

Gender equality on the slide?

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Cambridge University study suggests growing numbers of people are concerned about working mums' impact on family life.

Support for gender equality in Britain and the US appears to have peaked and could now be going into decline, research at Cambridge University has revealed.

The study, by Professor Jacqueline Scott from the University's Department of Sociology, found evidence of "mounting concern" that women who play a full and equal role in the workforce do so at the expense of family life.

Although there are no signs of a full-scale gender-role backlash, there does appear to be growing sympathy for the old-fashioned view that a woman's place is in the home, rather than in the office.

The study appears in a new book, *Women And Employment; Changing Lives And New Challenges*, which Professor Scott also edited.

"The notion that there has been a steady increase in favour of women taking an equal role in the workplace and away from their traditional role in the home is clearly a myth," she said.

"Instead, there is clear evidence that women's changing role is viewed as having costs both for the woman and the family.

"It is conceivable that opinions are shifting as the shine of the 'super-mum' syndrome wears off, and the idea of women juggling high-powered careers while also baking cookies and reading bedtime stories is increasingly seen to be unrealisable by ordinary mortals."

The survey compared the results of social attitude surveys from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s - using recent data from the International Social Survey Programme as well as older polls. Professor Scott focused on the results from Britain, the United States and - because the earlier surveys pre-dated the fall of the Berlin Wall - the former Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany).

In each survey, samples of between 1,000 and 5,000 people were asked to say whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements. Statements such as "A husband's job is to earn income; a wife's to take care of the children," were designed to test their overall views on gender equality. Others, such as "Family life suffers if a woman works full time," examined whether they considered maternal employment as harmful to children or families.

The study shows that while British attitudes are more egalitarian than in the 1980s, there are signs that support for gender equality may have hit a high point some time during the 1990s. When it comes to the clash between work and family life, doubts about whether a woman should be doing both are starting to creep in.

In the 1990s, for example, more than 50% of women and 51% of men said they believed that family life would not suffer if a woman went to work. Since then, the figure has fallen - to 46% of women and 42% of men. Fewer people (54.9% of women and 54.1% of men) now take the view that a job is the best way for a woman to be independent than in 1991.

The results are even more extreme in the United States, where the percentage of people arguing that family life does not suffer if a woman works has plummeted, from 51% in 1994 to 38% in 2002. About the same number of West Germans (37%) agree; but the number there has risen, having been just 24% in the mid-1990s.

Professor Scott argues that each country is at a different stage in a cycle of sympathy for gender equality. In West Germany, where up until the 1990s a large majority of people still believed that men should be the family breadwinners while women stayed at home, acceptance for the notion of working mums is now increasing.

In Britain and the US, however, where support for equal opportunities for both sexes is much longer-standing, some people are now starting to have second thoughts. In most cases, this appears to revolve around concerns that the welfare of children and of the family are being compromised the more women spend their time at work and find themselves lumbered with the double burden of employment and family care.

The report adds that there should now be further investigation into whether the attitude shift is occurring because caring for the family is seen as predominantly women's work, or because people feel there is no practical alternative to a woman fulfilling the role.

"A change in attitude is not the same thing as a change in behaviour, but attitudes do matter," Professor Scott added. "Women - particularly mothers - can experience considerable strain when attitudes reinforce the notion that employment and family interests conflict.

"If we are to make progress in devising policies that encourage equal working opportunities for women, we need to know more about what gender roles people view as practical, as possible and as fair."

Women And Employment: Changing Lives And New Challenges is published by Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd. this week.

Provided by Cambridge University

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