

## Outline + Discuss the View That Roles of Men and Women in the Family are Becoming More Equal

The aim of this essay is to attempt to come to a conclusion as to whether the gender roles within the modern-day family are equal, whether they are becoming more equal, and whether they shall ever be equal. In doing this, we shall have to study the views and opinions of many schools of thought, the results of different studies, and recognise and fully appreciate the arguments of different people and groups.

The title question itself raises many debateable points, as it makes assumptions that ignore the diversity of the family. Firstly, and most obviously, the question assumes we shall only deal with heterosexually based families, not same-sex relationships. While same-sex families most definitely exist, they are a minority and do not really come into the issue of gender, therefore I shall ignore them for the course of this essay. Secondly, no two families are exactly the same. Families in different countries will no doubt have different attitudes on the subject of equality, and there will be noticeable differences across race, class and culture divisions, as well as between two different families with (superficially at least) a lot in common. This type of diversity would require its own set of studies and essays, and so for the sake of this essay I shall limit my studies to families from this country, and to statistical evidence; rather than individual families.

There are many different views concerning the equality between men and women in the family. The traditional nuclear family as we consider it today would be a married man and woman with children, with the man going out to paid employment and the woman staying at home to do housework and look after the children. In *The Symmetrical Family* (1973), Willmott and Young identified these roles as the “breadwinner” and the “housewife”. They labelled the traditional nuclear family the “Asymmetrical Family”, and claimed it to be a phase that was a by-product of industrialisation. They argued that in a post-industrial era, the family would move into the “Symmetrical”, or “egalitarian”, phase; where family roles would be shared equally between partners, with no differences

between gender roles. Their study also claimed to have evidence that in 1973, Britain was moving into this "Symmetrical" family phase. Willmott and Young's views are similar to those of Postmodernists, a sociological school of thought that developed in the 1980s. Postmodernists believe that we live in a postmodern world, where differences in gender, race, class etc are now obsolete. As a result, they see gender roles in the family to be equal and egalitarian, and claim that any inequality or dissimilarity between gender roles in individual families is due to the choice of the members within the family.

Many people have attacked Willmott and Young's study, claiming insignificant evidence and inaccurate methodology to back up their conclusions. Edgell's *Middle Class Couples* (1980) claims that while the division of housework is more equal than in the past, the vast majority of families are far from being egalitarian. Edgell also puts emphasis on the fact that the division power within the family also still seems unequal, with men making the majority of decisions for the family. Many feminists also claimed that the statistics show that men still do a disproportionately small amount of work at home.

While some more liberal feminists believe we are on a steady path to gender equality within the family, many more hard-line and radical feminists argue that gender roles are far from equal. Ann Oakley's *The Sociology of Housework* (1974) and *Housewife* (1976) argue that modern women work a 'double-shift', juggling full-time employment and housework. Oakley claims that "One occupation in particular, that of housewife, is exclusively feminine. In Britain, 76% of all employed women are housewives and so are 93% of non-employed women..." - *Housewife* (1976). She argues that while feminism has forced change in waged employment, social attitudes in the home remain the same. According to Oakley, men do very little in the home, with dishwashing being the only housework men do more than women. She also argues that men see doing housework as a favour to their wives, rather than a duty; and that childcare for most men is merely a spasmodic activity of recreation.

Many other sociologists attack Oakley's views, accusing her of hypocrisy as she attacked Willmott and Young's methodology, while her own studies into housework

completely ignore the more traditional male jobs, such as DIY, operating machinery, gardening, simple household repairs and so on.

A. Warde's *Domestic Divisions of Labour* (1990) offers a more well rounded view: \*

	Male Partner	Female Partner	Shared
Plastering	32	4	2
Tidying Up	2	67	23
Cooking	4	77	17
Checking Car Oil	79	9	2
Bathing Children	22	44	33

It may also be important that the female-dominated jobs (Tidying up, Cooking, Bathing children) are much more often 'shared' than the male-dominated ones (Checking Car Oil, Plastering)

Burghes (1997) argues against Oakley's dismissal of male childcare, stating that more fathers are taking an active role in the emotional development and support of their children.

Marxists argue that the traditional nuclear family was merely a way for the capitalist class to control and exploit the proletariat through ideology. Therefore, Marxist-Feminists believe in a 'patriarchal ideology', in which girls are socialised into a male-led world to accept their role as housewives, and make marriage and family their main goal. In turn, this will benefit the capitalist society by keeping the status quo, and creating a new generation of similarly socialised male workers and female housewives. Marxist-Feminists believe this patriarchy occurs at all levels of society, from making girls wear skirts to advertising dolls on television, and that to truly achieve gender equality we must dispense with socialising our children into gender roles.

People often dismiss this view, claiming that gaining equality should not mean compromising identity, and many other feminists believe that retaining their femininity is as important a part of the struggle for equality as gaining equal rights.

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\* This table is taken from pg 60 of *Sociology for AS Level*, by Stephen Moore, Steve Chapman and Dave Aiken (HarperCollins; Hammersmith, London; 2001)

The New Right believe that the nuclear family is the ideal family structure, and that Britain went through a 'Golden Age' during the 1950s. Since then, they claim that feminism and equal rights have caused women to demand jobs, and thus be absent from home. As a result, the New Right argue that this puts stress on the nuclear family, often tearing it apart, and that absent parents cause deviance and social problems amongst their children. They claim that this has caused a decline in the family, and an increase in what they consider social problems (egg divorce, single-parent families). They believe that the current equal rights movement is wrong, and that people should return to the traditional nuclear family, which gives everyone an equal but separate, individual role.

These views are similar to those of functionalists. Functionalists also believe that the nuclear family is the perfect and desired family type, as each member is supported within the family unit, and each person agrees on their role within the family to keep it working. Robin Fox (1969) argued that roles in the family were based on biological rules, while Talcott Parsons (1955) took a similar view, claiming that naturally women are best at 'expressive' roles, such as caring, empathising and socialising, while men are best at 'instrumental' roles, such as working for money. Therefore, functionalists believe that biological factors determine gender roles within the family, and the traditional roles within the nuclear family are the perfect representation of these roles. What is more, functionalist claim there is a consensus within the family, whereby all members of the family agree to these roles.

These functionalist and new right views are viciously attacked by Marxists, feminists and postmodernists, all of whom agree that gender roles are culturally, not biologically, determined. Marxist-feminists claim that the consensus is an illusion, as women only accept their roles in the traditional family as they have been socialised to do so by patriarchal ideologies. All feminists also disagree with the New Right idea of the 'perfect' nuclear family and the 'Golden Age', claiming that all these things did were control and manipulate women, and that roles within such families were never equal.

As this essay has shown us, views on gender roles in the family are fiercely contested, and opinions differ drastically. Functionalists and the New Right insist that gender roles in the family are biologically intended to be different, and were most equal in the traditional, nuclear family. Postmodernists and followers of Willmott and Young claim we have moved into an era of egalitarianism, where gender roles are shared and equal. Feminists argue that while there has been a small amount of progress, gender roles are far from equal, and females still have a much worse 'deal' than males.

I have attempted to fully understand all these points of view, and come to a fair conclusion. In truth, it seems to me that the real nature of gender roles within the family is somewhere between all these points of view. I believe that as we currently stand, gender roles are equal, but not egalitarian. More males share more of the housework and childcare than ever, while more females are pursuing careers and learning what were traditionally 'male' skills (eg DIY, repair, vehicle maintenance etc). People tend to still do jobs that were traditionally considered 'right' for their sex, and there are most definitely still differences between the genders, but these boundaries are being pushed every day, and more and more families are sharing more jobs and decisions. I think we must remember that social attitudes take more time to change than social actions, and we must recognise that change is occurring. Since the 1970s, when Ann Oakley wrote her books on housework, we have seen the rise of the 'new man' and 'house-husbands'. Meanwhile, more and more women are proving Fox's and Parsons' theories of biologically determined roles to be wrong.

Not all families will follow the statistics; there will always be a few male-dominated households, just as there are now 'role-reversal' families. And families will always differ slightly from each other. But within a few generations, I believe that Willmott and Young's vision of an egalitarian family will become our view of the majority of families, as we're halfway there already.

## Bibliography

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