

Jump-Starting the Struggle for Equality



For several decades women's success in the labor market was so breathtaking, so propulsive, that full gender equality seemed inevita-

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The traditional division of labor by gender was challenged from all sides. Women's share of the labor force, husbands' share of housework, the integration of occupations once categorized by gender and women's share of management jobs all rocketed upward from the 1970s till sometime in the 1990s. Women went from earning fewer than 10 percent of law and medicine degrees in 1970 to earning almost half of them by the early 2000s.

The very notion of a breadwinner-homemaker ideal family descended into quaint anachronism. Men's attitudes changed right along with women's.

The assumption of continuous progress has become so ingrained that critics now write as if the feminist steamroller has already reached its destination. The journalists Hanna Rosin ("The End of Men") and Liza Mundy ("The Richer Sex") proclaimed women's impending dominance. The conservative authors Kay S. Hymowitz ("Manning Up") and Christina Hoff Sommers ("The War Against Boys") worried that feminist progress was undermining masculinity and steering men toward ruin.

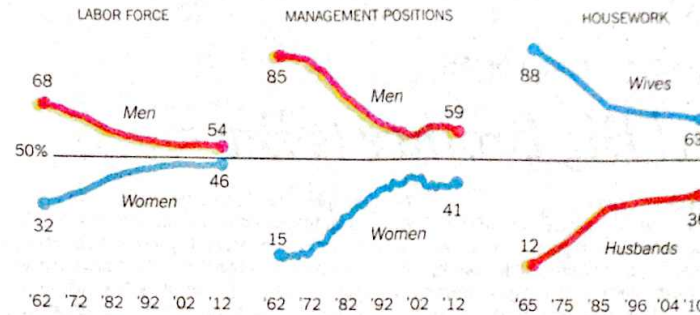
But in fact, the movement toward equality stopped. The labor force hit 46 percent female in 1994, and it hasn't changed much since. Women's full-time annual earnings were 76 percent of men's in 2001, and 77 percent in 2011. Although women do earn a majority of academic degrees, their specialties pay less, so that earnings even for women with doctorate degrees working full time are 77 percent of men's. Attitudinal changes also stalled. In two decades there has been little change in the level of agreement with the statement, "It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family."

After two steps forward, we were unprepared for the abrupt slowdown on the road to gender equality. So why did progress stall in the 1990s? First, despite the removal of many legal and social injustices, the movement away from traditional forms of gender segregation has remained decidedly one-directional. As the sociologist Paula England has shown, this is most apparent in education. If you look at female representation in the top fields of study since 1970, the pattern is

Women's Work

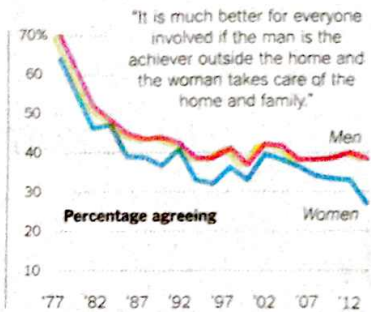
Gender roles changed rapidly for a time, with women streaming into the job market and men assuming a greater share of housework. Attitudes about the traditional roles of men and women in families also changed rapidly. Then the trends leveled off.

Gender share of



Sources: Integrated Public Use Microdata Survey, University of Minnesota; time use surveys; General Social Survey

Breadwinner-homemaker family



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clear. The most female-dominated majors remained that way; the male-dominated majors had continued increases in female representation through the early 2000s; and some heavily male-dominated ones saw dramatic spikes in women's share of degrees (which have now slowed or stalled). Strikingly absent is the substantial movement of men into even one female-dominated major.

The same is largely true of occupations, with the most female-dominated — such as librarians and early-childhood educators — remaining that way. Even registered nurses remain nearly 90 percent female despite a decade of increasing male presence (they were 92 percent

Men need to move into jobs considered female.

female a decade ago). And one of the most consequential gender divisions, the residential custody of children, remains stubbornly resistant to change. In the past four decades, the percentage of single-parent families headed by men has risen to just 16 percent from 10 percent.

Men aren't acting irrationally; women's work pays less, partly because of its cultural association with traditionally unpaid tasks. And there is a deep social stigma that attaches to men who are perceived as feminine — much more than the reverse (notice that social change means that women wear pants, not that men wear dresses). At the low end of the

labor market, where the men can't afford to be choosy, some men have taken on traditionally female positions, such as cooks and cleaners (where such jobs are majority-male outside of private homes), and low-skilled nurses' aides. But most men who can, choose to avoid female arenas. If more men don't — won't or can't — move into female fields, we hit a ceiling on integration, and with it gender equality.

The second hurdle we face is the failure to develop work-family policies that promote gender equality by enabling women to become parents without sacrificing their engagement at work and encouraging men to work in ways that do not sacrifice their engagement as parents. Unfortunately, momentum for such policy reform is hampered by the resurgent narrative that women don't really want it. The "opt-out revolution" story was that professional women — those who had gained the most from feminism and the new economy — gave up trying to make it on the career track. Of course, as long as there have been professional women, some have ended up on the family side of the work-family fork in the road. But in the last few decades that hasn't involved a large or growing proportion of women. Among married women in their 30s and 40s with children, college graduates are the most likely to work — three-quarters are in the labor force, and that participation rate has been unchanged for two decades.

When push comes to shove, the mother's career is most often the first to go, or

at least to be compromised. But despite the rhetoric of choice that has been adopted by many professional mothers who were actually forced out of inflexible work environments, women's behavior belies the idea that they do not want to combine work and family. Their movement into male-dominated fields and the rejection of traditional gender roles by large majorities of women all suggest that they remain ready to respond to a more welcoming environment.

On the flip side, moving men into the no-man's lands in the division of labor is daunting. Given the pay penalty for women's work, some professions have begun recruitment campaigns, especially in areas with labor shortages, such as nursing. They valiantly attempt to mobilize masculine imagery — comparing nursing to mountain climbing, using phrases like "adrenaline rush," and asking, "Are you man enough to be a nurse?" But that path toward gender integration runs decidedly uphill.

Done right, work-family integration policies can promote gender equality. If you want a society in which men are welcome and willing to be day care workers, you may need a workplace culture that accepts — or encourages — fathers' spending more time at home with their children. To unblock the path toward gender equality, these policies may be the best ideas we have.

This is an excerpt from *The Great Divide*, a series on inequality, at nytimes.com/opinionator.