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The Unfinished Revolution: How a New Generation Is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America.

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REVIEW

The World Economic Forum released its annual Global Gender Gap Report in October 2010. The United States rose 12 places to enter the top 20 for the first time. American women have done quite well in their educational attainment, and they are more likely to be professional workers, although their wages remain at two-thirds of what men doing similar work receive. Yes, the United States is narrowing its gender gap, but the goal of greater equality cannot be realized if we fail to incorporate marriage and partnership concerns as well as family and parenthood issues into the whole picture. Sociologist Kathleen Gerson's new book, *The Unfinished Revolution*, vividly portrays how the children of the gender revolution are still struggling to attain a work and family balance, a difficult task that their parents were unable to solve. This elegant and powerful book has won acclaim from prominent scholars in the fields of family, work, and gender.

As a sociologist of reproduction with a focus on East Asia, I was first drawn to this book because of my interest in the correlation between fertility changes, gender equality, and social institutions suggested by demographic statistical data.

Population experts tend to attribute low fertility in East Asian societies to declining family values and women's strong, if not over, devotion to their career that have resulted from increasing individualism (This discussion does not apply to China because of its enforced fertility control policy). Meanwhile, a new trend of demographic studies in North America and Europe shows that in industrialized countries, the higher social status women have, the higher totally fertility rate of the society. It became clear to me that only when a society values and advocates gender equality, can it reassure women to embrace and enjoy motherhood. I started looking for the scholarship that explores the concept of gender equality through deciphering daily experiences within the family as well as work, and Gerson's book is the one that gives me such intellectual excitement.

Gerson's book is based on 120 meticulous in-depth interviews (averaging 3 hours per person) with young adults who are the children of the gender revolution (between the ages of 18 and 32, with an average age of 24). The sample is both random and representative: an equal number of native-born women and men from various economic backgrounds (poor or near poor - 16%; working class - 38%; and, middle or upper middle class - 46%), different racial and ethnic groups (non-Hispanic white - 55%; African-American - 22%; Latino/Latina - 17%; and, Asian - 6%), and diverse family circumstances (homemaker-breadwinner - 33%; dual-earner - 27%; and, single-parent - 40%). By having informants who represent the different ethnic, racial, and class makeup of twenty-first-century America and applying careful comparative analysis to their responses, the author is able to reveal 'how—and, indeed, if—diverse social, cultural, and economic contexts shape childhood experiences and later life chances' (p.232).

Gerson is aware of the strengths and limitations of her research method. In Appendix 2 she explains in detail why in-depth interviews serve her project best. Her goal is to understand how family dynamics and parents' strategies shape young adults' childhood experiences as well as their current actions and future plans. As an experienced sociologist of the family, Gerson suggests that an open-ended yet highly structured interview can help the interviewee more easily recall her/his life events in a chronological narrative from childhood, through adolescence, to early adulthood. It also encourages respondents to express their own interpretations, reflections, values, actions, and worldviews. Through the information provided, researchers can discover the 'processes that link 'causes' and 'effects' identified by quantitative techniques in family studies, which often come from surveys involving a large number of participants. Meanwhile, researchers can explore, like ethnographers, their subjects' entire life span through well-designed sequential questions' (p.233). Locating these rich, complex personal biographies in the social context of the post gender revolution, Gerson believes that her work can deepen the sociological investigation of the interactions between structure and agency via the lens of gender, work, and family. I find the way that Gerson skillfully braids reliable survey results, for

example, from PEW Research Center, with her interview materials does make a solid foundation for her arguments.

The structure of the book follows the informants' life trajectory. Chapters in the first section provide readers with a picture of the changing American family that resulted from the gender revolution, including a view of the families that adjusted better, and the others that took a turn for the worse. Drawing upon the reflections of adult children, the author questions popular claims that non-traditional family forms (single-parent, same-sex, or dual-earner) contribute to declining family values and unhappy children. She finds that while the majority of children who had work-committed mothers or family-involved fathers were proud of and grateful to their parents, half of the children from traditional breadwinner-housekeeper families observed their parents' dissatisfactions due to the rigid gender division of labor at home and in the workplace. Most of the children who experienced single-parenthood expressed their regrets, but nearly half believed that living with a single parent was better than staying in an unhappy two-parent home. Diverging from conventional wisdom, the factors that determine the quality of marriage and family life are less about family types and more about how well parents cope with work-family conflicts. Gender flexibility in breadwinning and homemaking, caring and resilient single-parents (such as a self-confident working mother or an involved father), and expanded external support, Gerson argues, are the social and psychological resources that lift the family's spirits and outlook, therefore equipping the family to overcome the obstacles they face.

The second section contains chapters on the young adults' own views of balancing family and work. Despite the differences in sex, parental and family paths, class, and ethnic background, these young people express similar high expectations: they want committed, enduring, and egalitarian partnerships that can help them fulfill their dual-centric (career and family) lifestyle. Yet when reality fails to live up to their ideals, Gerson finds women and men employ different coping strategies. If equality is difficult to attain, most women would rather secure social and economic autonomy through a paid job than fall back into a neo-traditional relationship. Their self-reliant strategies include: seeking a position in the workplace; postponing marriage; considering marriage as optional and reversible, redesigning motherhood by postponing parenthood; separating marriage and motherhood; and, becoming a provider as well as a caretaker. Young men, on the other hand, are more resistant to equal sharing. When they find that the work-family balance is difficult to attain, they tend to fall back on traditional gender roles to cope with their vulnerability in this age of economic uncertainty: they might not postpone marriage, but they consider the husband to be the breadwinner with little time for parenting, while the wife should put her domestic responsibilities first and her job second.

The children of the gender revolution are open to a redefined work-family balance, blurred gender boundaries, and involved parenthood that embody

egalitarian spirits. Yet they are not sure whether they can overcome the family-work dilemma in a society that lacks family-friendly cultures and institutions, such as a rigid working environment that requires full-time or often overtime commitment without flexibility and the culture of privatized care-giving.

In the last chapter, Gerson proposes that only through cultural and institutional changes that value equality, flexibility, and balance and being able to transform these values into real options, can these young women and men finish the gender revolution. Her suggestions for institutional practices include: creating flexible workplaces that separate essential benefits from full-time employment; enforcing gender antidiscrimination policies, and outlawing discrimination against workers with family responsibility; and, constructing child-supportive communities that offer paid parental leave, after-school programs, and community-based child care. Nevertheless this is not a book about social policy-making or evaluations of their implementations. Comprehensive discussions of gender roles and family policies as well as the costs and impacts of these policies can be found in the new books by sociologists Gornick & Meyers (2009) and Esping-Andersen (2009).

Gerson provides a fine example of what a brilliant sociological study can contribute to academia as well as to society. Through rich interview materials, familiarity with the latest survey data and scholarly works, and critical examination of the discourse in the mass media, she challenges the stereotypes and myths about American families, revealing how individual lives and choices are conditioned by the interaction between personal biography, social structure, and history, and suggesting feasible family policies and workplace reform to help individuals cope with the ambivalence, stress, and conflicts that we all face in our daily lives. Above all, she does all this with compassionate understanding and insightful analysis, and does not rush to blame or criticize specific gender or social institutions. When reading this book, I was impressed by the respondents' willingness to share their private experiences and thoughts in such depth with the author. I soon realized that Gerson's nonjudgmental sympathy might help her earn their trust. She also successfully describes what a complete gender revolution would mean: every woman and man is entitled to a vibrant family and work life, and the society—through workplace and community changes—can help them to fulfill such hopes and dreams. Last, but no less important, this is a true study about ‘gender’, one that pays equal attention to women and men. The only reservation I have for this book is the unclear distinctions between what interviewees thought/expected and what they actually did/acted. I find some younger respondents answered interview questions based on their envisioned rather than experienced negotiations in partnership or coping strategies for work-family dilemma because they were not at that life stage yet.

The Unfinished Revolution is a well-written, engaging, and important book. Students of all disciplines who want to know more about the work-family

dilemma in the United States and how young Americans struggle to cope with it would benefit from reading this book. It is also a treat for the more general reader who wishes to reflect on their childhood experiences of gender roles at home, the imprints of these experiences on their own lives, the options and constraints of their current work-family life, and how they can achieve a more balanced life than their parents. In addition to Gerson's book, readers interested in more discussions of gender roles and family policies in contemporary America and Europe will find the above-mentioned books by sociologists Esping-Andersen (2009) and Gornick & Meyers (2009) helpful. Professional women readers can get practical advice from *Mothers on the Fast Track: How a New Generation Can Balance Family and Careers* by Mason & Ekman (2009). Readers from STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) might also want to consider adding another two books to their reading lists: *Motherhood, the Elephant in the Laboratory: Women Scientists Speak Out* by Emily Monosson (2008) and *The Madame Curie Complex: The Hidden History of Women in Sciences* by Julie Des Jardins (2010).

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