

REVIVING THE STALLED REVOLUTION OF THE WORKING MOTHER:

Multi-level intervention paths towards more gender balance

Abstract

This commentary advances evidence-base propositions for interventions targeting the stalled side of the gender revolution: gender balanced roles in the home domain. Such interventions should be approached in a multi-level frame, from (1) socialization; to (2) family-level interventions; (3) organisational policies; and (4) societal policy/governance levels. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's Community and Social Impact Statement

Introduction

Over the past year, an impressive and growing body of research has shown the negative impact the pandemic has had on the women's equality movement (Collins et al., 2020; Flaherty, 2020; Minello, 2020). Locked in, without access to external support for domestic chores or caring for children, working mothers experienced a big setback – both career-wise and in terms of their well-being – since the start of the pandemic. What the lockdowns have revealed is that the advancements in gender balance in the household were due to a large extent to women outsourcing part(s) of their domestic responsibilities, rather than to a change in gender ideology towards men taking on more roles and responsibilities at home (Boroş, under review; Solnit, 2020). Previous longitudinal research on gender ideology trends has already demonstrated that while over the past decades women's amount of time spent on house chores has decreased, men's has not increased proportionally (Grunov et al, 2018; Miller & Sassler, 2010). Second, earlier research shows that even in relatively gender equal couples,

the ideology becomes more traditional once children are born (Cerrato & Cifre, 2018). However, the findings from the past two years show undeniably the lag in gender balance at home at the behavioural (as opposed to ideological) level, and the price paid for it – especially by working mothers (Guy & Arthur, 2020).

At a time when economists, politicians and social activists argue for ‘the great reset’ (WEF, 2020), we need to use the momentum of this ‘great reveal’ of gender imbalance to reconsider the evidence-based policies and interventions that can contribute to a better gender balance at home and in the workplace, and truly advance gender equality in society by changing gender ideology. We need to put in place long-term interventions that will give rise to more sustainable gender role divisions in society, instead of again focusing solely on alleviating measures. Furthermore, many of the gender equality interventions to date focus on women empowerment, especially creating conditions for them to access and thrive in the workplace. However, following the evidence that led to the ‘stalled gender revolution’ framing¹, equal weight should be given to *empower men to contribute more in the household*.

There already is a plethora of research on what types of interventions are effective to promote gender ideology change in the gender roles in the household. We also know, from broader privilege research, that moving beyond awareness to effective interventions requires multi-level interventions (Peretz, 2020). Therefore, this commentary sets out to review and structure this research into a multi-level systematisation of effective interventions to address gender balance in the home domain.

Multi-level systematization of interventions

1. At governance level: endorse parental leave policies that encourage fathers to take parental leave.

Extant evidence from parental leave policies studies shows that if both parents can take parental leave (family entitlement), mothers tend to take it to a much larger extent (Moss & Deven, 2015), whereas when there is differentiated parental leave (by individual entitlements, especially those targeted specifically at fathers on a use-it-or-lose-it basis), men tend to take parental leave to a much larger

extent. For instance, in the EU, where the average for fathers taking parental leave is at 10%, it can go as high as 44% in Sweden, where the leave consists of both a shared and a (3-month) non-shared part, which gives men a considerable financial incentive to take the leave (van Belle, 2016). Fathers are most likely to take parental leave when it can be timed around the time of birth or linked to the mother's return to employment (van Belle, 2016). This period indeed seems then to act according to role exposure mechanisms (Gangl & Ziefle, 2015) and lead to gender change norms in the family: 'when fathers in heterosexual couples experience the transition to parenthood in ways that are structurally comparable to mothers, they come to think about and enact parenting in ways that are more similar to mothers' (Rehel, 2014: 110). This then leads to a change in the gendered behaviour of men, who will not only contribute more to childrearing but also spend an average of an hour more doing house chores (Evertsson, 2014), but also leads to gender ideology changes that ripple across generations: upstream towards grandparents and downstream towards own children (Unterhofer & Wrolich, 2017).

For these governance-level interventions to be effective however, they need to be backed by support in the public communication fora and within organisations. For instance, in a welcome step in this direction, the EU Directive 2019/1158 (2019) stipulates an increase from one to two months of non-transferable parental leave. This change aims to increase fathers' participation in childrearing. However, the impact of this directive alone remains uncertain, seeing as the previous directive from 2010, which was already stipulating one non-transferable month, failed to bring about the expected shift: to date, 90 % of fathers across the EU do not use parental leave entitlements (Borg, 2018). This is partly due to the large variability of implementing the directive across the member states, partly due to the extent to which parental leave is well-paid, and partly to cultural norms that still stigmatise fathers who take parental leave, and a lack of prominent, successful masculine role models to openly take parental leave. Beyond a macho discourse (Chapman, 2021), stigma is experienced especially in the workplace, where fathers taking parental leave are seen as less committed to their work (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018; Pets, Mize & Kaufman, 2021). Therefore, such governance level initiatives

need to be complemented by helping “organizations design parental leave policies that increase the likelihood that workers can take needed leave without damaging their careers” (Pets, Mize & Kaufman, 2021).

2. At organisational level: you can take part (for the better) in both sides of the gender revolution: at work and at home. A first and efficient step in creating gender bias-free organisations is raising awareness of internal gender segregation (horizontal – i.e., according to type of function, and vertical – i.e., hierarchical) through systematic and transparently communicated measurements (Morse, 2016). Second, these assessments can also add a qualitative level, in reflecting on expectations of gendered performativity of functions (Abele, 2003; El-Alayli et al., 2018). Then, employ participatory interventions (Bleijenbergh & Van Engen, 2015) in order to involve as many actors as possible, instead of using ‘victim-focused interventions’, which often come with unwanted backlash and unexpected negative consequences in diversity dynamics (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2018). Equally important, these interventions must adopt a complexity mindset towards change, meaning multiple actions and areas of intervention, adapted to local dynamics and demonstrating context-specificity (instead a one-size-fits-all approach – see Kalpazidou Schmidt & Cacace, 2019 for a detailed frame of complexity-mindful interventions).

Specifically related to the impact of organisations in gender balance at home, organisations can actively support men in taking more parental leave (with the cascading consequences mentioned in the previous section). At the most basic level, they can do so by actively endorsing a culture of acceptance (as opposed to shaming) of men applying for flexible employment schemes or parental leave (Esplen, 2006) and actively role model such behaviours through the circulating mythologies in the workplace (Olsson, 2006). Taking this one step further, they can offer incentives for young parents of both genders to take parental leave. For instance, some universities (Hijink, 2018) offer young mothers a research sabbatical and special research funds after their return from maternity leave. While extremely beneficial for their immediate career progressions, such policies perpetuate traditional gender ideologies and consequently (as we saw before in the publication data during the

pandemic - Flaherty, 2020; Minello, 2020) have a negative long term impact on a woman's career. A more gender-balanced alternative is to offer these benefits for any parent who takes parental leave when the baby is recently born (as this is demonstrated to be the period when most fathers are likely to take it, if ever, and when taking parental leave is clearly related to changes in gender ideology and behaviours at home).

3. At family level: focus interventions more on fathers of sons, as they can play a crucial role in changing gender ideology and counteracting the dogmatism of intensive mothering precepts. Substantive evidence (see Davis & Greenstein, 2009 for a comprehensive review) points to the role fathers play in the intergenerational gender ideology transmission in the household, through role modelling and through discourse transmission in direct interaction, and the construction of the child's home environment (Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles & Patterson, 2008). Parents (and especially fathers) of daughters are more likely to be naturally sensitized to issues of gender equity (Warner & Steel, 1999). However, it is parents of boys that play an even more important role in generational ideology change. Evidence suggests (Myers & Booth, 2002) that boys (and not necessarily girls) who grow up in gender egalitarian households become frontrunners of gender egalitarianism.

Furthermore, fathers subscribing to intensive parenting ideology are much more autonomous in adopting expert advice, and less susceptible to public judgment on their behaviours than mothers are (Shirani, Henwood & Coltart, 2012). Because of that, should they be more involved in parenting, they could relieve some of the pressures of internalized judgment that inform so much of women's self-sacrificing mothering behaviours which is detrimental to their well-being.

Therefore, due to the important role they play in the intergenerational transmission of gender ideology and the possibility to create more flexibility regarding the intensive parenting approach, fathers of boys need to be more involved in gender awareness interventions. So far, most interventions targeting gender equality (even in the household) are aimed at women, under the umbrella of women empowerment interventions; the counterexamples where interventions targeted

the wellbeing of men and their children prove that “such initiatives can potentially ‘undo’ gender” (Hanna, Robertson, Woodall & Rowlands, 2018: 562) and have a much wider impact on the well-being of families. Evidence suggests that the positive implications for families are created by offering a shared space for men and children to develop their own dynamics; time for mothers without their children, which can help with shifting roles and attitudes around childcare and emotional labour in the home (Hanna et al., 2018), as well as challenging mother’s perceptions of fathers’ roles as secondary caregivers (Cosson & Graham, 2012; Peukert, 2019).

To be successful, it is important that these interventions target both partners: (1) sensitising men about the role they play in the household and the gender discourse they endorse needs to be (2) complemented by educating mothers – especially those holding intensive mothering beliefs – to take a step back from selflessness and allow new gender dynamics in the home to emerge.

Family-level interventions are particularly important in WEIRDⁱⁱ countries, where child-rearing responsibilities fall primarily upon the parents, and the nuclear family is more autonomous from the extended family (unlike in more collectivistic cultures, where child-rearing is a more communal act shared by various actors in the extended family and community – LeVine et al., 1994). Because of this form of societal organising, there is a bigger burden in these societies to re-invent gender roles within the family, to compensate for the otherwise limited resources and flexibility in organising, due to the small number of actors involved in the processⁱⁱⁱ.

4. *At individual (next generation) level: teach (and allow) boys to help more at home (without reproducing the gender pay gap!).* Research from around the world shows that mothers rely primarily on daughters, rather than sons, in helping with household chores, with girls ending up spending 40% more time daily than boys doing house chores (UNICEF, 2016). Furthermore, in USA households, boys earn twice as much for doing chores per week than girls, and are awarded larger bonuses by parents (Busykid, 2018). Because of the focus of the intensive mothering ideology (reinforced by the standards by which a mother is judged by peers and community) on developing children’s cognitive potential

through active stimulation and enrolment in extra-curricular activities (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Shirani et al, 2012), mothers will often excuse children (especially boys) from house chores, in favour of such activities. This approach is largely propagated by media coverage of parenting advice, with parents increasingly encouraged to actively foster their children's academic skills (as the content analysis of parenting articles published between 1997-2003 demonstrates, by revealing a shift in emphasis from "fun" activities to an increasing focus on schooling and children's cognitive development) (Quirke, 2006). However, longitudinal cohort research shows that performing chores in early elementary school was associated with later development of self-competence, prosocial behaviour, and self-efficacy, and that performing house chores (irrespective of frequency) in kindergarten is associated with improved math scores in elementary school (White, DeBoer & Scharf, 2019). This contradiction reveals that the social pressures of the new parenting ideologies are not only detrimental to parents' (especially mothers') wellbeing (Boroş, under review), but that children could actually benefit from more gender-balanced participation in household chores. This in turn is proven to be one of the most effective mechanisms of developing more gender equal ideology in future men (Hanna et al., 2018).

To get there, professionals (such as counsellors) and media campaigns can focus more on helping individual parents and family systems to develop strategies to reduce the impact of the intensive mothering culture at work and home (Lamar, Forbes & Capasso, 2019) and challenge the widely accepted tenets of good parenting focusing on cognitive development to the detriment of socio-emotional capabilities.

Conclusions

The first lockdown already revealed, in stark contrast with the declarative gender equality discourse, the reality of the slow change of gender norms in our society. When given the choice (i.e., both parents being at home with the children), the existing gender ideology largely delegated women as the main care giver. This was due partly to the gender system existing within the family system, and partly to

the different expectations, pressures and allowances organisations make differently for men and women. While these allowances are made in good spirit/with good intentions, they are only beneficial in the short term and hurt women's long-term career perspectives. Therefore, future policies need to be more mindful of the bigger picture of gender balance, and target much more the goal of rebalancing the stalled gender revolution at home. Because, as Gloria Steinem has already been stating for long time now, 'Women are not going to be equal outside of the home until men are equal in it.'

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ⁱ The term 'stalled gender revolution' refers to the uneven change in the gender system, with the focus and more advancements in women gaining more access to (equally) paid employment, but with less progress on men pursuing traditionally feminine jobs or take on more traditionally 'feminine' and responsibilities at home (England, 2010).

ⁱⁱ The WEIRD acronym refers to "Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic" countries

ⁱⁱⁱ In contrast to this, more communal forms of organising allow for more flexibility of arrangements – e.g., working mothers in Africa who leave children behind in the care of the extended family or who bring children along in some work-related activities.