

Britain slow to adjust to gender equality in work-family roles

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Gender equality in work-family roles has not yet been reached in Britain, with a fifth of families still relying on the father being the sole full-time breadwinner despite a significant growth in dual earning households, according to new research.

As well as a growth in both [parents](#) working full-time, the study found an increase in the working hours of mothers in part-time employment and a growing proportion of households with 'non-standard' working patterns.

The research examined the work-family arrangements adopted by parents between 2001 and 2013 in Britain, where the male breadwinner family, although in decline, has traditionally dominated. These household employment patterns were used to gauge changes in traditional gender work roles and to what extent parents have combined economic independence and family care in different ways.

The study was led by Prof Sara Connolly and Dr Matthew Aldrich at the University of East Anglia (UEA), working with researchers at the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) at UCL and NatCen Social Research. It was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the findings are published today in the journal *Work, Employment And Society*.

Using data from the EU Labour Force Survey the researchers focused on couple households with dependent children and examined the relationship between parents' education, care responsibilities (the

number and age of children) and the type of work-family arrangement.

Three dominant types of arrangement were identified, which in 2013 accounted for more than four in five families: the 'standard' 1.5 earner, where the father works full-time and the mother works part-time; dual full-time earners; and male breadwinner, where the father works full-time and mother does not work.

There was a significant decline in the prevalence of the 1.5 earner household over the period, from 37 per cent in 2001 to 31 per cent in 2013, now equaling the proportion of dual full-time earners, which went from 26 per cent in 2001 to 31 per cent in 2013.

Non-standard working patterns increased from eight to 12 per cent, including growth in part-time employment among fathers and main breadwinning among mothers.

Prof Connolly said the findings suggest a behavioural shift towards a gender balance in work-family roles, but also continuity in some traditional models because of the continued reliance of British families on a male sole full-time breadwinner - over the period studied this accounted for more than a fifth of households (22 per cent).

"While our results suggest both some merging and greater diversity in economic provisioning between British parents, the societal infrastructure still tends to promote and support a full-time breadwinner plus part-time carer model, slowing adjustment to the gender revolution," said Prof Connolly, professor of personnel economics at UEA's Norwich Business School.

Dr Aldrich, lecturer in economics at UEA, said: "The dual full-time earner model is growing in significance for British parents of young children but a new gender equality in work-family roles has not yet been

reached. It seems that culturally embedded gender-based norms as well as economic calculations are at work, resulting in a very slow adjustment to the view and practice that parental responsibilities can be equally shared by both parents."

A stronger parental leave system to incentivize British fathers to become more involved in the care of children from the outset could help parents manage work and family responsibilities more effectively and fairly. UCL's Prof Margaret O'Brien said: "Unfortunately, the new shared parental leave legislation, despite its name, fails to offer British parents real choice about how to manage work and caring for the baby."

The usual weekly working hours of fathers working full-time fell significantly from 47 to 45 hours a week, remained stable for mothers in full-time employment (39 hours a week), but rose from 17.5 to 18.5 for mothers in part-time employment.

The researchers also found that household employment patterns remain strongly associated with maternal education and family size but are becoming less sensitive to the age of the youngest child.

There was evidence of increasing engagement in full-time employment among better-educated mothers of pre-school children; a growing share of dual full-time earners where parents are highly educated; but a constant small percentage of workless households with low levels of education. There was also a steady share of sole male breadwinner families consisting of less well-educated mothers but mixed educational backgrounds for fathers.

Dr Svetlana Speight, of NatCen, said: "The continued growth in women's educational attainment in Britain is a major structural factor behind the changes in parental working patterns that we observe.

"The growth in dual earning households with pre-school children over the period is consistent with other evidence that improvements in public childcare provision have supported dual earning."

'Britain's slow movement to a Gender Egalitarian Equilibrium: Parents and Employment in the UK 2001 - 2013', Sara Connolly, Matthew Aldrich, Margaret O'Brien, Svetlana Speight and Eloise Poole, is published in *Work, Employment And Society* on May 11, 2016.

Provided by University of East Anglia

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