

Towards Balanced Lives and Gender Equality

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The growth of dual-earner families in country after country opens up new opportunities. It brings economic independence for women and raises the standard of living for families. It also creates new tensions as increasingly inappropriate ascribed gender roles within the family persist, to varying extents, across national boundaries. Where do we go from here? How do we create the opportunities and incentives for dual-earner men and women to achieve a balance between work and family in ways that disadvantage neither sex and strengthen the family? It would not be appropriate for us to set a single agenda for change in diverse cultures. Rather, in this final section we consider what appear to be the conditions under which dual-earner roles and relationships change and some of the questions raised by the consideration of dual-earner families within a cross-national perspective.

A precondition for effective change for dual-earner families is that the discourse on balancing work and family be framed as an issue for both men and women. The recognition in most countries that families need two incomes and that women are needed in the labour force must be balanced by the acknowledgement that men have responsibilities for family work. Organizational and public policies that merely enable women to combine the two domains leave men's roles untouched, perpetuating women's double burden and the lack of fit between family and work life.

Social policies which focus directly on the family and which recognize that men's family roles must change can structure opportunities for men and women to work out a more satisfactory balance between work and family. Sweden provides a model of such a social policy. It is committed not only to equal opportunities in the workplace but also to changing families, with some measure of success. Elsewhere affirmative action programmes and other policies which focus specifically on the workplace are useful but not sufficient to address the work and family issues. The public provision of childcare and care for the elderly are important in this respect but even these are

of limited benefit if the care of family members is still widely regarded as women's responsibility.

The emerging issue of eldercare for dual-earner families suggests that a life cycle approach to family policy is called for. The sharing of family responsibilities could be encouraged by the provision of incentives and support for men and women to integrate periods of caring with a career viewed within a long-term perspective.

Employers also have a vital role to play in enabling dual-earner partners to find the right balance between work and family. They must be willing to create alternatives to the male model of work. This model of continuous full-time work constrains men from full involvement in their families and disadvantages women. Women do have special needs but they are only disadvantaged by these needs if male patterns of work are viewed as the norm, from which women deviate. Parents of young children and people with responsibility for the care of elderly or sick relatives also have special needs. They too are disadvantaged only if they are regarded as deviant. In the context of organizational policies which allow flexibility in hours and places of work and in career pathways over time, and make this acceptable for both men and women, the continuous full-time pattern of work may become only one of many genuine options.

The valuing of women's work is another condition for change within dual-earner families. The gender segregation of occupations with women's work attracting lower pay is universal, but some countries, notably in Scandinavia, are making genuine attempts to give equal value and rewards to women's and men's work. Several of the contributors to this volume note that men whose wives earn as much as or more than they do are more likely than other men to participate equally in family work. Women's lesser earning power is often used to legitimize their greater domestic responsibility. The balance of power within families does not automatically shift with women's higher earnings. Nevertheless equal earnings provide women with the bargaining power and men with the incentives to alter the gender arrangements in the home. Women's earnings also empower them to negotiate with other role partners, for example in their relationship with their mother-in-law in extended families in India.

The movement of more women into previously male-dominated areas, especially the field of management, is also important, not only in raising women's earnings, but also in changing the nature of work. There is evidence that when women are equally represented in management or in other occupations they bring considerable changes to their work, including a greater insistence on a balanced lifestyle (Lunneborg, 1990). Patricia Lunneborg suggests that men also change under these circumstances and that everyone – women and men,

workers and clients – benefits from these developments. The promotion of token women or small numbers of women into management is not sufficient to bring about radical change. Indeed women who construct their realities in a way which enables them to succeed in male-dominated structures, with minimal threats to their identity, frequently do so by adopting male values (Lewis, 1991). Real change in the nature of occupations can occur only when women are well represented.

It is unlikely that the redistribution of power within the family and the workforce will come about without a similar redistribution within wider societies. Token or minority women policy makers can achieve only minimal change in societies because their power and influence are achieved within and dependent upon male-dominated structures. In Norway where women are well represented in government, childcare subsidies and generous parental leave provisions remained a top priority even in the context of spending cuts. Increasing the number of women in politics and other positions of power can help to place and preserve the needs of families high on the public agenda.

A final condition for change is an ethos of openness and willingness to confront taboo subjects, bringing taken-for-granted issues into the public discourse. Taboos contribute to the maintenance of the status quo. For instance the subject of domestic work is taboo in many contexts. Women are expected to get on with this work or to find another woman to do it, but not to discuss this issue at the same level of importance as more weighty (male) concerns. The way in which money is handled is another taboo subject which preserves power differentials. In the workplace the fact that workers have family responsibilities over and above the demands made by employers has for too long been a taboo subject, and even now that many men do restructure their work and family they often have to do so covertly (Hall, 1990).

Issues and questions

Career women in many countries attempt to relieve their double burden and achieve parity in the workplace by conforming to the male ethic of total work involvement and by paying other women, sometimes at low rates, to perform domestic and childcare work, an option which is not available to other women. This can perpetuate gender inequalities within families, both because domestic help is often construed as help for the woman and therefore not associated with changes in men's behaviour, and also because it upholds the male model of work. It enables men and women to adopt patterns of work which assume a full-time helpmate, thus obscuring the need for organizations to change. Class inequalities thus uphold gender

inequalities. The link between ongoing class inequality and the perpetuation of gender inequality within families raises the question of whether it is possible to address the issue of achieving balance and equality in families separately from issues of social class and privilege within wider societies.

A second question is whether the nuclear dual-earner family is an ideal to be pursued at all. Can it ever offer real support and possibilities for gender equality? The nuclear family was functional in the context of a gendered division of labour and the separation of work and family domains. The dual-earner family, one of many non-traditional family forms, heralded the reintegration of work and family and some reallocation of gender roles, but in the context of the nuclear family it can create problems of supports for the young, sick and elderly and even for the breadwinners themselves. We have seen that support for the dual-earner lifestyle is embedded in the three-generational extended families in the East. However, these supports bring their own problems and can constrain the pace of change in gender roles within the family. Perhaps the gradual breakdown of the gender allocation of roles opens the way to new possible family forms with more built-in supports, such as extended cross-generational families. In the future we may be debating issues concerning not dual-earner but various forms of multiple-earner families within which flexible de-gendered roles may develop.

This book raises questions with respect to gender equality and diversity among dual-earner families. Can gender equality, defined in terms of a reallocation of family roles, be a universal ideal which transcends cultural tradition? Should egalitarian ideals be modified to take account of strong cultural attitudes? Feminist writers have argued that it is only by modifying traditions to take account of women's needs that the reproduction of inequalities will be halted. At the same time women value the traditions of their respective countries. The constructs of Western feminism are not necessarily acceptable or valid for women in all contexts. While the commonalities in the experiences of dual-earner women in diverse national cultures are apparent in this volume, so are the differences among women whose experiences of gender and family roles are constructed within different historical and socio-cultural frameworks. Contributors to this volume have demonstrated that when there is a clash between cultural and egalitarian values women frequently attempt to reconcile their needs within the boundaries of traditional expectations in non-threatening ways, which also diffuse the tension that might lead to change. The perceived high cost of social change in the West, in terms of family breakdowns and other social problems, is not a price that dual-earner women everywhere are willing to pay. The dilemma for many women concerns

not how to alter gender roles in dual-earner families, but rather the relative costs of change and stability, especially where other supports are available to reduce their double burden and other pay-offs exist for the persistence of gendered roles.

What is certain is that the solutions to issues of balance and equality in work and family will be diverse. The way ahead does not lie in uniform change whereby the ideas of certain cultures are imposed upon others without sensitivity to national needs. The Hungarian experience illustrates the futility of this. Rather it lies in open-minded debate about the choices of life scripts open to men and women in dual-earner families in diverse contexts, and in new perspectives for policy which treat work and family as a single integrated social system. Ultimately this may enable us to optimize life choices while retaining respect for diversity and for those aspects of each national heritage which do not disadvantage people by virtue of gender and class.

References

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