

# Opinion: More women are running the world, so why aren't more men doing the dishes?

September 23 2016, by Alice Evans

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Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

Globally, women are triumphing in historically male-dominated areas. 2017 may begin with women at the helm of Germany, Liberia, Norway, South Korea, the UK, the US, General Motors, the IMF, YouTube and possibly the United Nations. Slowly and incrementally, support is

growing for women's employment and public leadership.

But social change seems curiously one-sided. While women have taken on more work outside the home, men's share of cooking, cleaning and caring for elderly relatives has not increased commensurately.

Since this is a global phenomenon, I have tried to understand it by engaging with research from around the world. This contrasts with a tendency within academia to focus on either rich or poor countries, which can blind us to both shared and country-specific drivers of change and continuity. I also draw on 16 months of ethnographic research in Kitwe, the largest city in the Zambian Copperbelt. Here's what I found...

## **Rising support for women's employment**

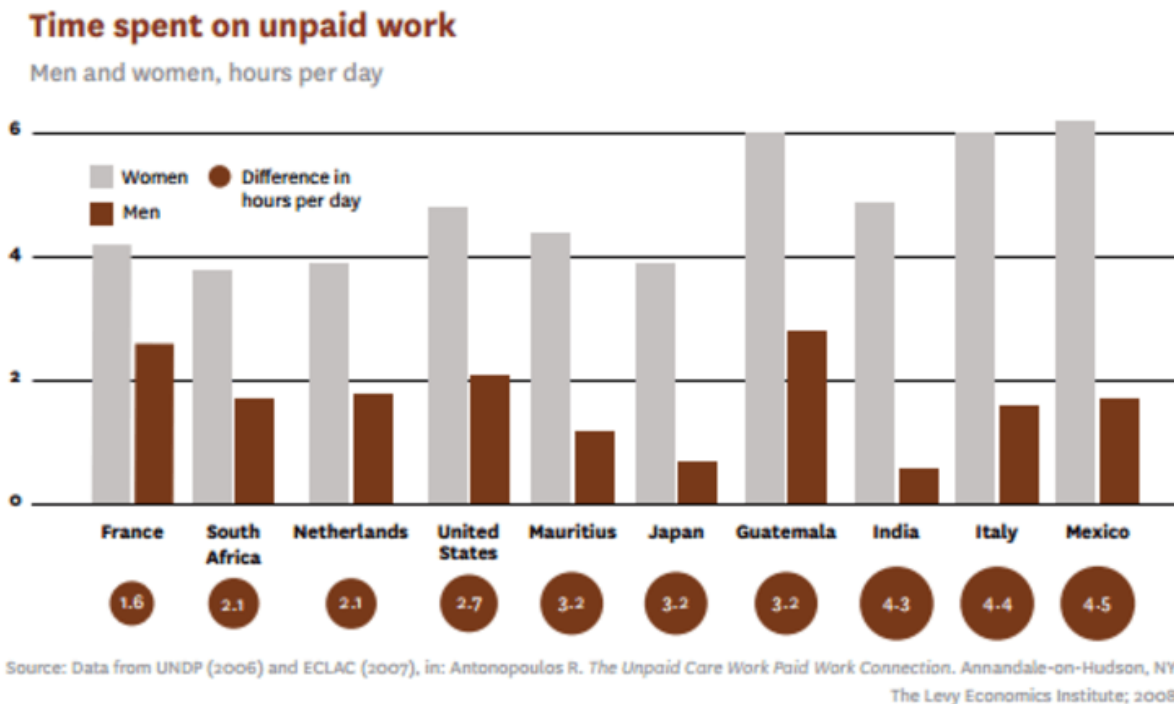
Rising employment for women partly reflects macro-economic changes. Processes such as deindustrialisation, demechanisation, deregulation and trade liberalisation have reduced the number of working class men's jobs in rich countries – and their wages. In the US, women's employment increased as young men's [median wages declined](#) from \$41,000 in 1973, to \$23,000 in 2013.

Similar changes have occurred in Zambia. From the mid-1980s, families' economic security worsened due to trade liberalisation, resulting factory closures, as well as public sector contraction, user fees for health and education, and the devastating toll of HIV/AIDS. Families could no longer rely on a male breadwinner. Many came to perceive women's employment as advantageous.

Globally, there has also been [a growth in sectors](#) demanding stereotypically "feminine" characteristics: health, education, public administration and financial services in Britain, and [export-orientated manufacturing in Bangladesh](#).

Both of these changes have increased the [opportunity cost](#) of women staying at home.

Resulting exposure to a critical mass of women performing socially valued, masculine roles appears to – slowly and incrementally – undermine gender stereotypes. Increasingly, people see women as equally competent and deserving of status. Many also recognise that their colleagues and communities regard women as equally competent. This ideological change has fostered a positive feedback loop, with more women pursuing historically male-dominated domains.



Credit: Levtov R, van der Gaag N, Greene M, Kaufman M, and Barker G (2015). *State of the World’s Fathers: A MenCare Advocacy Publication*. Washington, DC: Promundo, Rutgers, Save the Children, Sonke Gender Justice, and the MenEngage Alliance.

However, the initial trigger (the rising opportunity cost of women staying at home) has not occurred in all countries. In the oil-producing countries of the Middle East and North Africa, growth is concentrated in male-dominated sectors. Returns to female employment remain low. The consequent paucity of women in socially-valued positions reinforces widely-shared beliefs that men are more competent and deserving of status. This impedes the kind of positive feedback loop that is occurring in Bangladesh, Britain, USA and Zambia.

Globally, then, rising female employment and leadership seem contingent upon shifts in perceived interests and exposure to women demonstrating their equal competence.

## **Sharing the caring**

Exposure to men sharing care work appears to undermine people's internalised gender ideologies - their beliefs about what men and women can and should do. For instance, men who cooked and cleaned in their youth (or saw others doing so) did not regard it as 'women's work'. Instead, they took pride in their cooking, cleanliness, and capacity to wash white shirts.

Seeing men sharing care work also seems to affect people's norm perceptions – their beliefs about what others think and do. Women who had grown up sharing care work with brothers were commonly more optimistic about social change. Besides wanting to share care work, they also anticipated social support for their behaviour.

But exposure to men sharing care work remains limited. We rarely *see* men cooking, cleaning and caring for relatives. This is partly due to the low status of such work. It is also because care work is typically performed behind closed doors, in private spaces, leading many to assume that such practices are uncommon. These norm perceptions

discourage others from sharing care work.

This is exemplified by BanaCollins, a market trader supporting an unemployed husband: "Here in Zambia, a woman doesn't have time to rest... We were born into this system. Every woman must be strong. It's just tradition. We are all accustomed to it. We can't change it."

Of course there are men who share housework, but they're rarely seen by others. Egalitarian social change is slowest when it is not publicly visible. Yes, [supportive work-family policies are important](#), but [uptake is conditional on norm perceptions](#): beliefs about what others think and do. Even if people become privately critical, this does not seem sufficient for behavioural change.

Participants who had not seen men sharing care work (or speaking out in favour of it) remained discouraged. They were unconvinced of the possibility of [social change](#). This was exemplified by Penelope, who is studying to become a social worker: "We learnt about gender in school. But still, it's just the culture here in Zambia that a woman should do care work."

To amplify ongoing progress towards gender equality, we need to increase exposure to both women as professionals and men as carers. If EastEnders featured male care-givers, viewers might come to see it as common and widely accepted. Films can also play a role – [Fundamentals of Caring](#), for example, features Paul Rudd as a male carer, never suggesting this is unusual. Likewise in employment, trade unions and political parties, gender quotas can increase exposure to [women](#) demonstrating their equal competence. This could cultivate a positive feedback loop, inspiring others to follow suit.

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