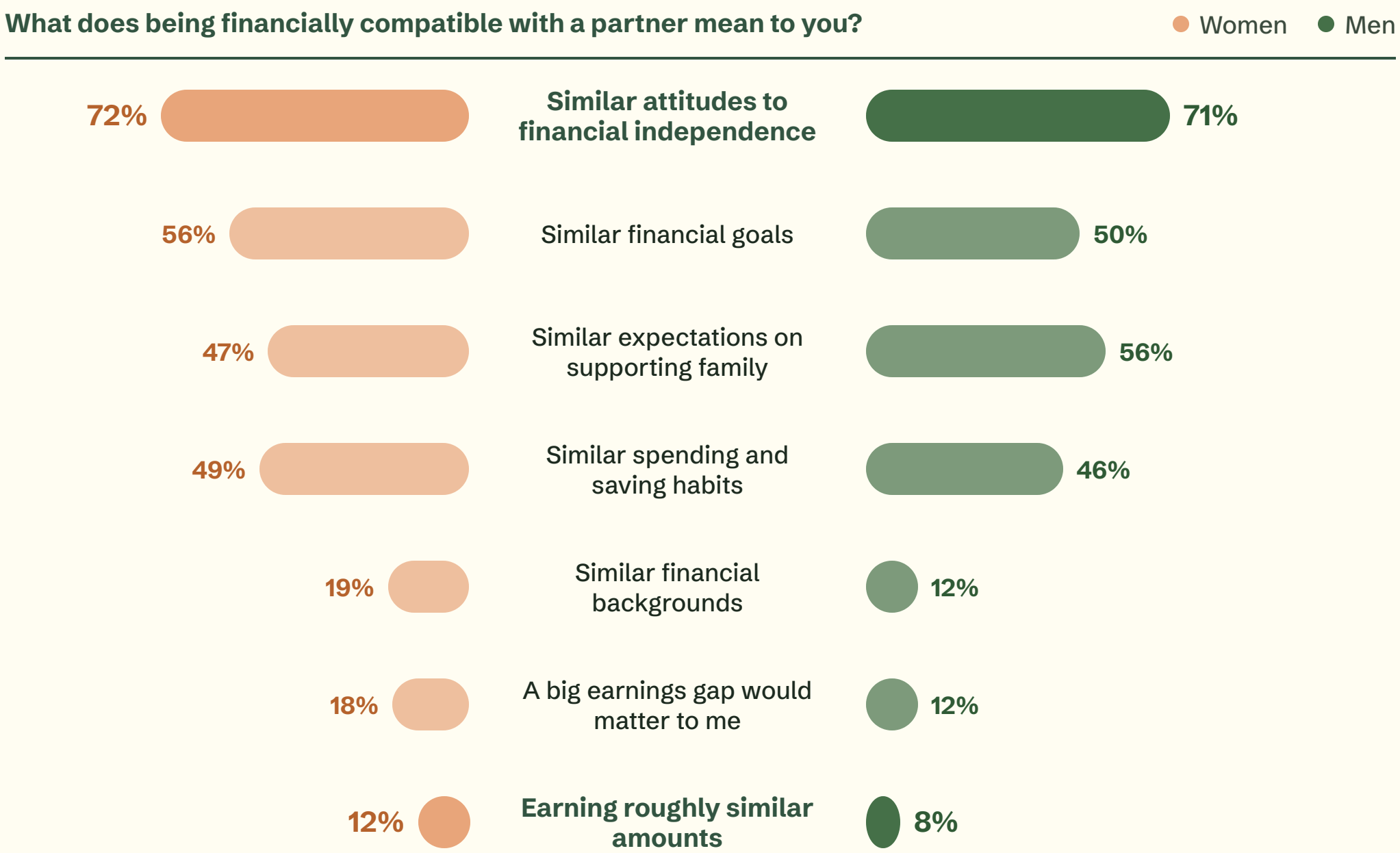
of those who fear being left out consistently include their own partner.

Base: 57 women and 52 men, one choice each. “Consistently” = chose the joint option in at least three of four dilemmas: a holiday budget, a parent's medical bill, a family loan and a partner objecting to family spending.

Couples want to think alike about money, not earn alike

Shared attitudes to financial independence top the list for women and men alike. Matching incomes comes last for both, chosen by about one in ten.

The more revealing finding sits underneath. **6 in 10 women say a partner's earnings matter when they judge compatibility**, yet only 12% want incomes to match. **A partner's income appears to be read as a signal of security and ambition, not as a target for parity.**



60%

of women say a partner's earnings shape how they judge compatibility.

12%

of women want their incomes to match.

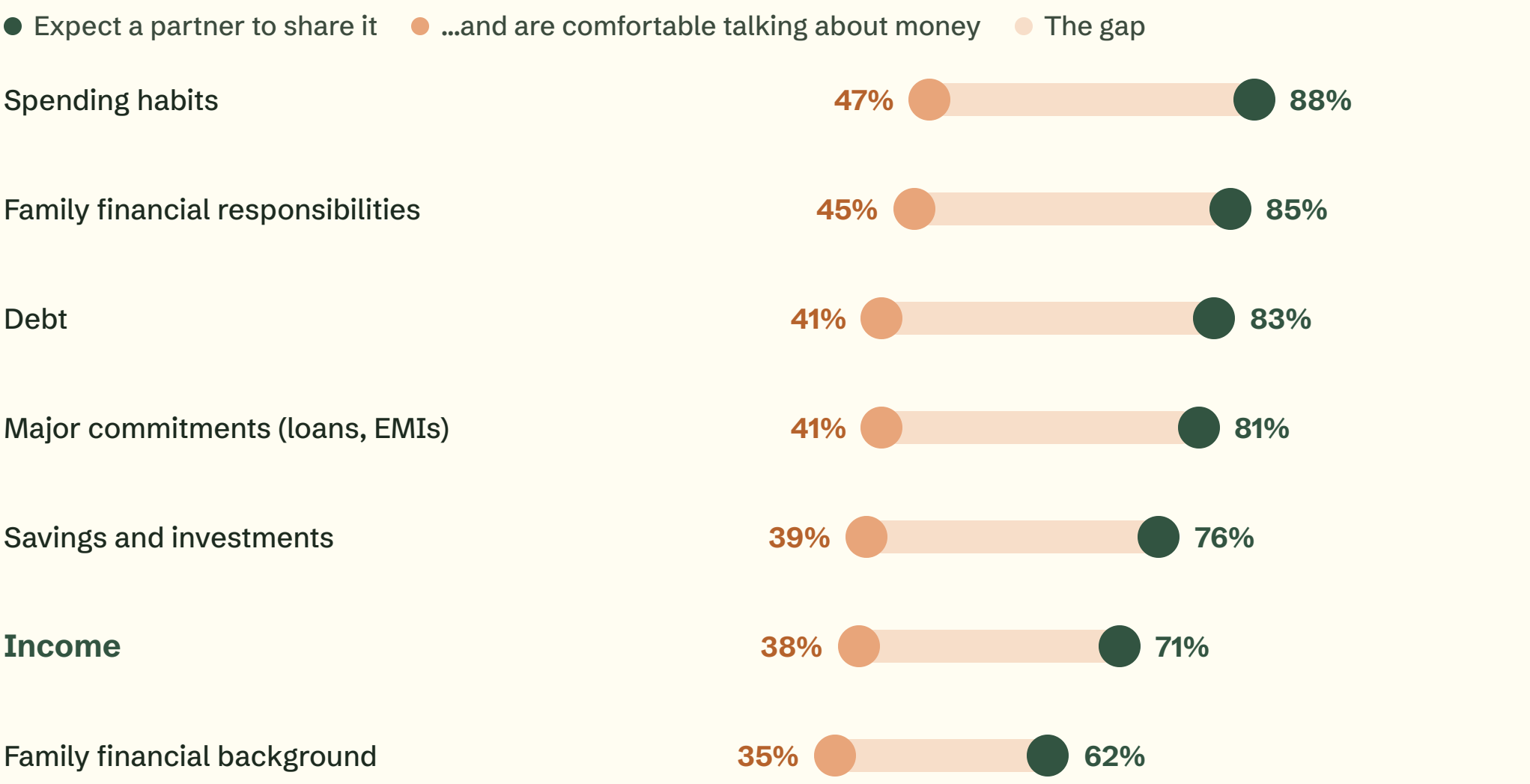
Base: 57 women and 52 men; several choices allowed. “Partner's earnings matter” = agree or strongly agree, asked in the women's section of the survey.

We expect full disclosure. We struggle to say it out loud.

Most people expect a long-term partner to share their spending habits, debts and family obligations. Income ranks surprisingly low on that list: how a partner handles money matters more than how much they make.

Yet only about half of those who expect openness are comfortable talking about money themselves. 1 in 3 respondents sits in this gap, and **women are twice as likely as men to be there**. The gap persists in marriage, so this is not a problem that time together resolves.

What should long-term partners know about each other's finances?



42%

of women expect full disclosure but find money hard to talk about, twice the share of men.

31%

of married women talk about money with ease, less than half the share of married men.

Base: all respondents; several choices allowed. “Full disclosure” = expects at least five of the seven items. Married base: 35 women, 33 men.

INTERVAL

Which money character are you?

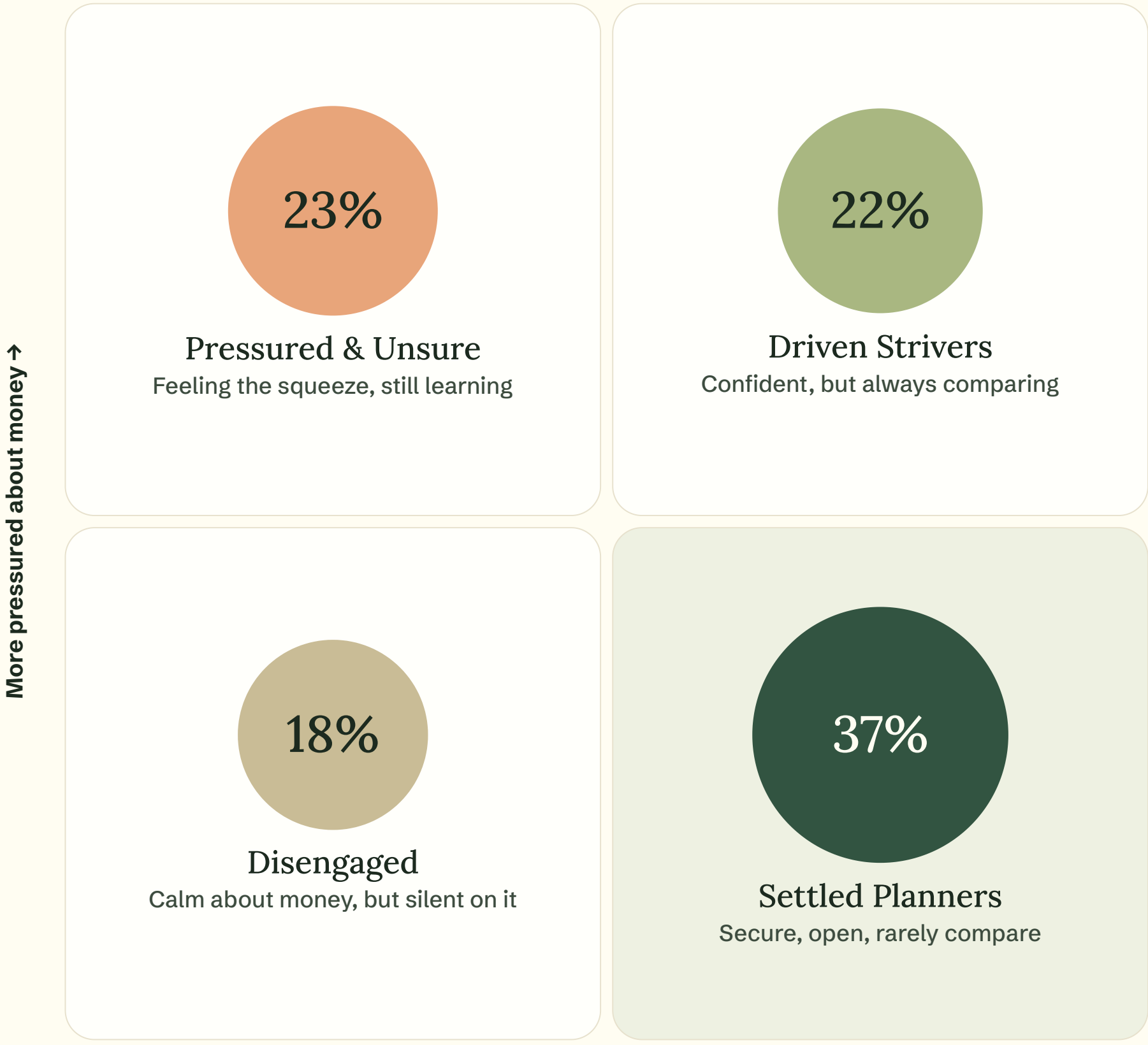
Agree with 1 and 2? You sit to the right. Agree with 3 and 4? You sit higher up. Find your corner.

1 I feel financially secure

2 I talk about money with ease

3 I compare my finances with others

4 I feel pressure to earn more



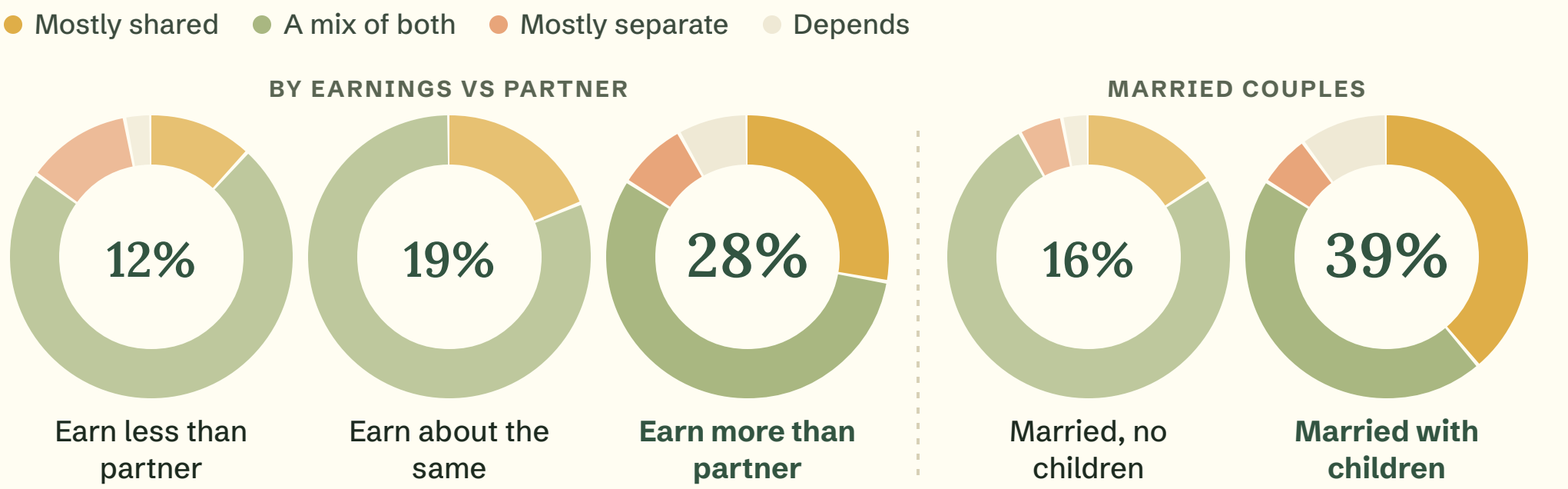
Share of respondents in each group. Groups are based on combined confidence and pressure scores.

Men and higher earners lean towards ‘ours’. Women and lower earners keep a door open.

Most couples settle on a mix of shared and separate money. The revealing part is who wants to go further. **People who out-earn their partner are more than twice as likely as those who earn less to want fully pooled finances, and men are twice as likely as women to want the same.**

For example, if handed an unexpected ₹10 lakh, **nearly 3 in 4 married men would agree a shared priority before anyone spends, against 6 in 10 married women, and the only people who would keep their share separate are women.** Pooling appeals to whoever brings more money in; a pot of one's own appeals to whoever brings in less.

Which arrangement feels most comfortable? Centre figure = mostly shared



25%

of men want mostly shared finances, twice the share of women.

73%

of married men would agree a shared priority before spending a ₹10 lakh windfall.

39%

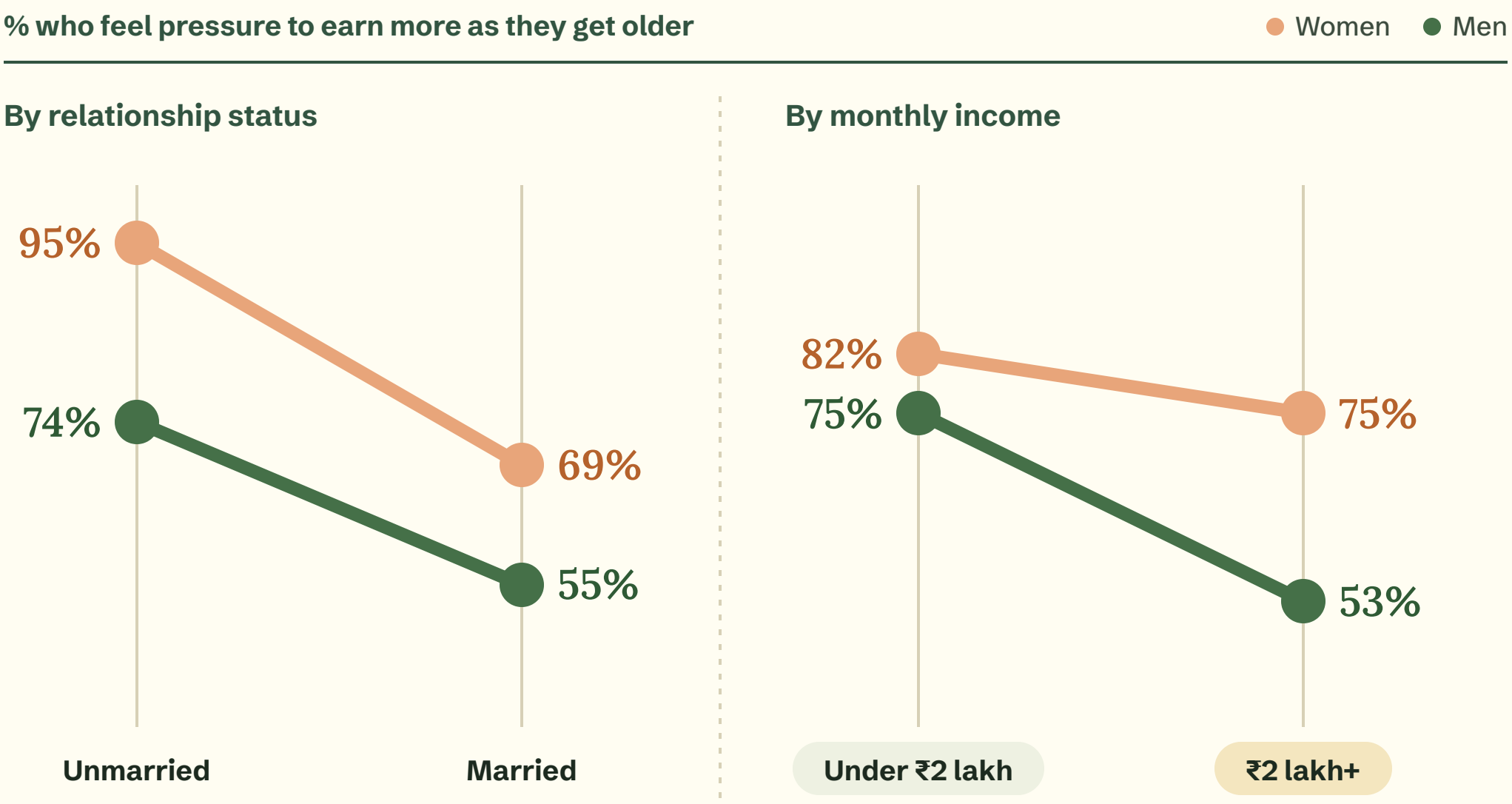
of married parents want mostly shared finances, more than twice the share of couples without children.

Bases: earn less 33, about the same 16, earn more 39, married without children 37, married with children 31; 57 women, 52 men; windfall asked of 35 married women and 33 married men.

A married woman feels the pressure to earn as keenly as a single man

Nearly **2 in 3 men say earning enough to provide is part of being a successful man. Yet the pressure to keep earning more falls harder on women**, and it does not ease the way the provider story predicts.

Marriage lowers the pressure for everyone, but women start higher and stay higher: a married woman feels it about as much as an unmarried man. Higher income doesn't close the gap either. **Among people earning ₹2 lakh or more a month, 3 in 4 women feel pressure, against roughly half of men. And 4 in 5 of the study's most anxious money personality, the Pressured & Unsure, are women.**



63%

of men tie providing to success, yet few would struggle to earn less than their partner.

None

of the men who actually earn less than their partner said it was hard.

Agree = 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale. Bases: unmarried women 22, married women 35, unmarried men 19, married men 33; under ₹2 lakh: 33 women, 20 men; ₹2 lakh+: 24 women, 32 men. Gender gaps are directional at these sizes. “Earn less” asked of 39 partnered men.

When family spending is questioned, men justify. Women inquire.

When a partner objects to spending on family, **men and women reach for different tools: twice as many men argue the case for their obligation, while women more often begin by asking what concerns their partner.**

Women are also more likely to settle the matter quietly with their own money. Those who support parents absorb the cost personally: they are twice as likely to pay a parent's medical bill from their own savings to keep a shared goal intact.

YOUR PARTNER SAYS

"I don't think we should spend this on your family."

This is how people said they'd reply...



46%

of people feel financially responsible for their parents.

31%

of those who support parents would pay a parent's medical bill from their own savings.

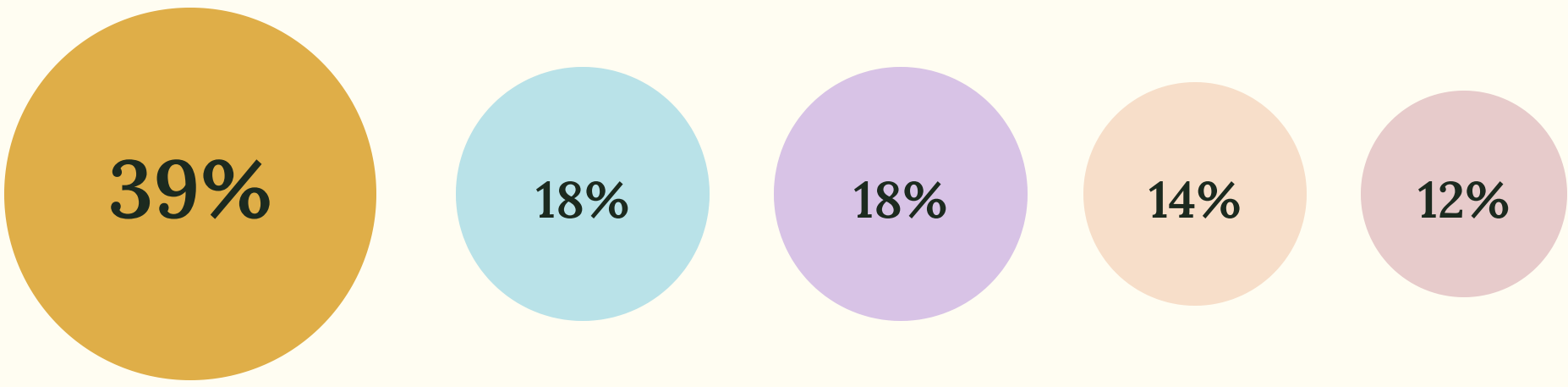
Base: 57 women and 52 men, one choice each. Medical-bill dilemma: all respondents.

Women want authority over money, yet many learned about it from their partner

9 in 10 women say financial independence is part of who they are. The largest group chose having money they can make decisions about on their own, well ahead of simply being able to support themselves. **Independence, for women, is about authority over money rather than income alone.**

That ambition meets a striking imbalance in how women learned about money. **Women are four times as likely as men to name a partner as one of their main money teachers, rising to one in four married women, and a third of women say they haven't figured money out yet.** Many women are seeking authority over money in a relationship where their partner often holds the expertise.

Women: what feels most important about financial independence in a relationship?



23%

of women learned about money mainly from a partner, four times the share of men.

1 in 3

women say they haven't figured money out yet.

89%

of women say financial independence is part of who they are.

Base: 57 women and 52 men; married women 35. Learning sources: up to two choices. “Being able to support myself” combines two near-identical wordings used for partnered and single women.

FROM THE THERAPY ROOM

Money is rarely just about money

We asked couples therapists who work with Elfina what these findings look like from inside the session.

> *Financial independence answers, 'Can I take care of myself?' It doesn't answer, 'Can I feel emotionally safe, valued and partnered here?'*

An argument may look like it's about ₹10,000. Underneath, it is often about trust, autonomy, and whether each partner feels the other is on their side.

Meenakshi Moorjani · Couples Therapist

> *"Income differences can easily become power differences: through whose career gets prioritised, whose spending is questioned, or who gets the final say."*

In India, couples also bring inherited conditioning about saving, supporting parents, gender roles and duty into marriage.

Neha Bhusri
Trauma-informed Psychotherapist & Couples Therapist

> *"It is remarkably common for a woman to have no visibility into her husband's earnings, while her own income is actively monitored."*

A son's duty to his parents is non-negotiable; a daughter's wish to support hers is often seen as a diversion.

Deepika Goel
Couples Therapist

> *"When one partner has to keep asking permission to spend, even a loving marriage can quietly shift into a parent–child dynamic."*

Money acts as a mirror for how safe, equal and seen people feel.

Ashmita Mohan
Couples Therapist

> *"For many couples, money isn't at the forefront. It surfaces from the background only when we dive deeper."*

What carries a couple through is trust, transparency and tolerance for each other's perspectives.

Sindhiya Vaithiyanathan
Couples Therapist

IN CONCLUSION

Couples don't really fight about money. *They fight about respect.*

In this report, the money itself was rarely the problem. What hurt most was being left out of big decisions. Women wanted a real say over money, not just an income of their own. Most people expected a partner to be completely open about money, yet found it hard to talk about money themselves. And for many couples, the budget also has to make room for parents and siblings. Each of these comes down to respect: who gets consulted, who gets trusted, and whose needs count.

WHERE COUPLES THERAPY COMES IN

These conversations stall because they are never only about rupees. Without a neutral space, they turn into verdicts on love, loyalty and worth, and the same argument repeats. Couples therapy gives both partners that space to understand what money means to each of you and make the unspoken rules visible. It helps you:

01

Agree how decisions get made so no one is left out of the big ones.

02

Talk about money without it becoming a verdict on love, worth or competence.

03

Negotiate family obligations as a team instead of as rival loyalties.

START WITH ELFINA

Your next money conversation doesn't have to be a fight.

Give yourselves a chance to talk. We'll match you with a couples therapist trained for exactly these conversations.

Book couples therapy →

Talk to us first

APPENDIX

About this study

GENDER
57 women, 52 men, 1 preferred not to say

AGE
18–30: 40 · 31–39: 54 · 40+: 16

RELATIONSHIP
Married 68 · dating, committed or engaged 24 · single or separated 18

MONTHLY INCOME
Under ₹1 lakh 28 · ₹1–1.99 lakh 26 · ₹2–4.99 lakh 39 · ₹5 lakh+ 17

CHILDREN
34 parents · 76 without children

WORK
81 full-time · 15 self-employed · 14 other

Method

An online survey of 110 adults in India, fielded via Tally in September and October 2026. The sample is self-selected and unweighted, and skews urban, salaried, married and aged 25–39. Figures describe respondents, not the national population.

Routing

Most questions went to everyone. Men and women answered separate sets of statements on providing and independence. Respondents without a partner answered partner scenarios hypothetically.

Reporting

Percentages are shares of those who answered each question. Groups of fewer than 20 are reported as counts. Gender differences of roughly 15 points or more are statistically significant at this sample size; smaller differences are described as directional.

External Sources

The Gottman Institute, “5 Rules for Having a Constructive Conflict Conversation About Money” (2016), gottman.com. Therapist perspectives on page 14 come from couples therapists who work with Elfina: Meenakshi Moorjani, Neha Bhusri, Deepika Goel, Ashmita Mohan and Sindhiya Vaithiyanathan. Their contributions have been condensed for length.