

Does motherhood make women more traditional?

Posted on December 18, 2017 by Gender & Society

By Muzhi Zhou

As a PhD scholar working on gender and family issues, and as a woman of childbearing age, I spend a lot of time thinking about the balance between work and family. I have witnessed many of my female friends move away from their promising careers to be a dedicated caregiver and educator for their young children. They shared with me their struggles and conflicting feelings in the change of roles. Those who did go back to work after maternity leave told me their lives had changed irrevocably, and they now felt that, despite what they had previously been led to believe, you could not have it all. If motherhood changes women's lives so much, does it change their views about the roles of women and men as well? I ask this question in my Gender & Society article (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0891243217732320>).

The conflict between women's employment and child-rearing responsibilities

I have always been interested in the impact of motherhood on women's lives and identity. The most striking fact is that in many developed countries, women are outperforming men in education and participating in the labour market at a similar level as men are. However, women's labour market activity declines substantially once they become mothers. Many leave the labour market, at least temporarily, to fulfill their child-rearing responsibilities. Others are struggling to achieve a balance between work and family.



In the United Kingdom, where I now live and study, employed mothers can have a maximum 52 weeks (up to 39 weeks are paid) of maternity leave. Formal childcare is extremely costly. The cost for a nursery school is high, starting at £30 (about \$39) per day. For many women, it is unrealistic, uneconomic, or not ideal to work and spend most of the earnings on day care. National statistics show that in 2014, 61 percent of women with dependent children aged under five were working, of whom 58 percent were working part time (http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_388440.pdf). For many mothers, leaving the labour market to care for children seems to be the only choice, despite their earlier needs, efforts, and desires in career development. Those who maintain a full-time job as mothers are subject to great tension between work and family, especially when women are still expected to prioritize the need of children. In other words, the career of a mother, who has to care one or more young children, is likely to be at stake.

Women's gender attitudes are related to how they settle the conflict

The substantial conflict between women's employment and child-rearing responsibilities can be powerful enough to provoke a change in women's gender attitudes, especially their views about the gendered division of labour. Using a sample of women aged 21 to 45 who were followed up over time in the United Kingdom from 1991 to 2013, I discovered that simply the birth of a child, or the shift from full-time employment to a non-working status is not the direct reason for changes in women's gender attitudes. Women adjust their attitudes when their motherhood and employment statuses intersect. That is, only mothers become more traditional if they withdraw from the labour market. Among childless women, their gender attitudes remain largely stable regardless of whether they change their employment status. If we compare women's attitudes before and after the birth of a child, those who remain in the labour market, and keep a full-time job, actually become slightly less traditional in their attitudes after becoming mothers, whereas those who withdraw from the labour

market as mothers turn to more traditional attitudes. Therefore, adult women adjust their views about the gendered division of labour in family only when they are trying to settle the conflict between their employment and child-rearing responsibilities.

A call for policies targeting the conflict between women's employment and child-rearing responsibilities

Gender attitudes are usually assumed to be stable during adulthood and work as an important predictor of women's labour market performance and fertility behaviour. However, I discovered that women's lived experience can also influence gender attitudes, which can subsequently affect future decisions to balance work and family. A critical step to further improve gender equality is to have more people practicing and supporting a symmetrical family model with dual earners and caregivers. Better work-care policies and cost-effective childcare services would enable more mothers with young children to maintain employed so that fewer women need to compromise their original gender attitudes to conform the reality of staying at home and caring for children.

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