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WORKING TIME, GENDER DIVISION OF LABOR,
AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Abstract

This paper suggests that the redesign of working time can be an important key to the achievement of equal status for women in the labor market. It maintains that it is women's traditionally much heavier household and childcare work role and primary responsibility that push women into part-time work, interrupt and limit their occupational careers, reinforce gender occupational segregation, keeping their occupational income and status lower than those of their male partners, and thus reinforce the notion of the inevitability of the unequal gender division of labor in paid and in unpaid work, thus perpetuating the vicious circle. The problem, thus, is, how to break the circle? The solution advocated in this paper is that both genders should share dual work roles and equal parenting. To achieve this the radical reduction of the work days, and the flexible coordination of the working schedules of all parents (or educators) of younger children have to be legitimated and facilitated. The Swedish pioneering legislation of parental baby leave, of parental leave for the care of sick children, and the option of a six-hour workday for parents of children up to age eight, are examined.

My thesis is that in modern industrialized societies the redesign of working time is potentially the key to the achievement of equal status for women in paid occupational work, and therefore also to the achievement of equal status in society. "Redesign of working time" usually means a) reduction of the hours of daily, weekly, yearly or lifetime work of the

normal "fulltime" worker, and b) the flexibilization of the currently rather rigid positioning of normal working time, especially within both the 24 hour day and the week. Certain forms of reduction when combined with certain forms of flexibilization--by no means all currently discussed, suggested, or practiced--may have a positive influence on the position of women.

Although since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution the norms of working time have changed enormously, they are still cut to the measure of men who are supposed not to have to attend to a household, and certainly not to children. The majority of adult women always had, and still have difficulty in conforming to the ruling norms of full-time work, because most adult employed women still have a second unpaid work role.

There exists a vicious circle here. Women are still considered by most men--and also by a large proportion of women--to have the primary responsibility for the welfare of their children and for all the care-work and all the housework connected with the raising of children; therefore the time available to them for occupational work is limited; they are tied to family mealtimes, to children's bedtimes, and to the opening and closing times of private and public childminders, kindergartens and schools; consequently they tend to work "part time", i.e., less than the norm for full-time work for the day, the week, the year, the occupation. Everywhere a much larger proportion of employed women than men work part-time(1). In some cases part-time workers are paid less per hour than full-time workers(2). They have less vacations, less fringe benefits, greater non-membership of pension schemes, and less insurance against sickness, accidents, old age or unemployment(3). Most common are fewer or no chances for promotion to better-paid positions of responsibility(4). Obviously most part-time workers

have smaller incomes (and smaller pensions) than most full-time workers and this means that most women who work part-time earn considerably less than their male partners(5). Consequently the husband's or male partner's occupational work will be taken more seriously, family decisions will give his training, or search for a job, position, or need for a move, preference over hers. It will be considered as for the benefit of the family that he continues to work full-time or even overtime. Consequently he has little time left for routine daily housework and childcare and so the woman continues to perform most or all of the domestic and childcare work and to accept primary responsibility for them. She continues to look for work as near as possible to home and at hours compatible with the needs of children and partner--which means that she and not he tends to accept part-time and temporary work, and to be restricted to work stereotyped as women's work, where workhours may be more compatible, yet pay and prestige are usually inferior. It is she and not he who will be ready to interrupt occupational work for family emergencies, or at birth and during the infancy of children, or when a child or a parent falls sick, or when the family moves. Consequently her occupational income and status remain lower than his, so that views held regarding the present unequal division of labor between the genders as being both inevitable and reasonable are strengthened--and the vicious circle continues.

Certainly the length of the conventional work-day and the rigidity of full-time work-schedules are not the only factors that are responsible for the persistence of gender segregation of occupations(6), and for the prevalence of women in inferior secondary labor markets--yet they appear to me to be a major factor, and a link which--if broken--could break this vicious circle(7).

Engels considered the fact that employed women had also to perform a separate, unpaid, work role at home, as the root cause of their inferior status in industrial capitalist society. His proposed remedies were the abolition of "bourgeois marriage" and the family household, and the "socialization" of housework to permit women's full participation in production. What Engels hoped for was the abolition of the entire private "reproductive" work role. He did not consider that private household and childcare work could ever be shared equally by women and men.

Although Engels' pioneering--though not very clear--ideas have been very influential, attempts to organize life without any private family households as places of basic nurturance for adults and children alike, have been rare, mostly shortlived, and have not resulted in a more equitable division of labor between the genders. Yet the provision of adequate and affordable non-domestic daycare for infants and preschool children, as well as lunches and afternoon supervision for kindergarten and school children--as forms of a less radical "socialization" of childcare--have become central goals of the new women's movement. Wherever little has been achieved in this area, young women tend even today to despair of the possibility of combining motherhood and a decent job, let alone a career(8).

Yet even in those countries, where the situation is more favourable, it has been realized that the problem of the unjust division of labor between the genders cannot be solved by daycare alone(9). Doubts as to the desirability of institutional daycare for babies, and of all-day care for very young children outside their homes are frequently voiced and even the desirability of too much institutional education for older children is being challenged by believers in "deschooling" within the women's movement(10).

Obviously the logical solution is the adoption of a combination of the two workroles, the paid occupational one, and the unpaid housework/childcare one, as the norm for both genders. It has been adequately demonstrated that men are capable of performing housework and childcare, including also infant care, and that many of them tend to benefit psychologically from it(11). Yet the fact that progress in this direction has been so slow, forces us to look for the major obstacles.

The present full-time workday, especially where paid or unpaid overtime is taken for granted, leaves many men too little time to do half of the unpaid work needed, especially in households with children(12). The norm of long work hours for men who are committed to their occupation or profession, is still so strong, that few men are ready to apply for shorter, so called part-time work, even when they can afford a reduction in income, because most are afraid of no longer being taken seriously by employers and by colleagues(13).

What kind of reduction of the norm of full-time work could remove this obstacle to men's equal sharing of the domestic workrole? It would have to be a sizeable and noticeable reduction, not just half an hour a week each year. Reductions should preferably be of each work day, not of the week or of the year: routine childcare and housework have to be performed, and therefore should be shared, on each and every day(14).

The introduction of the seven hour workday as the general norm of full-time work would be an important step forward. It would however not be sufficient. It should be complemented by a regulation which grants every man or woman who raises a child under the age of eight, the right to a six hour workday. This regulation exists in Sweden, but has not yet been very

successful in attracting men towards this option. Nevertheless it has been valuable in completely legitimizing the "part-time work" - i.e. the six hour workday - of a large group of mothers of younger children, as it has demonstrated that they can successfully perform highly qualified, professional and responsible work.

Research into the reasons for not attracting more fathers to this voluntary six hour workday is currently under way(15). As tentative guesses I would like to suggest a) the still too large gap between the prevalent norm of the eight hour day plus overtime for men, and the suggested parents' six hour work day(16) , and b) insufficient financial compensation. (Those choosing this shorter parents' workday could--if they previously had worked longer hours--be compensated for loss of income, for example, by a reduction in income tax.) Social pressure on employers to comply fully with the law, has obviously been easiest in the public service sector, and on fathers, wherever two parents are employed in the same organization. Objections which claim that such a provision would cause discrimination against parents as a group, seem to me rather unlikely, especially if the reform does not involve employers in extra costs. Even in Sweden, which has a rather low birthrate, parents of children up to age eight make up one fourth of the entire labor force(17).

If most parents would work not more than six hours a day, five days a week, then ,if each parent (or partner in child raising) would contribute about two hours of housework and childcare on each working day and on one day of the weekend and perhaps three hours on the second day of the weekend, then thirty weekly hours of family work could be performed--without any partner having an overheavy workload on any day.

The reduction of the parents' workday to six hours, however, does not by itself solve adequately the problem of parental presence, e.g., of one parent being available to attend to children in the morning, to bring them to daycare at a reasonable time, and one parent collecting or waiting at home after kindergarten or school. To achieve this, we need flexibilization of working time of a special kind. The two six hour shifts should not start and finish at the same times; ideally one parent's shift should start before the child or children's day starts--and the other's afterwards.

Different arrangements would be suited to different stages in the life of children . The radical innovation would be that employers, unions and workmates would have to realize that the working-time needs of two egalitarian childraising partners are equally legitimate, and have to be accommodated and coordinated.

Now to a most important reduction of working time over the life course: parental leave or the baby year. A successful example of this is the Swedish, where both parents of each baby have the right to divide between themselves a leave of from nine to eighteen months, with their jobs and positions protected. The sharing is voluntary, though definitely encouraged. During the first nine months the leavetaking parent is paid ninety percent of his or her wage or salary--during the additional months, somewhat less. (See Naesman/Falkenberg 1989, Statistics Sweden 1985, Women and Men 1988). As the first year after the birth of a baby has caused in the past most employed women to interrupt their employment, whereas it hardly affected the employment records of men, equalization here is of great importance for the achievement of equal status for women in occupational work.

It should be remembered that up to now fathers are allowed (but

rarely encouraged) to share in "maternity leave" in only 7 out of 14 European countries, and in most countries paid maternity leave is much shorter, longer optional leave being either unpaid or minimally subsidized, (See Boh, 1987, pp.165,157).

Genuine and generous parental leave also is a crucial step in the long struggle for equal parenting: the traditional lack of body contact between fathers and their newborn infants creates in many men subsequent difficulties in relating and communicating with their children. In Sweden, in 1974, during the first year of the reform only three percent of all leavetakers were new fathers, but by 1986 this has already risen to twenty-three percent, and continues to increase. In a follow-up of the fathers of children born in 1983, during the first 18 months the proportion of men among the parents on leave increased to almost 30 per cent, although it has to be remembered that fathers' average periods of leave are still much shorter than mothers'. Fathers, more often than mothers choose to take leave of absence on a part-time basis, as half or a quarter of a day. The higher the income of the mother the more often the father takes parental leave(18).

Finally, there is another form of work interruption which up to now has affected mostly women, and this is the care of sick children. Up to now fathers are allowed to share in the sick leave for their own children in only 6 out of 14 European countries. In Sweden most generous leave provisions for each child under 12 (up to 90 days a year) were explicitly tailored for both parents; by 1986, parents that used it were 41 percent men, and men used 34 percent of the total number of days (19).

Single parents, raising their children without a partner, obviously, have special working-time needs, as well as special needs for non-domestic

childcare and special needs for income maintenance, a subject too big to discuss here. Obviously single parents - mothers as well as fathers - urgently need the legitimation of reduced work days(20) and sufficient leave for the care of sick children, but this will not suffice to solve all their special problems.

There are indeed some who cast doubt on the very importance of, as well as on the chances for, equal parenting, because of the growth of the incidence of divorce and of single parent families in many industrialized countries. It should be pointed out here that - in most industrialized societies - the great majority of children under eight still are being raised, most of the time, in two-parent families (see Boh, 1987, pp.158-59 for her most interesting statistics); therefore the status of the majority of women with children would potentially benefit from the facilitation of equal parenting through the redesign of working time.

It should also be pointed out, that as a recent American study has demonstrated, there are divorced parents who live at not too great a distance from each other, who want to, and also manage to, share childcare, and some of them even aim at genuine equal parenting. As this usually involves the children's spending certain days and nights alternatively at each parent's household, these parents may need specific forms of working time reduction and flexibilization, such as very compressed work weeks, as well as the possibility to coordinate their arrangements.

All strategies of working-time reduction or flexibilization that combat unemployment are of course of special interest to women. Yet all proposals of reduction or flexibilization should be carefully examined in the light of the twin goals for women of equal status in paid occupational work, and of

equal sharing of housework and childcare between the genders.

N O T E S

1. Share of part-time workers in total employment by gender, 1983

Country	women	men
Canada	26.2	7.6
France	20.0	2.5
Fed. Rep. Germany	30.0	1.7
Japan	29.2	7.1
Netherlands	49.7	6.8
Sweden	37.1	6.0
United Kingdom	41.3	3.3
United States	22.3	7.7

Note: the U.S. figures are for 1982 and refer to voluntary part time only.

Source: Chris de Neubourg, 1985, p. 551.

2. This was a widespread practice. Equal pay per hour for part-time work has become a legal requirement under the ILO conventions of 1951 and 1958. Many countries have, however, not yet fully adopted them. A new form of pay discrimination for part-time workers is currently being created in some cases in the FRG where full-time weekly hours are being reduced without reduction in pay, thus slightly raising the hourly pay of all full-time workers, but leaving part-time workers at the old rate.

3. Examples for fringe benefits are the thirteenth month, subsidies for transportation, meals, and bonuses. Part-time and temporary employees in the teaching professions frequently are not paid during the long summer vacation and are not eligible for sabbaticals and

- other study leaves. Discrimination in social security rights is most injurious for those who work part time for very few weekly hours. For example, in the FRG, those who work nineteen hours or less per week are not entitled to unemployment benefits. Minimal part-time workers are often excluded even from the public health, accident and old-age insurance systems. In all those countries where the general (public or national) pension scheme is very inadequate, most male employees are likely to be members of some supplementary group pension scheme. Part-time and temporary workers--mostly women--are usually not accepted as members.
4. Policies of no promotion for part-time workers are usually justified by the excuse that promotion is to positions of higher responsibility, that responsibility usually involves supervision and that supervision requires presence during the entire workday. That this excuse does not hold is proven by the success of job sharing and of other forms of cooperation of part-time workers in supervisory and other positions of responsibility.
 5. In 1985 the average gender pay differential in Western Europe was 30%.
See Vogel-Polsky, 1985, p.254.
 6. A classical example of women's concern for work hours that are compatible with their traditionally sole responsibility for children, leading to the gender segregation of occupations is the semi-profession of grade-school teaching which became female stereotyped as soon as women teachers were no longer fired on marriage..For further discussion see Reskin 1984.
 7. The misunderstanding to avoid here is rooted in the assumption that

- institutions such as "normal working time" are responsible for gender segregation in work. Behind such institutions stand the short-term interests of men to segregate and thus to discriminate. These can be overcome only by pressure to introduce new rules that make gender equality more profitable even in the short run. See Reskin,1988.
8. Services needed are not only day care for preschoolers, but also lunches for kindergarten and school children. In countries where the latter are not provided, even medium and longer part-time work is closed to most mothers of younger children.
 9. Sweden had an enormous growth of public day care institutions; in 1987 70 percent of children between 9 months and 6 years were cared for in municipal day care centres or municipally supported family day care and an additional 6 percent in some other form of municipal child care. See Naesman/Falkenberg 1989 p.15; and yet the concern there is with the limitation of the hours of out-of-home care of younger children. It is considered there an excess if both parents of younger children work eight hours a day; moreover, Swedish children of less than 9 months of age are supposed to be cared for at home.
 10. For a U.S. opposition to long school days even for older children on the ground that schools tend to be pro-establishment, see Hunt and Hunt, 1985.
 11. A bio-social argument against equal parenting that has been refuted by now is the claim that men lack the capacity to communicate with preverbal infants. See Rossi 1977 and 1984; for refutations see Fthenakis 1985,Hoff and Scholz 1985,Napp-Peters 1987,Parke 1981.

12. New time budget figures show that even in times of mass unemployment overtime remains a fixture of men's employment. The union achievement of double the rate for overtime as well as of the high cost of insurance for each worker to employers, together have unintentionally created a vested interest for both employer and employee to continue practicing overtime work--to the detriment of the unemployed and the female partners of the employed.
13. The opinion that highly qualified and professional workers objectively can do a good job only if they work long hours is widespread even among fellow (male) sociologists.
14. Examples of collusion of male union leaders with employers against the daily reduction of work hours in favour of annual reduction, are Sweden in the 'seventies, when the project to declare the six-hour day as the national goal was buried in favour of a fifth week of paid summer-vacation, and - in the FRG - current efforts of leaders of several unions to procure for all their full-time working members additional free days rather than a daily reduction of work hours.
15. The study is currently conducted by Elisabet Naesmann and Eva Falkenberg at the Arbetslivscentrumm. Stockholm. Although there are no signs of discrimination against all parents as a group, the two researchers have found some cases of individual discrimination against fathers who had taken parental leave or the six hour day, who on their return to full-time work did not obtain the same position as before - contrary to the law.
16. An interesting finding concerning the pernicious effect of overtime, is the fact that even previously very gender-egalitarian younger men

revert to the traditional male rejection of housework and childcare, after a protracted period of overtime. (Communication by Anita Rissler, Psychology Department, Stockholm University.)

17. It is convenient to take eight as the minimum age for the ability to stay alone for some time without the supervision of an adult. The Swedish Civil Service has already raised this age for the children of its employees to twelve.

18. See Naesman/Falkenberg 1989, Statistics Sweden, 1985, p.20, Women and Men 1988.

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