

Charting gender's 'incomplete revolution'

June 27 2012



Gender Equality symbol. Credit: Open Democracy from Flickr.

A major survey of gender inequality in contemporary society has found lingering echoes of old-fashioned, "male breadwinner" values, but also evidence that men are happier when they do their fair share of household chores.

The findings are among dozens of results that have emerged from a five-year research project investigating equality between the sexes, and which are now being published in a book, *Gendered Lives*.

It charts the causes, [consequences](#) and prospects for what the Danish [sociologist](#), Gøsta Esping-Andersen, called an "incomplete revolution" in gender equality in Europe, and asks how greater equality between men and women can be achieved.

Optimistically, parts of the study found that even outside countries such

as the Nordic states, where governments have actively promoted measures designed to promote greater equality, the gap between men in women in fields like the division of domestic labour is closing.

At the same time, however, the initiative also identified causes for deep concern. Many companies in the UK, for example, still see little incentive for altering the employment conditions of their staff to ensure that the work-life balance of men and women is equitable. Several of the researchers involved in the project also conclude that the only way to close certain aspects of the gulf between the [sexes](#), such as the gender-pay gap, is through legal compulsion.

The study, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, was deliberately wide-ranging and complex. It covers attitudes and approaches towards gender equality over time, in different countries and at different levels – ranging from government policy to individual families. The researchers argue that this approach is important because we can only improve gender equality if we understand that it is the consequence of a network of multiple causes and effects.

Jacqueline Scott, Professor of Sociology at the University of Cambridge and co-editor of the book, said: “There has been a lot of social theory about how people ‘do’ gender, in other words, how they behave in accordance with society’s expectations about what it means to be a man or a woman.”

“What we sometimes forget is that institutions are doing gender as well. Politicians, employers, schools and kindergartens, care homes and many other organisations all make decisions which impact directly on what is expected of families and these can challenge or reinforce traditional ideas about what men and women can or cannot do. If these decisions are not joined up, it can limit real gender equality overall.”

The idea of an incomplete revolution refers to a mixed picture in terms of gender equality across Europe. Since the 1960s, society has witnessed the demise of the traditional “male breadwinner” family, in which men went out to work and women stayed at home. More women have gone into higher education, managerial jobs, or professional occupations. Many now earn a salary comparable with their male counterparts.

At the same time, however, it is widely acknowledged that the gap has not closed completely. Many women still struggle to strike a work-life balance, especially when it comes to having children. Some decide not to have children for the sake of their careers, while others “rein in” their careers to start a family. Often they do this by reducing their working hours; in the UK, for example, 40% of women work part time, compared with just 10% of men. And the gender gap has only narrowed in certain areas – women still shoulder far more unpaid housework, for example.

One surprising outcome of the research project was that some attitudes from the days of male-breadwinner dominance have not disappeared.

Researchers expected to find, for example, that both men and women will be more satisfied with their household income if they have earned the money themselves. In fact, a series of interviews with couples on low or moderate incomes revealed that both tend to prize the man’s income more.

The authors suggest that this is really a modern version of the old idea that a man should eat well even when food for other family members is scarce, so that he has the strength to go out and earn a living. The authors reflect that: “The saying, ‘the more things change, the more things stay the same’, springs to mind.”

Perhaps more surprising still, however, is that another study found that

men are actually happier when they make an equal contribution to household chores. This research, which spanned Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, France and Britain, set data from the European Social Survey on how much people experience work-life conflict alongside other measures of their well-being. The participants were then asked how much time they spent on tasks like cooking, washing, cleaning, shopping and property maintenance.

The academics expected to find that men's work-family conflict rose, and their well-being fell, when they did more housework. In practice, they found the opposite, with conflict falling, and well-being going up. The study suggests that this may be because more men support gender equality, so they feel uncomfortable if the woman does most of the housework, and because women are becoming more assertive and making their dissatisfaction with lazy partners plain!

Prospects for the future remain mixed. On the one hand, an investigation into the business case for closing the workplace gender gap was “not encouraging”. It found that many companies in the UK, at least, see little reason to relax their policy on matters such as paternity leave or improve gender equality in terms of work place conditions and pay. Many of the researchers involved in the project argue that government legislation is needed to force the hands of companies in both the public and private sectors.

At the same time, however, there are grounds for optimism. Regardless of policy regimes, researchers found evidence that across Europe, the gap between women and men in terms of how much paid and unpaid work both do, is closing. In the Nordic states, where far more has been done by governments to improve gender [equality](#), the improvements have been more rapid – but even in southern Europe, where far less has been done, [women](#) live on an increasingly equal footing with men. “The conclusion is that as far as gender roles are concerned, there is staggered

adaptation, rather than a stalled revolution,” the book’s editors conclude.

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Charting gender's 'incomplete revolution' (2012, June 27) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-06-gender-incomplete-revolution.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.