

## EQUAL PARENTING

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1. The Universal characteristic of the unequal division of labour between the sexes is unequal parenting.
2. This aspect of, the inequality of the sexes, I contend, is still the central obstacle to the achievement of autonomy for women, for their attainment of a degree of freedom which should enable them to plan their lives, and a degree of participation in decision-making institutions and processes that is equal to that of men.
3. In what follows I shall address the problem as it appears in democratic industrialized countries. The present situation is that in which the work of child care - i.e. the feeding, cleaning, watching, nurturing and training of infants and children - plus all the house work involved in maintaining a household catering to children, is performed usually entirely but at least predominantly by the mother. In addition, the responsibility and initiative for child care rests almost universally with the mother - even in those partnerships where men share in household and child care work.

4. Obviously, this one-sided burden of and responsibility for child care handicaps most mothers in their competition with men in the labour market. Moreover, the very supposition that this limitation is the normal lot of all, women, at least potentially, is the chief basis - and excuse - on which the assumption rests that women as a category tend to be less productive workers than men and have a shorter work-life than men. It is thus the basis for a variety ,of discriminations - of pay, fringe benefits, job security, training and promotion - and of the occupational segregation which perpetuates discrimination despite laws which forbid it.
5. All this is well-known in the women's movement, where a few solutions to the problem have been suggested, some of which have also been tried out. The oldest suggestion was to socialize household and child-care maximally. The crucial area of child care - the case of babies and infants - cannot be treated satisfactorily on these lines. It was also suggested that women's position in the labour market be strengthened, that more women achieve positions of power there, on the supposition that then women's position in the family will thereby also improve so they then could effectively demand of their spouses an equal division of labour in the family. It did not work because there is a vicious cycle here. It was suggested that a prolonged process of education and the purging, of the institutions of education, the media and advertising of traditional sexism would cause a new generation of men to share equally both housework and parenting. It does not work, except for a small minority of

men. Amongst radical feminists more radical solutions were voiced. Two of these stand out. The most spectacular one is the proposal which stands out is that of women's refusal of biological reproduction and putting the hope of the freedom for womankind in the development of the artificial womb. This is both questionable and impractical. The other is the total abolition of all long-term heterosexual bonding such as marriage or long-term cohabitation - on the supposition that all heterosexual relations are bound to become relations of domination and dependence. This, of course, consigns the burden of child-care to women. The logical sequel to this is the recently voiced slogan "Pay for house-work", which apparently means public support for women's private housework and child-care. Without discussing any other implications of this proposal, one may assume it to be obvious that any payments out of the public purse will not gain women equal access to resources, so that the inequality will thereby be perpetuated.

6. My own contention is that equal parenting is both essential and today is feasible. Yet for its implementation clearly focused changes are required - both in the antiquated pattern of household and family as well as, indeed primarily, in the sphere of work. Describing the feasibility, the present turbulent situation in which it might be implemented, and outlining a strategy for this implementation, I will close the present discussion.
7. The two major technological advances of the last two decades which make equal parenting feasible are as follows.

The first is medical and the second is the electronic revolution in the work place. The new methods of contraception and sterilization, as well as those of nearly risk-free early interruption of pregnancy, have made the separation of sex and reproduction practically though not ideally implementable. Consequently, women can these days decide if and when they want to bear children, and for the first time the available techniques are sufficiently reliable and in most western countries legally available. The second, the automation of the micro-computer, has increased productivity to the point that the work week of 40 hours is no longer necessary; indeed if the level of production and the range of goods and services were to remain constant without the reduction of work hours, there would necessarily be a massive reduction of available jobs. The other potential effect of the micro-computer revolution is the feasibility of the decentralization of much work to the home.

8. The two above mentioned technical advances were among the factors causing a great, deal of turbulent change both in the sphere of sexual lifestyle and family as well as in the sphere of work. In the example has the erstwhile of a legally married couple and their children with the man as bread-winner and the wife as unpaid housekeeper/child-care taker in the U.S. become a minority institution. The incidence of marriage has declined, the age of first marriage has risen and the divorce rate has continued to climb; the birth rate has drastically declined, one child families have been accepted as normal and the childless lifestyle is on the way to be

accepted. The cohabitation of unmarried heterosexual couples has become a generally accepted feature of western life, and that of homosexual and lesbian adults has become more widely accepted. The rash of communal households and settlements of the sixties and seventies appears to have dwindled.

9. In the sphere of work the most drastic change has been the massive influx of women into the labour market, including younger married women. Yet the percentage of employed women working part-time i.e. less than the norm of year-round work weeks is much higher than that of men. The enormous rise in the cost of energy and the competition of low wage countries has severely shaken the older industrial base of western countries; the shrunken cohorts of students and the shrinking of expenditure for public services have compounded the problem of unemployment, causing some economists to doubt the feasibility of ever returning to full-employment. Quality of Working Life reform projects have demonstrated that work organizations can function productively while structuring their tasks less hierarchically, and in a much less fragmented way and making work time arrangements much more flexible.
10. How can all these changes and upheavals be used for facilitating the acceptance of a new social norm of equal parenting? By equal parenting I mean that mothers and fathers share equally in the work, responsibility and initiative for the rearing of their children. I content that both equity between the sexes and the need for individual development

demand that both parents will not be required to interrupt their occupational activity because of the need of looking after and catering for young children at home. Whereas .for the first year of the life a baby parents should be able to choose between either alternating parenting leaves, or work days of not more than 4 hours for both~ the subsequent child care needs can be dealt with if the normal work day for all were one of not more than 6 hours. Of course, short distances between home and work place, the possibility to do part of the work at home and cooperative child watching arrangements between neighbouring couples can all make things easier. In addition to the shortening of the workday another revolutionary change would be demanded from employers, fellow employees and unions. It would have to be accepted that the social and moral duty of equal parenting obliges employers to facilitate the complimentary arrangement of the work hours of two parents if both work in the same organization this is easier, otherwise it will demand a new form of collaboration between organizations.

11. Obviously, a relatively stable, long-term domestic partnership between the parents should be most conducive to equal parenting once the world of work recognizes this as the norm. It may be hoped that much of the tensions that disrupt so many marriages would dissipate once genuine equity in marriage becomes a reality. Yet the current trend towards impermanence in sexual unions cannot be suddenly reversed. In the case of separation or divorce dual custody might often permit the continuation of equal parenting. The

need of those women (or men) who reject any stable heterosexual relationship but still want to rear children has to be recognized. For some a stable same-sex partnership may offer equal parenting. Others may find some alternative supportive adult cooperation in child-care. All such arrangements should be recognized by the world of work.

12. In conclusion, we should, in our quest for the equal empowerment of women, seek the recognition by the world of work of the problem and of the need to facilitate equal parenting.

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