

Comment: Gender inequality in work-family balance

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Gender inequalities in work-family balance have wide-reaching ramifications: women shoulder the greatest burden of unpaid work and care, decreasing opportunities for employment, and contributing significantly to the gender pay gap. Concerted measures at both the policy and ideological level are required to redress this problem.

Recent statistics show that there remains a gender pay gap of 16% in Europe¹, and 18% in the USA², despite half a century of women moving into paid employment. Gender inequality in pay is intricately linked to gender inequality in work-family balance, especially in the division of paid and unpaid work: women shoulder the greatest burden of unpaid work and care, with the effect of decreasing opportunities for employment and career progression. The extent and cross-national scope of this inequality is a pressing matter on an

international level, and it will require both innovative policy approaches and significant shifts in attitudes to amend it.

The unequal gender division of labour

How women and men divide their time has changed over 50 years: while women's overall time in unpaid work (including all forms of family care) has decreased substantially on a cross-national basis, the time that men spend doing such work has increased much more modestly (see Figure 1). Despite movement in the direction of greater equality, the trends for women and men do not meet—reflecting the persistent disproportionate load of unpaid work and care undertaken by women, who still do over 60% of the unpaid work.

*****Figure 1 here*****

The educational and employment opportunities for girls in most societies over the latter part of the 20th century were significantly greater than those that were available to their mothers, although their brothers' options were, in most cases, not as different from those of their fathers. Gender attitudes, however, have been slower to change. Therefore, if a girl forms a heterosexual partnership, her paid employment, combined with her own and her partner's inherited expectations of gendered responsibilities and behaviours, leads to an unfair accumulation of paid and unpaid work on her shoulders. This accumulation is increased if and when she has children. She experiences this in the form of various specific sorts of disadvantages: in reduced life chances in relation to leisure time; in more limited choices regarding family formation options; in restrictions on career development; or all of these in combination. But how does this map onto gender inequalities in the overall balance of paid and unpaid work on the population level? If we calculate the proportion of *all* work that is

done by working-age women (that is, including both paid and unpaid work) and plot this over time, we see a reasonably consistent clustering of the national trends around the 50% level, plus or minus 3% (see Figure 2). In other words, when we sum paid and unpaid work together, it appears that women and men do, on the average, a relatively equal amount of *overall* work.

*****Figure 2 here*****

However, the appearance of relative gender balance is not all it seems, because these overall averages of time spent in paid and unpaid work disguise some critical inequalities.

Firstly, there is an intimate connection between unequal time and unequal money. The fact that men do substantially more paid work, and women do substantially more unpaid work (including family care) has important knock-on consequences for inequality in earnings. The extra time in employment for men translates into the potential for greater human capital (meaning extra skills and experience, leading to greater employability and promotability). This additional human capital constitutes a major element in the explanation of the ubiquitous and still-substantial gender gap in wage rates.

Secondly, specific subgroups do more overall work than others. In the UK in 2014-15 the hardest working groups were partnered mothers and fathers combining full-time employment with childcare, followed by employed single parents. In both cases women in these groups spent slightly longer in overall work than men. The biggest gap in overall work time was between non-employed partnered mothers (a large group including full-time stay-

at-home carers) and equivalent fathers (a relatively small group comprising the unemployed and some stay-at-home carers)³. This is related to the gender 'leisure gap', meaning that women on average, and some groups of women in particular, enjoy less leisure time than men⁴.

Thirdly, not all time is equal. Research shows that women's unpaid work is likely to involve multitasking, in particular, doing childcare along with other household tasks⁵. Women are also still regarded as responsible for the management of what goes on in the household in terms of childcare, shopping, and housework (even when it is not them who actually does these tasks).

These factors; gender inequality in work and leisure time, and the more intensive nature of women's time, contribute to the fact that women overwhelmingly report that they feel more rushed than men. In the UK (2014-15) time use survey the differences between women and men in their reports of feeling 'always rushed for time' far outstrip differences measured according to socio-economic status, or the time spent using digital technologies⁶.

What can be done?

The challenge is to redress gender inequality in the division of labour, and the gender attitudes that underpin this inequality. Actions that can promote greater equality, and ease the time pressure that women experience, span several levels: from government policy measures to the actions of social movements in influencing attitudes to gender and labour. Although there are significant differences between countries in these respects, some general suggestions may nonetheless be made.

In terms of government policies, what is required is the implementation of measures in support of genuine work-family flexibility, including the statutory reduction of working hours.

This would permit couples to stagger their hours of paid work in order to care for their children or other dependents, reducing the need for one parent – usually the woman - to stay home or reduce their employment hours. There is evidence that shorter, more flexible working practices and greater diversity are what working millennials want to see in their workplaces⁷.

Equally important is the introduction of high-quality, available and affordable early childcare facilities. Women and men should be able to return to full-time employment without suffering the penalty of having to bear expensive private childcare costs or experiencing the guilt of having to leave children for long periods in poorly-funded daycare. Policies should be targeted at enabling an easier return to employment for both partners, on a gender-level playing field, well before their children reach school age. In countries where quality care is both available and affordable, leaving young children in these facilities is the norm. In countries where they are not, there is inevitably pressure on one parent – in practice almost always the woman - either to remain at home herself over a period of several years, or to return to limited part-time work, or to rely on assistance from family members (usually other women).

The establishment of meaningful periods of take-it-or-leave-it paternity leave has also proved effective. In countries where dedicated father leave was introduced – most notably in Iceland, where fathers and mothers get 3 months each of non-transferable leave, take-up of the full 3 months by fathers is as high as 65%⁸. Men who stay home to care for children not only spend more time in childcare, they also do more housework. In addition, the experience of the Nordic countries shows that, once fathers are visible, out and about with prams and pushchairs in the playgrounds, drop-in centres and the streets, changes in hearts and minds start to happen.

The combination of policies that permit employed fathers to spend more (paid) time caring for their children with those that provide early public childcare are part of why, according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index⁹, Nordic countries consistently rank highest as the best places to be a woman.

Even with such a transformation in policy, a sea-change is unlikely to happen without simultaneous changes in the ideology of traditional masculinity and associated workplace expectations. The notion that "real" men don't do "feminine" things like care or housework must be combated. These conceptions have proved far harder to shift than the opposite idea that women can do things that were traditionally thought of as "men's work". Related to this is the challenge posed by traditional workplace management cultures and expectations.

Patriarchal management culture praises dedication to the job - construed as working long fixed hours, and being constantly available, with work taking priority over family. Men who fail to conform to this expectation are regarded, like women, as less reliable and less promotable¹⁰.

Looking forward

Three things suggest that there may be cause for hope for the future. The first is slow but positive changes in attitudes about work-family gender equality, particularly among younger cohorts. International Social Survey Programme attitude data showed that, while there was some evidence for a slowing of the trend in certain countries (particularly the United States and Britain), men and women's attitudes regarding gender equality continue to shift in the direction of greater egalitarianism¹¹. However, it may be that in those countries where the revolution in women's paid work began relatively early we have reached a point where

continued movement in the direction of greater gender equality cannot take place without more profound changes occurring in the wider structural, ideological and policy context.

Secondly, and relatedly, there is an ongoing increase cross-nationally in the time that fathers are spending with their children. Time-use data show that U.S. parents, both men and women, have substantially increased their time investment in childcare of all kinds over the past few decades¹². These increases are also present cross-nationally across a range of developed countries¹³.

Finally, the experience of Scandinavian countries may serve as a model. There, the trend in the gender division of housework and care continues in the direction of greater gender egalitarianism: in Sweden in 2010 (the most recent Swedish time-use survey), women's share of routine housework time was down to 56%, from 64% in 1990. Their share of childcare time was 58%, down from 65% in 1990¹⁴. These ongoing processes of change in response to both committed policy efforts and egalitarian normative gender ideologies suggest that where political willingness is implemented in relevant policies, and where gender equality has long been regarded as a social goal, the process of gender convergence in family work and care can continue.

Social movements, such as the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and, recently, the outcry caused by the continuing gender pay gap (see #PayMeToo), can have enormous influence too. They can have a powerful impact on increasing awareness about inequalities and the pressing need for measures to address them. With sufficient proactive support, the sorts of changes I have described may prove be persistent enough over the long term to dissolve the foundations of existing structures of inequality.

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³ Sullivan, O. & Altintas, E. In J. Gershuny and O. Sullivan (Eds.) *On Time: Half a Century of UK Daily Life* Ch. 5 (Penguin Books, 2019 forthcoming).

⁴ Sevilla, A., Gimenez-Nadal, J. I. & Gershuny, J. *Demography* **49**, 939-964 (2012).

⁵ Sullivan, O. and Gershuny, J. *Social Science Research* **42**, 1311–1324 (2013).

⁶ Sullivan, O. & Gershuny, J. *Sociology* **52**, 20-38 (2018).

⁷ 2018 Deloitte Millennial Survey: www.deloitte.com/MillennialSurvey. (Findings are based on the views of more than 10,000 millennials questioned across 36 countries).

⁸ Eydal, G. B. & Gíslason, I. V. International Network on Leave Policies and Research Iceland Country Report (2017).

⁹ <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2017>

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¹¹ Braun, M., & Scott, J. In M. Haller, R. Jowell, & T. W. Smith (Eds.), *The International Social Survey Programme, 1984–2009: Charting the Globe* pp. 358–377. (Routledge, 2009).

¹² Bianchi, S. M., Robinson, J. P., & Milkie, M. A. *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*. (Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).

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¹⁴ Pailhé, A., Solaz, A., & Stanfors, M. Paper prepared for the workshop “Caregiving responsibilities across the life course: An international perspective”. Lund May 31 – June 1 (2017).