

Caregiving Dads, Breadwinning Mums:

Transforming Gender in Work and Childcare?

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Executive Summary

Although men's and women's involvement in paid work and childcare has become increasingly similar over the past decades, the work and care arrangements of most British couples persistently reflect traditional gendered norms, with mothers as primary caregivers and fathers as main breadwinners. This gender inequality in the home both disadvantages women in the workplace and denies men the opportunity to develop close nurturing relationships with their children.

To identify routes and barriers to greater gender equality, this research examined parenting arrangements in which childcare responsibilities are shared equally or assumed primarily by the father. This is the first study to use a mixed-methods approach to examine couples' work and care arrangements from the perspectives of both mothers and fathers, uniquely comparing equal sharers, role-reversed and traditional couples in a single comprehensive design.

The quantitative phase drew on extensive survey data from a nationally representative sample of parents with children aged 11 or younger. The qualitative phase comprised 60 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 couples (where each partner was interviewed separately).

Three key questions were addressed:




(i) what do the parenting practices of equal sharers and role-reversed couples entail in terms of time distribution and task allocation? (ii) what are the facilitating economic, structural, and psychological factors that enable role-reversed couples and equal sharers to resist gendered parenting norms? and (iii) what are the consequences of their division of roles for wellbeing and relationship satisfaction?

Our findings show that both fathers and mothers in all parenting arrangements want to spend time with their children and be closely involved in their lives. However, most couples feel forced to identify a main carer with reduced involvement in paid work, and a main breadwinner with reduced involvement in childcare.




Opportunities for organising family life in ways that enable both parents to be equally involved in work and care are constrained by gendered parenting leave entitlements, long work hours cultures, limited options for flexible and part-time work, and expensive inaccessible childcare. Couples who overcome these obstacles are characterised by a strong commitment to gender equality, mothers' strong work identities and earnings, and fathers' desire to be heavily involved in raising their children.

Key findings





Traditional arrangements

-  In the majority of families, the mothers are the main carers and arrange their paid work to accommodate childcare, including long Maternity Leave, part-time work or flexible hours. The fathers carry the main responsibility for breadwinning and work full-time, long and often inflexible hours. These fathers share childcare in the evenings and weekends only.
-  25% of the fathers in traditional arrangements felt they were forced into their role and saw no other viable options. Only 30% felt they chose this division of responsibilities (compared to 46% of the fathers who were primary caregivers).
-  Mothers in traditional arrangements reported significantly lower wellbeing and relationship quality than mothers who shared childcare equally or reversed roles.

Reversing roles

-  Couples' decision to reverse roles was typically motivated by the mothers' greater attachment to work and higher earnings, combined with a desire to avoid or limit the use of formal childcare provision, and the fathers' desire to spend more time with their children.
-  These couples' day-to-day division of work and childcare generally mirrored that of the traditional couples, with the fathers being the main carers and arranging their paid work to accommodate childcare, and the mothers working full-time.
-  Compared to traditional couples, role-reversers tended to have a slightly more equal division of childcare, with greater involvement by the breadwinning mothers compared to the breadwinning fathers.

Equal sharing

-  The decision to share work and childcare equally was motivated by egalitarian gender ideologies and an expectation of a 50/50 split of family responsibilities, as well as fathers' desire to spend more time with children and the importance attributed to mothers' paid work.
-  Equal sharers described conscious efforts to achieve equality, having to "fight for" their chosen arrangement by overcoming barriers which facilitate a female carer/male breadwinner division.
-  Both fathers and mothers who were equal sharers worked shorter hours than main breadwinners and spent more time with their children as sole caregivers.
-  Equal sharing mothers had the highest levels of satisfaction with their division of responsibilities, with 83% reporting they were satisfied or very satisfied (compared to 60% of mothers in traditional arrangements and 52% of mothers who reversed roles). Equal sharers tended more than other parents to perceive their arrangement as resulting from their conscious choice and were the least likely to want it to change.

Recommendations

Equal parenting leave entitlement, including non-transferable ‘use-it-or-lose-it’ Parental Leave for fathers

Gendered policies around leave for parenting do not align with couples’ commitment to equality, fathers’ desire to be closely involved in their children’s lives, and mothers’ strong attachment to work. Fathers who otherwise shared childcare equally or were the main caregivers were entitled to two weeks of Paternity Leave only, while their partners were paid to stay at home for the first 39 weeks of the child’s life. Shared Parental Leave was rarely utilised, either because couples were not entitled, could not afford the reduction in the father’s income, or the mothers did not want to lose their time with their child by reducing their Maternity Leave. These gendered leave policies therefore restrict couples’ choices and steer them into a traditional division of family roles despite their beliefs, preferences and parenting arrangements.

Government policies supporting shorter and more flexible work hours for both fathers and mothers

Flexibility in working hours, working from home, part-time working and emphasis on product/output-based (rather than time-based) work were all identified by parents as beneficial to managing childcare. Both women and men, however, reported that in practice there are barriers to securing such work arrangements, especially for more desirable or senior roles, with some suggesting that this was particularly a problem for men. In addition, parents whose partner’s work commitments were less flexible than their own felt forced to arrange their work around their partner’s job to facilitate childcare. This meant indirectly prioritising the career of the less flexible partner, most often the father. In this way, flexible and part-time working only for mothers can exacerbate inequalities in arrangements, as well as potentially impacting negatively on their career prospects. Parents would like to see the normalisation of part-time and flexible working for both fathers and mothers, and regardless of seniority.

Clearer, more visible workplace policies and underpinning family-friendly cultures

Our findings suggest that parents’ experiences of workplaces are often dependent on individualised factors such as supportive or unsupportive managers, and employees are sometimes made responsible for being aware of policies and asserting their entitlement. Employers can help to provide more consistently positive experiences for workers who are carers by improving clarity, knowledge and visibility around existing state and workplace specific policies and by encouraging family-friendly workplace cultures.

High quality affordable childcare provision to enable both parents to return to work after parenting leave

In addition to the lack of shorter hours and flexible work arrangements, the pressure on parents to identify a main caregiver and a main breadwinner is exacerbated by the lack of childcare alternatives. This is particularly difficult in early years as unaffordable formal childcare often means that one parent must stay at home until the child turns 3 years old and qualifies for (limited) free provision. Our findings suggest that parents also find it difficult to juggle work commitments with childcare after school/nursery and during school holidays. To enable both parents to maintain their involvement in paid work, affordable, formal and high-quality childcare provision should be made available from the age of 6 months.

Overall, the findings point to a discrepancy between current state and workplace policies and parents’ actual views and preferences. Gender norms and parents’ priorities are slowly changing, whereas outdated gendered policies continue to reinforce traditional norms and encourage mothers to stay at home or work part-time and fathers to work full time. These policies are incompatible with fathers’ desire to spend more time with their children and work shorter and more flexible hours. They are also incompatible with mothers’ strong work identities and desire to share family work with their partners. This research focuses on couples who managed to overcome the barriers posed by gendered policies and achieve greater equality in their family. Through their actions, they contribute to a gradual pressure that can potentially lead to the policy changes indicated in this report.

