

The High-hanging Fruit of the Gender Revolution: A Model of Social Reproduction and Social Change

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Abstract

This article proposes an abstract sociological model of stable patriarchal social relations and feminist social change. I describe a patriarchal equilibrium of gender inequality and propose an approach for thinking about how various kinds of interventions can short-circuit the system, pushing it onto a new equilibrium path. In particular, I focus on possible interventions into parental leave policy, describing their social structural and cultural ramifications as well as a range of objections to them. However, more important than the specific interventions proposed is the general model itself, which depicts reinforcing structures of patriarchal culture, gender inequality in labor markets, and gender inequality in the home—and moreover, how this model can evolve. It describes a feedback loop that can lock structures of gender inequality in place but also provides a means for considering the spaces available to both blunt the social reproduction of gender inequality and reinforce “genderless” social relations.

Keywords

gender, social change, culture, parental leave, inequality

INTRODUCTION

Why should the transformation of public policy be on a contemporary feminist agenda? For some feminists, the realm of public policy is associated with a different era, a different political agenda, and a different set of strategies. In particular, postwar feminism has been criticized for being overly focused on the social policies shaping the economic opportunities of middle-class or white women (i.e., Fraser 2009; Lewis 2000; Mohanty 2003; Nakano Glenn 1999; Newman 1999). Many activists today focus their energies, in place of state and social policy debates, on “interstitial” transformation, the central strategy of which focuses on building new feminist forms of organization and interpersonal relations in the cracks of

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existing patriarchal institutions (Nzomo 2003, e.g., develops a criticism along these lines in the context of struggles around development).

Rather than rehashing well-trodden debates between second- and third-wave feminisms, this article reformulates one aspect of the old-fashioned feminist case for a renewed focus on state and social policy. Instead of emphasizing the link between social policy success and immediate material welfare—which I take to be straightforward—this article attempts to elucidate a cluster of mechanisms through which social policies shape culture and the future of gender relations.

In what follows I propose an abstract sociological model of feminist social change. I describe a patriarchal “equilibrium” of gender inequality—focusing, in particular, on inequalities in wages and domestic labor—and propose an approach for thinking about how various kinds of interventions into the gendered division of labor can short-circuit the system, shunting it onto a new egalitarian equilibrium path. However, more important than the specific interventions proposed is the general model itself, which depicts reinforcing structures of patriarchal culture, gender inequality in labor markets, and gender inequality in the home—and moreover, how this model can evolve.

First, the model describes a feedback loop, which can lock structures of gender inequality in place. This helps to clarify why certain inequalities have persisted despite momentous transformations in gender relations throughout the twentieth century. Second, the model provides a means to consider how the dynamics underlying the social reproduction of gender inequality might mutate into an alternative system that nurtures egalitarian gender relations (see Walby 2007 for a comparable approach on this front). I should state, however, that I do not pretend to describe a full general equilibrium model, capturing all salient aspects of the gender system. It is better read as a partial equilibrium model, acknowledging (1) that plenty of aspects of gender remain unexplored, and (2) that it is only a model, offering one perspective on some mechanisms I believe to be important.

Before outlining the model, in the second section (Policy, Culture, and the Changing Shape of the Family) I provide some historical and theoretical context on the relationship between public policy and feminist social change. This requires spending some time outlining the forces that stabilized and destabilized the old postwar gendered equilibrium. In the third section (Interventions and Transformations) I introduce specific interventions into parental leave policy, while in the fourth (Social Policy and Culture) I respond to potential objections and discuss the impact of the intervention on the sphere of culture. I bring these strands together in the fifth section (A Model of Patriarchal Equilibrium) with an abstract discussion of the intervention in the context of a stylized presentation of key aspects of the gender system. Given this setup, how should we evaluate the success or failure of the proposed intervention? That is, insofar as public policy can be conceived as a set of interventions measured by their ability to make advances toward some underlying normative ideal, what are the candidates for that ideal in the case of feminist public policy? I close by making a case for “genderlessness” (Wright and Brighouse 2009) as a feminist endgame, an underlying normative ideal for policy-making in the twenty-first century.

I wait until below to describe the concept of genderlessness, but at the outset I should state my contention that a public policy built around the objective of genderlessness demands a deep and sometimes uncomfortable set of interventions in the family. Nevertheless, such an approach is necessary if we hope to destabilize the entrenched configuration of gender inequality. The sweeping changes around gender relations in the twentieth century seem to have stalled (Blau and Kahn 2006; Cha and Weeden 2014; Charles 2011; England 2010, 2011; Gerson 2011), and the old tools of liberal public policy, I argue, are nearing their natural limits; these include policy instruments prohibiting

discrimination such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and Executive Order 11246 in the United States (Beller 1982; Crampton, Hodge, and Mishra 1997; Leonard 1989, 1996), as well as a range of “comparable worth programs” (England 1992; Killingsworth 2002). The final closing of the gender-wage gap is thus unlikely to be realized through legislation akin to the demand of equal pay for equal or comparable work, or improved enforcement of antidiscrimination laws.

The remaining transformations around the socioeconomics of gender require interventions into the cultural life of the family, especially those shaping both the basic choices we make in family life and the formation of our underlying preferences. Recent contributions (e.g., Goldin 2014, 2015) to the debate on the gender-wage gap sometimes have neoclassical economic assumptions at their core. For example, if remaining gender inequalities can be attributed to women *choosing* not to enter highly paid male-dominated occupations (rather than direct discrimination), then those inequalities are, more or less, unobjectionable.

How can we object to outcomes that are the product of uncoerced choices? In brief, the sociology of gender is at core a recognition that gender shapes both the constraints that people face and the choices people make (e.g., Epstein 1988). Indeed, the main difference between the sociology and the economics of gender is that only the former endogenizes preferences. To state the claim broadly: While the constraint side, even in sociology, is more commonly emphasized, it is also recognized that all of the skills, capacities, and preferences behind people’s choices are shaped by the gender system, and in particular by the social organization of the family. On these grounds, a new public policy designed around the objective of genderlessness would be geared toward reshaping *both* the material incentive structures in the family and its interior culture. It is these phenomena that in the first place generate the underlying gendered skills, capacities, preferences, and norms often perceived to be outside the ambit of public policy. I identify these changes as the “high-hanging fruit” of the gender revolution. There is every reason to believe they are reachable, but that does not mean they will be cheap or easy to grasp. Perhaps even more foreboding is that the transformations required do not likely fit neatly in the toolbox of existing liberal public policies. The result can be read as a dilemma, entailing certain tradeoffs between liberalism and feminism.

Some final remarks should be added about the style and theoretical structure of the argumentation herein. While this article is critical of economic theories reliant on the neoclassical choosing subject, and I argue that there is no neoclassical subject whose choice structure is disconnected from the social world, this does not imply that material incentives are unimportant. If anything, this article might be overly reliant on materialist factors in its theory of social change. Indeed, my arguments take much inspiration from Epstein’s (1988) focus on gender as a material structure of constraints and opportunities, as well as from Hakim’s (1995, 2000) emphasis on the importance of preferences. However, rather than taking them as fixed givens, I attempt to locate mechanisms that shed light on Orloff’s “most important question,” namely, “where do these preferences come from?” (2009:322). While preferences might be immensely powerful in predicting and describing the world, they still themselves may emerge, in recursive fashion, from a material structure of constraints and opportunities (for a comparable approach, see Risman’s 1998, 2004 discussion of gender as a social structure). Indeed, they may be the product of a causal chain, from material structures to cultural dynamics to preferences, as discussed below.

The claim, therefore, is not that economic forces are the only factors shaping human decision-making, nor even the primary one. More modestly, I take economic motives to be only one of the relevant factors impinging on human behavior, and among the more directly manipulable by way of deliberate social policy planning. Furthermore, all other

factors—from deeply hidden psychological motives to ingrained societal norms, even those that powerfully shape our lives—have to work that much harder to take effect in order to overcome countervailing economic pressure. Finally, I do not attempt to deny the explanations proposed by Ridgeway (2011, 2014), discussed in greater detail below, showing how gender structures come to be reinscribed onto new forms of social organization. Note that Ridgeway does not argue that the impact of material transformations on preferences, beliefs, and culture is forever stymied by processes that lock in place the gender structure. Indeed, she grants that changing socioeconomic circumstances “will eventually” be reflected in a changing cultural frontier but that there are important processes that “slow down changes” (2014:976). The arguments laid out below admit that Ridgeway’s mechanisms slowing the pace of social transformation may hold; however, granting that a good deal of change has indeed occurred during past decades—and may again do so under new circumstances—I attempt to add some precision to the set of mechanisms specifying how such a social transformation might in fact proceed.

POLICY, CULTURE, AND THE CHANGING SHAPE OF THE FAMILY

Feminist public policy—on a host of issues from labor markets and education to the family and the welfare state—is significant not only because of the direct and potentially favorable gains with respect to equity and material living standards for a broad stratum of the population. Likewise, it is significant not only because it strengthens women and feminist movements to advance broader and more far-reaching goals. In this article, I wish to emphasize the role of public policy and the particular mechanisms through which policy can transform the cultural sphere and the social structures that go on to shape people’s opportunities, experiences, and outcomes.

Transforming political culture, or what was once called “consciousness-raising,” has long been a goal of various streams of feminism (Rosen 2000). The idea pivots on the belief that patriarchal culture, or any culture for that matter, is a social rather than a natural fact; it thus can be seen as something produced by particular and impermanent historical institutions and social relations. It is worth adding that the term “social fact” may be more useful than the term “social construct,” which gives the impression that the phenomenon is not real, that it rests on flimsy foundations and can be transformed with relative ease. On the contrary, calling patriarchy a social construct should not render it unreal; social constructs have very real effects in the world. Likewise, feminists rarely intend to argue that patriarchy rests on unsolid foundations. Terminology suggesting that gender systems and patriarchy are “liquid” makes it difficult to explain why anyone would bother going to the trouble of building social movements against them. It portrays a world where transforming political culture is effortless rather than, as Max Weber put it, a “slow boring of hard boards” (1946:128). That social phenomena are changeable should not suggest they are fragile, and the term “social fact” tends not to elicit these misinterpretations (see Haslanger 2012 and Jaggar 1983 for illuminating discussions about the meaning of social construction).

Now to the big question: Why should public policy be important to a broad feminist agenda? In short, *public policy is a crucial political tool affecting one of the key social institutions where gender is produced and reproduced, namely, the family*. This is certainly not to say that the family is the only institution that reproduces gender—I believe Risman (2004) and others are correct to identify gender as a multidimensional structure reproduced at different levels of analysis, including individual, interactional, and institutional levels (see also Ferree 1990; Ferree and Hall 1996; Risman and Davis 2013). Moreover, it is not to suggest that public policy is the most important factor shaping the family. However, policy is more

or less open to deliberate political intervention in a way that culture itself is usually affected indirectly, as discussed below. Thus, public policy can have some impact on the various aspects of family life, helping to influence how people live, how they grow up, how they are shaped, and how particular familial and gender relations are organized around them. Indeed, there is a lively debate in feminist public policy about the role of gender and the family in comparative welfare state analysis. For example, revising Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare state typology Orloff (1993) adds access to paid work and capacity to maintain an autonomous household as key dimensions of variation in understanding the relationship between gender and social policy. On the whole, the debates have been successful in analyzing the diverse role that gender plays in alternate modes of social provisioning (Lewis 1992, 1997; Orloff 1993, 1996, 1997; Sainsbury 1999). Even if familial culture is downplayed in these discussions, the role of family dynamics is typically prominent, from the impact of policy on the gendered division of labor to the degree of economic dependence of married women on male-breadwinner husbands. The literature sometimes criticizes the Esping-Andersen framework and sometimes builds on it, analyzing whether social policy reinforces or transforms gender relations. This demonstrates, in ways both large and small, both hidden and apparent, the impact of state and public policy on the changing shape of family structures.

The idea of the standard, post-World War II male-breadwinner family—the modal, but by no means only, kind of kinship relation at the time—became a tenable and socially reproducible model as a result of a number of interlocking economic, cultural, and policy-related factors. Broadly speaking, these include but are not limited to the following: the family wage for men; discrimination against women in education and work; the massive proliferation of suburbs, giving rise to geographies that are far more isolated than city centers; and norms around marriage generating long-term relationships of economic convenience and dependence (see Bergmann 2010; Gerson 1986; Jackson 2010 for detailed accounts of changing work and family patterns). In particular, given the combination of the norm that men's wages can sustain an entire family (Barrett and McIntosh 1980) with obstructed work opportunities for women and various forms of cultural sexism, the "Standard North American Family" (SNAF) model (Smith 1993) was structurally favored to proliferate, while nonstandard models were structurally disadvantaged or "selected against."¹ Even setting aside its intersection with sexist culture, this particular socioeconomic conjuncture should lead to an *expectation* that kinship forms outside typical heterosexual patriarchal family relations would be outliers, lacking as they are a set of interlocking institutions to reinforce their selection and reproduction.²

Even if the SNAF model was never universal, it was a widespread pattern that has had real purchase in the day-to-day lives of many American families, and its conditions of possibility are important to grapple with. The factors forming the SNAF equilibrium identified above are partly cultural, partly economic, and partly affected by social policy. The decline of the family wage and the growing capitalist demand for educated labor in the second half of the twentieth century (women were a largely untapped labor supply until the postwar boom), alongside a political push for the entrenchment of antidiscrimination policy and legislation, began to chip away at the structural reinforcements undergirding the standard family model (Bergmann 2010; Gerson 1986; Jackson 2010). While the effects of this transformation have not been untarnished by negative ramifications (Hochschild and Machung 2012; Stevenson and Wolfers 2009), the weakening standard family model has had important and undeniably emancipatory consequences. This is partly because a key institutional site in which gender is determined, the family, itself underwent a significant transformation. What was once understood to be a natural way of life was denaturalized and shown to be just one form of social organization among others. The affirmations and sanctions

(Epstein 1988; Therborn 1999) that reinforced particular cultural patterns of family life began to deteriorate, and the cultural models young people were exposed to and shaped by had been quite different from those of their parents' childhoods. It was no longer a *fait accompli* that a young Canadian or American girl would be channeled into a path of domesticity that involved responsibility for the vast majority of a household's domestic work.³ Likewise, in stark contrast to young adults 60 years ago, survey evidence (Gerson 2011) indicates that both young men and young women today tend to favor broadly egalitarian family ideals as opposed to a neotraditional model. Interesting to note, men still tend to identify the neotraditional model as their second-best choice, while women's second-best tends to be a self-reliant model. It is for reasons such as these that Gerson (2011) refers to the broad social changes around gender and the family as an "unfinished revolution." The twentieth-century transformation should not be underestimated, but it would be a mistake to ignore that it fell short of feminist aspirations.

INTERVENTIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

It is evident that the family affects gender relations and that political institutions affect the family; for these reasons there is a strong basis for thinking that public policy ought to be an important tool in any feminist political agenda. What is less clear is the set of mechanisms, direct and indirect, through which policy affects the social reproduction and transformation of gender relations.

To illustrate these mechanisms I take an example from the volume *Gender Equality*, edited by Gornick and Meyers (2009), in the field of parental leave. In that volume, Wright and Brighouse (2009) advance a proposal for leave policy, namely, that maternity leave ought to be *dependent* on paternity leave. That is, after some initial leave for the mother, the authors propose that each subsequent month of maternal leave ought to be conditional on the same amount of time for paternal leave, up to some set amount of months. This particular conditionality might not apply to lesbian, gay, or trans couples, as it is specifically intended to undermine the social reproduction of the heterosexual family as a *patriarchal* family. The intervention amounts to strong pressure on both mothers and fathers—if they wish their families to access parental leave at all—to participate in childcare.

An alternative to the Wright and Brighouse (2009) proposal—one that relies less on the prospect of negative sanctions but achieves the same objectives—goes as follows: Grant heterosexual couples who select the father to take leave a higher portion of his wages than they would receive in the mother's wages had she taken the leave, such that the total leave payment to families is higher when men rather than women take family leave. This may kick in after an initial number of weeks available to the mother; likewise, it might phase out after the father has taken half of the leave. The objective, however, is to remunerate families who assign early childcare duties to fathers. Imagine a family where the father earns \$50,000 per year and the mother earns \$30,000. In a leave system where leave payments amount to 60 percent of earnings, total family earnings will equal \$68,000 if the mother takes the leave but only \$60,000 if the father takes the leave. In a new system that remunerates in the same way when women take leave, but pays out 90 percent of men's wages if fathers take the leave, we have a different calculus: total family earnings will equal \$68,000 if the mother takes the leave, as before, but will reach \$75,000 if the father takes the leave. If the policy applies to only half of the leave time, the before-after difference will be less; however, it is still economically rational for couples to have men take some amount of leave (see Table 1).

Table 1. Financial impact of an alternative leave policy.

	Preintervention Leave System (60 Percent for All)			Postintervention Leave System (90 Percent for Fathers/60 Percent for Mothers)			
	Market Earnings	Impact if the Mother Takes the Leave	Impact if the Father Takes the Leave	Total	Impact if the Mother Takes the Leave	Impact if the Father Takes the Leave	Total
Couple 1 (father earns more)	Father	50,000	30,000	60,000	50,000	45,000	75,000
	Mother	30,000	18,000	30,000	18,000	30,000	57,000
Couple 2 (equal earnings)	Father	30,000	30,000	48,000	30,000	27,000	57,000
	Mother	30,000	18,000	30,000	18,000	30,000	57,000
Couple 3 (mother earns more)	Father	30,000	18,000	68,000	30,000	27,000	77,000
	Mother	50,000	30,000	50,000	30,000	50,000	75,000

The same logic applies when men and women earn the same amount and when women earn more than men. In all cases shown in Table 1, the policy economically compels men to enter into early childcare work.

But why apply a gendered rule at all? Why not apply the policies—both the Wright and Brighthouse (2009) policy and the alternative—in such a way that compels the higher earner, not the father, into early caregiving activities? This would have the benefit of an uncomplicated application to LGBTQ couples with internally inegalitarian divisions of labor. And in many cases—that is, when fathers out-earn mothers—the effect will be identical. The main problem with the income-based rather than the gender-based policy is that in cases where women earn more income than men, many couples will rationally decide to have women disproportionately take the leave themselves. In the gender-based policy, men are incentivized into early childcare work in all cases; this recognizes the power of the gender system across the board. That is, even in couples with higher-earning mothers and lower-earning fathers, gender norms may motivate mothers into the majority of early care work, and the proposed policy would provide countervailing pressure. It may ultimately be desirable to shift to the income-based alternative, and indeed that approach might be immediately most desirable in cases of LGBTQ couples. But as it stands, much like affirmative action is explicitly race based, there is reason to design explicitly gendered policies to move in the direction of genderlessness.

Thus, in the preintervention system shown in Table 1, it can be said that economic pressure leads women to take leave in the most common case of lower-earning women, and cultural pressure exists in all three cases. In terms of its immediate material impact, the intervention modifies only the economic logic; instead of reinforcing the cultural logic it sets up a greater barrier for that logic to surmount.

It is worth further spelling out the social meaning of the proposed policies relative to existing leave policies. These policies, especially the Wright and Brighthouse (2009) proposal, are much more forceful and much less libertarian than even the Norwegian model, where on top of maternity leave, 10 weeks of paternity leave are nontransferable to the mother. In Norway, as in other countries where “daddy quotas” have emerged in recent years (Bruning and Plantenga 1999; Bünning 2015; Haas and Rostgaard 2011; O’Brien 2009; Patnaik 2019; Schober 2014), policy incentivizes a kind of family life where fathers *can* participate in early childcare. If they do not take these weeks, they are lost. Recent evidence on the “daddy month” in Germany can be read as support for more demanding policies. While participant men reduced their work hours and increased their childcare involvement, only those who took more than two leave months increased their participation in housework (Bünning 2015; see also Schober 2014). Indeed, the Wright and Brighthouse proposal is even more demanding, stipulating that if one wishes to have parental leave at all, it must be the kind that fosters an egalitarian division of early childcare work. It is conceivable that this kind of policy will drive many families to spread early childcare duties much more evenly among men and women.⁴

The Canadian case provides an instructive comparison. Instead of parental leave alone, in Canada there are 35 weeks of parental leave available to either partner, as well as 15 weeks of maternity leave (Evans 2007, 2013; Lessard 2010; Marshall 2008).⁵ The idea of having nearly four months of leave geared exclusively to mothers, rather than parental leave, is a conservative policy whose design reinforces predominant gender relations. The message this particular piece of the policy conveys, in effect, is that the division of labor in Canadian families *ought* to be structured such that women are largely responsible for the care of very young children.⁶ It says that long-established distributions of household labor ought to be protected, and perhaps even that they are natural.

At the very least, shifting toward sharable leave rather than maternity leave implies, *prima facie*, a more neutral effect with respect to the reproduction of gender relations. In the United States, the 12 weeks of leave are available to either fathers or mothers. However, the United States is unique in that leave is unpaid and typically short (Han, Ruhm, and Waldfogel 2009). The case of parental leave in Germany in the 1990s is a particularly revealing instance of how a policy with seemingly neutral characteristics can in fact have conservative ramifications when grafted onto a conservative labor market regime (Korpi 2000; Korpi, Ferrarini, and Englund 2013). Gangl and Ziefle (2015) show that extensions to the German program in the early 1990s led to an entrenchment of gendered outcomes, including declines in women's labor force participation and a normative feedback effect weakening women's subjective work commitments (see also Schober 2014). In Canada, the 1991 Parental Benefits Program first introduced 10 weeks of paid leave that were available for sharing by qualifying parents (Marshall 2008). In its later expansion to 35 weeks, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada argued that these developments should be understood as "promoting gender equality" (2005:27). Despite this claim, the social meaning of shared leave is at best understood as leave that does not actively and directly promote gender *inequality*. However, because the program intersects with discrimination and is deployed in an inegalitarian labor market (which I discuss below), it needs to move beyond neutrality to transform the family in a manner consistent with feminist goals—that is, to "promote gender equality."

I should point out here that I introduce the Wright and Brighthouse (2009) proposal and the alternative not because they are necessarily the best feminist policy tools; in fact, there are some obvious downsides to both. In the first case, when a female partner's leave is dependent on a male partner's leave, there is plenty of room for perverse power dynamics. It introduces the possibility that male partners will hold female partners "hostage," blocking their access to leave and risking an exacerbation of any existing negative gender dependencies. In the second case, there are multiple problems, including the fact that it will be an expensive scheme, that it will be essential to organize a way to provide equivalent benefits to gay and lesbian households, that it will have to organize a way to avoid benefiting couples over singles, and that it may arguably punish women who *want* to do early childcare. Moreover, we might ask whether we can be confident these policies would actually work; can we reasonably expect significant take-up? Perhaps culture trumps economic motives after all. Finally, it might be argued that both versions ignore key interactions of gender and race.

Some of these problems are solvable. In the second case, it is easy to imagine the same policy applying to the higher earner in gay and lesbian households (i.e., an income-based version). In the same way, the policy could allow singles to receive 90 percent leave remuneration, thus avoiding a patriarchal bias toward couples. With respect to the role of race, it should be said that a good deal of feminist literature emphasizes the interaction of race and gender (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989; Nakano Glenn 1999; West and Fenstermaker 1995) and that the interventions posed here may fail to address the racialized dimensions of social policy. In particular, it is possible that the interventions discussed above affect less directly certain minority groups insofar as earnings differentials within those couples are small and the prevalence of stable couples is low. While some minority groups might be less directly affected, insofar as they are, there will likely be pressure in the direction of greater gender egalitarianism. Moreover, even if direct effects are weaker, there is no good reason to think the indirect effects, discussed below, would be restricted to white families.

The question of take-up is important, and it must be said that these are proposals; as such it is impossible to know in advance whether they will succeed or fail. However, we know that economic motives sometimes *do* work—and while culture might trump material

concerns at one incentive level, changing the price might change the trade-off. That is, larger financial enticements might work better than smaller ones. In general, however, there is an optimistic case to be made. Data show that the daddy month in Sweden and Norway *did* generate strong increases in men's parental leave (Dahl, Løken, and Mogstad 2012; Duvander and Johansson 2012; Ekberg, Eriksson, and Friebe 2013). In another interesting example, men have steadily increased their numbers in nursing, eroding cultural norms to take advantage of a growing sector with reasonably well-paid jobs (Auerbach, Buerhaus, and Staiger 2017). Thus, instead of posing the question as a perennial battle between culture and the economy, take-up might best be understood as a matter of accurately tweaking the economic dial.

On the final point, it is worth noting that when one compares the new and old systems in Table 1, the proposal does not punish women. Families wherein women take the leave receive the same treatment in the new system; it is rather that families where men take the leave accrue bigger benefits. It also is worth noting that this policy—not unlike a carbon tax or affirmative action—if successful, would make itself redundant and would eventually be phased out. Or, as noted above, a gendered scheme might ultimately phase into an income-based scheme.

For the purposes of this article, however, the details and problems of the proposal are secondary. I introduce them because of a key design feature: a strong motivation for couples to cultivate egalitarian divisions of domestic labor. As I argue below, it is this aspect that has potentially transformative ramifications and thus is worth analyzing separately from other potential trade-offs.

SOCIAL POLICY AND CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

Underlying the above proposals is the claim that it is a *social fact* that women tend to be responsible for early childcare work. Ever since rudimentary sterilization and bottle-feeding technology became cheap and widely available, there has been no reason why the natural fact that women can give birth and lactate ought to translate into a social arrangement where women are charged with primary childcare duties (Brenner and Ramas 1984; Tilly and Scott 1987). The central point is not simply to emphasize socially available opportunities for the redistribution of power and resources within families but rather that transforming families means transforming the culture and gender relations within which people develop. It is plain that familial changes will not affect all aspects of gender relations. Likewise, highlighting the interactive effects of culture is not meant as an overstated reliance on an outdated model of familial socialization, nor is it meant to sideline the impact of social structure. As evidenced in the next section, culture is but one piece in an interlocking puzzle. Still, feminist research has long highlighted the impact of the welfare state and social policy on gender norms and attitudes (i.e., Cooke 2011; Ferree 2010; Orloff 1996; Pfau-Effinger 2004; Walby 1990); it thus stands to reason that a polity whose children are cared for equally by men and women will likely cultivate a new generation in a manner different from a polity with a more traditional domestic division of labor. Cultural dynamics—and not solely the impact on the gender division of paid and unpaid labor—are surely part of the reason the family is a key institution in the reproduction of gender relations.

To add some clarity to this claim, it is worth making note of a distinction, made by Erik Olin Wright (2010), between “culture” and “ideology.” Whereas “ideology” refers to conscious aspects of subjectivity (i.e., beliefs, values, ideas about how the world ought to work), “culture” refers to nonconscious aspects of subjectivity (i.e., dispositions, instincts, habits, skills). As such, if changing ideology is hard, changing culture is even harder.⁷ Men might

be persuaded that aggressiveness is undesirable long before they manage to curb their aggressive dispositions. This is why social policy transformations affecting childhood circumstances, that is, those designed to affect culture, may be particularly promising. The inherently slow-moving process of cultural change is one of the reasons I use the phrase “high-hanging fruit.”

This, moreover, is why the approach here differs from that of Cecilia Ridgeway (2011, 2014) in her book *Framed by Gender* and related work. Ridgeway makes a powerful case for the ways that gender structures persist, but the theoretical setup of her question is somewhat one-sided. For example, Ridgeway argues that “when the system of resource control on which gender inequality is based ... is upset by technological and socioeconomic transformations, the gender hierarchy itself should be at risk of collapse. Yet this collapse has not happened in American society” (2011:4). As a theory of social change, the counterfactual that Ridgeway poses—the collapse of gender hierarchy and gendered beliefs—sets too high a bar.

Of course, Ridgeway emphasizes the role of lags in belief systems, and this is part of the power of her work. However, not only does it overplay the conjecture to argue that twentieth-century socioeconomic changes ought to have demolished gender hierarchies; the approach correspondingly underplays the extent to which such changes have indeed successfully weakened gender inequality. Despite what I believe to be correctly identified as a gender revolution à la Gerson (2011), it is asking too much of such transformations that they must entirely sweep aside deeply entrenched forms of gender inequality to count as properly revolutionary. Indeed, contra Ridgeway, there is an argument to be made that the changes we have already seen in the gender system during the past 50 years have been among the fastest transformations ever witnessed in the history of social change. Compare this, for instance, to the transformation from feudalism to capitalism, a momentous shift to be sure, but one that took place over centuries. From this zoomed-out view, Ridgeway’s theoretical problem looks like a nonproblem. Indeed, the speed of change in the gender system and the unease that can accompany it is partly why Connell (2005) coined the term “gender vertigo.”⁸

Even without the mechanisms Ridgeway identifies for reinscribing gender relations, the material changes over the course of the twentieth century—from changing female labor force participation to antidiscrimination legislation—are insufficient to induce the counterfactual collapse she posits. Beliefs are strong, and culture is even stronger. The argument posed in this article claims that changing material structures *can* induce cultural and ideological changes, but the material changes over the past few decades are still inadequate—indeed the next section highlights the interdependent material factors buttressing a stable gendered equilibrium—and likely insufficiently aggressive in their policy content to induce a “collapse” in gender. Thus Ridgeway, in setting up her puzzle of the persistence of gender, expects too much (and admits too little) in the way of changes transpiring from the gender revolution.⁸

The argument here therefore emphasizes slow but moveable cultural mechanisms, where deep interventions in the material life of families spur on changes in the culture and beliefs of a new generation of children. Four objections may be leveled against this hypothesis as it operates in my example intervention. First, much empirical research has cast doubt on the power of the socialization model. The model has a hard time explaining the high degree of behavioral variation, it has come up against findings that challenge different versions of its hypotheses, and it has been accused of ignoring the role of power in solidifying the gender system (see Risman and Davis 2013; Walby 1990 for overviews). However, despite the recent consensus against an overreliance on the socialization model, the lesson from accumulated research is not so much that Parsonian socialization is defunct but rather that “socialization and identity work alone do not explain all of gender stratification” (Risman

and Davis 2013:745). Indeed, our model positions these mechanisms as only one aspect of a multi-part system. But few critics are willing to abandon socialization wholesale; indeed, to discard it would mean discarding the concept of parents serving as an example for children, something few parents would easily give up.

Second, as an empirical hypothesis, the claim is not easily tested. Much research has examined the effects of changing household structures on the educational outcomes of children (Astone and McLanahan 1991; Magnuson and Berger 2009; Sun and Li 2011). And some studies have indicated that a father's involvement in parenting has positive effects on social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of children (Allen and Daly 2007). There is evidence also that a father's paternity leave can lead to more equal sharing of housework (Kotsadam and Fineras 2011) as well as cooking and shopping (Patnaik 2019). However, the comparative evaluation of the transmission of culture in egalitarian and nonegalitarian households clearly poses a thornier research problem because (1) the distribution of culture across household types is far from random, (2) culture is not easily disentangled from social structure in empirical work, (3) culture is not *easily* distinguished from ideology—even with our conceptual distinction, there is a good deal of blur in the line between conscious and nonconscious aspects of subjectivity—and (4) culture, even if carefully conceptualized is not easily operationalizable. These challenges, however, make the theoretical question no less relevant.

Third, some may object that the intervention and its theoretical claims place an excessive focus on heterosexual couples. Ingraham, for example, argues that feminist sociology tends to study gender in a way that “conceals the operation of heterosexuality” as an organizing institution (1994:203). In the case of this intervention, this focus is intentional; despite increasing diversity in family types, it remains the case that a plurality of children is raised within familial structures more or less resembling the SNAF model (Livingston 2014; Statistics Canada 2012). As a consequence, if we wish to weaken the social reproduction of gender it ought to be a central locus for feminist intervention.

Finally, it may be argued that as a social policy, proposals of the sort discussed above tread too deeply into the private sphere of the family. In this view, policy ought not to attempt to “reshape” our private lives.⁹ In fact, in many countries seemingly neutral maternal leave policies already intrude into the family, albeit to reinforce patriarchal outcomes. The state has been in the business of shaping the family and the course of its development since the dawn of public policy (Adams 2005; Seccombe 1995). There is, moreover, a long tradition in feminist theory that calls into question the very notion of an intrusion into the private sphere (Haslanger 2016; Okin 1989) as if in some counterfactual ideal the family could form and exist outside of public interaction. From a variety of feminist perspectives, this “intrusion” is neither a virtue nor a defect because the public/private boundary is conceptually ill defined. On this view, state policies that “intervene” in the family ought to be judged not on the mere fact of their intervention but rather on their substance. Does a particular set of policies, for example, stabilize or weaken patriarchal relations?

In thinking through the policy-culture relationship, it is important to consider that social policies, even otherwise liberal ones, often have cultural implications that extend beyond their direct, intended consequences. This operates in ways that are sometimes weak and sometimes strong. In accordance with the argument above, pay-equity policies (see England 1992) should not be seen within a *purely* liberal model where women demand equal pay for equivalent work. These policies can have the second-order effect of transforming the social structures within which families function. In an economy that systematically underpays women, any given family is much more likely to decide, from a rational economic perspective, that women ought to work less in formal labor markets in order to take care of domestic

obligations. For many families it is apparent that the opportunity cost of sacrificing the lower of two wages in the family, often that of the mother, is a simple, frugal decision. Pay equity can change the decisions faced by families and thereby have the unintended effect of altering the internal power relations and norms of family life. In this sense these aspects of the policy can be thought of as part of the illiberal project of molding culture.

To draw out the point argued in this section, consider the dynamic cultural impact of a robust public childcare plan (for overviews, see Friendly et al. 2012; Meyers, Gornick, and Ross 1999; White and Friendly 2012). It is not only that this could positively and immediately affect the material well-being of poor and working women (Baker, Gruber, and Milligan 2005; Brodeur and Connolly 2013).¹⁰ Moreover, it is not only that childcare can be conceived as an important public good, generating broad social benefits beyond the direct users and beyond the initial investment sum. In addition to these more conventional arguments, there is reason to believe that a public childcare plan could contribute to long-term cultural and social changes in family life. It would reduce the economic dependence of caregivers, who are often female, on primary wage-earners, who are often male, and it would promote possibilities for women's autonomy; this can be understood as changing—or expanding—the menu of empty places that people get slotted into within a given system of gender relations. It is reasonable to think of public childcare as a possible alternative to the role played by the parental leave interventions. And again, we can imagine weaker, more libertarian versions and stronger, more obviously illiberal versions. A strong version might entail a kind of kibbutz model of collective child-rearing. There are plenty of objections (e.g., Brighouse and Swift 2014) to such a dramatic reorganization of the family, and moreover the prospect is not an entirely hopeful one; if completing the gender revolution requires the kibbutzification of the family, that would indeed be high-hanging fruit. Nonetheless, it is not hard to imagine the powerful downstream cultural impact of such a change.

The key point here is that affecting gender *relations* through political and institutional change implies affecting the gender *norms* of the next generation. This in turn affects the future configuration of gender relations. The indirect and usually unintended impact of policy on culture and norms is an undertheorized aspect of policy studies (see, however, Korpi and Palme 1998), even if the direct impact of social policy on the substance and structure of gender relations is itself often opaque and difficult to identify with precision.

For two reasons, the model discussed below is not simply an argument about intergenerational cultural transmission (see Dumais 2002; Mohr and DiMaggio 1995). First, the cultural mechanisms are both intergenerational and intragenerational—I emphasize the latter in this section because it may be somewhat more important in shifting those nonconscious aspects of subjectivity. Second, the place of both norms and social relations in the model below marks an attempt to capture an interaction between cultural and social structural phenomena.¹¹ The next section fleshes out the side of social structure, focusing attention on the role of the labor market and formalizing these ideas into a graphic model.

A MODEL OF PATRIARCHAL EQUILIBRIUM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Figure 1 is designed to communicate, in a highly stylized manner, how a patriarchal equilibrium can lock into place, and how a policy intervention—understood as a kind of exogenous shock—can upset that equilibrium. By its nature, the model flattens or ignores various important aspects of gender dynamics. The theoretical claim, however, is not that the model captures the full spectrum of facts bearing on gender inequalities in the home and the market. Rather, it helps to explain some aspects of why, despite significant transformations in gender relations throughout the twentieth century, gender inequalities appear robust and persistent.

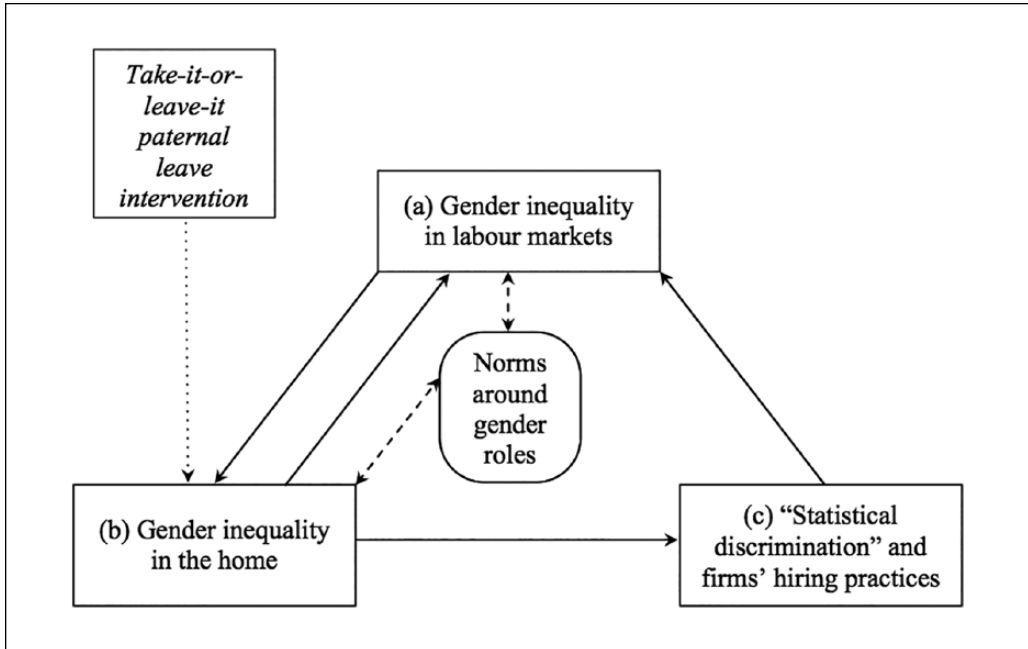


Figure 1. The reproduction of gender inequality in the home and in the market, and an intervention.

Starting, arbitrarily, with (a) the labor market inequalities between men and women, it is plausible that gender inequality in pay can stabilize gender inequality in the domestic distribution of labor. If men on average earn more than women, then families may, on rational and frugal grounds, decide that (b) if someone needs to care for children it is better to sacrifice the lower of two income sources. Even families with explicitly non-sexist commitments may decide that fathers ought to work primarily in the formal labor market and mothers ought to take on more domestic and care-work responsibilities. In a world with these social arrangements, (c) firms—those without access to cheap and detailed information about individual applicants—will be aware that female applicants are more likely to have career gaps and responsibilities at home and thus be on average a more costly hire overall. This perception on the part of firms, a wholly rational and profit-oriented strategy sometimes called “statistical discrimination,” generates systematic disadvantages for women in labor markets, even for those with no current or future plans for familial responsibilities (Bielby and Baron 1986; Pager and Karafin 2009; Phelps 1972). These disadvantages in turn reinforce (a) structural inequalities in pay.

A public policy of the sort discussed in the section above can weaken the stability of this system with an intervention at point (b). Interventionist parental benefit systems, such as those as described above, can change the calculus facing heterosexual couples. Male partners are compelled to (b) take on early childcare work and other domestic duties, and consequently, career gaps and other obligations of childcare become more equally distributed. As a consequence, when (c) firms look at a pool of applicants, they no longer see women—on the basis of average group characteristics—as a potential source of diminished productivity. New social circumstances make it much more difficult for firms to decipher (or imagine) gender differences in average productivity.¹² As a result of changes in firm behavior, the gender pay gap (a) begins to close, which in turn reinforces the rationality of an increasingly

egalitarian distribution of domestic labor. It is possible to imagine this abstract model with a variety of social policy interventions altering the calculus of family decision-making. However, to reiterate, none of this is to claim that all couples will change their behavior, or that they made purely economic calculations in the first place. Their decisions are of course affected by the gamut of cultural, political, and social forces. The starting point here is merely that to the extent rational choice calculations are part of the decision-making process, these policy changes ought to impinge on them.

Apart from the cycle described above, Figure 1 includes an arrow from (b) to (a), suggesting a second mechanism of social reproduction. This mechanism operates more directly, through the skills, capacities, and preferences cultivated by individuals embedded in particular systems of domestic equality and inequality. For example, in a neotraditional domestic division of labor, women who have cultivated a particular configuration of skills, capacities, and preferences will be more likely to opt for part-time, flexible, and hence lower-paying positions. This dynamic explains some part of the gender inequality in the labor market and contrasts with the postintervention ideal type of domestic egalitarianism. In this case, the skills, capacities, and preferences for certain types of flexible, low-paying work—those that often dovetail with domestic responsibilities—will be far more evenly distributed. At the same time, those skills, capacities, and preferences that are oriented toward full-time, inflexible, and higher-paying jobs will be distributed more evenly.

Finally, it should be noted that Figure 1 includes the changing role of social norms, as discussed above. The arrows between norms on the one hand and inequality at home and work on the other, go in both directions. Two-way arrows represent a self-stabilizing system. And norms in this depiction do just that: They serve to buttress the model, both in preintervention and postintervention forms. In the traditional model, norms around “appropriate” gender roles reinforce inequalities at work and at home, imposing social costs on women and men who might violate them; men engaged in female-typed roles and women engaged in male-typed roles experience social sanctioning. Likewise, men involved in male-typed roles and females involved in female-typed roles experience positive reception and social affirmation. Running in the opposite direction, the norms themselves are reinforced. Accordingly, the traditional division of domestic labor and limited labor market opportunities for women—because they are pervasive and because they naturalize social life by providing exemplars of what is possible and impossible, appropriate and inappropriate—serve to strengthen traditional social norms (see Therborn 1999).

While these abstract relations persist in the postintervention model, they now serve an alternative equilibrium. Egalitarian distributions of domestic labor, together with egalitarian labor market opportunities, tend to generate new norms around gender and weaken old ones. As standards for how to live, they reshape people’s expectations of what is possible, impossible, appropriate, and inappropriate. For example, Ruggles provides persuasive descriptive evidence that following increases in female labor force participation in the 1960s and 1970s, women’s attitudes rapidly caught up as an increasing portion of women began to disagree that “it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family” (2015:1806). Likewise, at a certain point it may become ordinary to see men in public during work hours, without partners, caring for small children. These new norms then feed back into the home and the labor market, “normalizing” and multiplying egalitarian social structures. Finally, on the basis of changed social structures, new social norms become stronger still; where before it was unusual to see men engaged in care work for small children, it eventually becomes widespread.

DOES DISCRIMINATION REALLY MATTER?

One objection to some features of the model proposed above emphasizes that discrimination is no longer the most important mechanism explaining gender inequalities in pay. At least in some countries, the United States and the United Kingdom, for example, it is a set of choices associated with “motherhood” rather than discrimination that appears to account for most of the variation in pay (Gangl and Ziefle 2009). The claim is not that discrimination no longer matters but rather that voluntary disruptions to work and human capital accumulation, women’s observable choices concerning the time and energy devoted to their careers, and choices to move into “mother-friendly” jobs have a more pronounced role. By contrast, after accounting for mothers’ observable labor market behavior, the residual wage penalty—which is often interpreted as an indicator of discrimination—is relatively small. Similarly, additional research using longitudinal U.S. data has demonstrated that accumulated months not in the labor force or not enrolled in school best explains the “motherhood wage penalty” (Staff and Mortimer 2012; see also Gupta and Smith 2002; O’Neill and O’Neill 2005 for related evidence on Denmark).

The arguments here are not always explicit but rather are rooted implicitly in a classic philosophical distinction between choices and circumstances (Anderson 1999; Dworkin 2000). The economics literature on differences in labor market outcomes is sometimes explicitly framed in terms of the “choice/constraint” debate (Altonji and Blank 1999:3221), even if it is difficult to identify the divide statistically. As such, motherhood and its associated time out of the labor market is considered a choice; discrimination is not. Discrimination is an external fact of social systems, but motherhood is a matter of individual preferences. The prime determining factors of pay inequality are the basic choices women make to enter into certain types of jobs, particularly those that are more flexible, have more room for part-time employment, and tend to pay less on average. For example, economist Claudia Goldin argues that when they have children, women “shift into lower-paying positions (or out of the labor force) to gain temporal flexibility” (2015:32). Likewise, Goldin (2014) shows that the widest gender pay gap is found during people’s childbearing years—when people are in their late 20s and early 30s. Men and women in their early 20s and mid-40s see much more equality in pay. Thus, firms penalize workers—both women and men—who *choose* positions with greater flexibility, and they suffer lower earnings as a consequence. It is thus a career choice trajectory with a pattern of work interruptions and wage losses that explains much of the “motherhood penalty,” which on this account is largely self-chosen.

A natural corollary of the above argument is that insofar as outcomes rest on individual, uncoerced choices, they fall outside the purview of social policy. This is not the *only* conclusion one can draw, but it is the one most consistent with basic economic theory. Thus, in their widely taught labor economics textbook, Ehrenberg and Smith note that if female occupational choices are not externally limited, and therefore a product of discrimination, they may reflect different preferences that “form naturally from one’s life experiences and should be respected in a market economy” (2012:399).¹³ In its theoretical hard core, the economic approach views individual choice as an exogenous datum, a black box of shadowy psychological givens. In this liberal picture of society, if there are labor market inequalities and they cannot entirely be chalked up to discrimination, then they are produced by discrete individuals with prior wants and are thus beyond reproach (for alternative views, see Bowles 1998, 2009; Gintis 1969).

The model discussed in this article takes a more sociological, and perhaps illiberal, approach and sidesteps the above criticism. I emphasize that it is the norms around gender as well as existing material gender inequalities that give rise to these preferences and choices

in the first place. In other words, it is appropriate to think of these choices as ineluctably endogenous.¹⁴ For various reasons—the theoretical tradition in economics of taking preferences for granted, the intractability of the approach, and concomitant difficulties in operationalizing a recursive system—little scholarly work on the gender pay gap has fully considered the social structure lurking behind people’s labor market choices. However, none of these count as good reasons to exclude from theorizing the broader social structures shaping the choices people make.

Thus, the model described in this article highlights the norms and economic background conditions underlying these choices as well as the interaction between statistical discrimination and the choices people make about work interruption. I underscore the transmission mechanisms shaping the environment in which choice occurs, and thus dispute the implication that once any residual gender inequality is reduced to individual choices, labor markets have reached a natural—and perhaps socially just—equilibrium. Wage penalties may be dually produced by discrimination and the choices made in one’s job history, yet both causes are themselves social artifacts. This is why a good social model of gender inequality ought to give consideration both to the circumstances giving rise to firms’ hiring procedures and to the circumstances shaping women’s choices about labor market activities and work interruption.

To reiterate, the model developed here stresses that gender inequality may be reproduced both through statistical discrimination on the part of firms and through the already-existing normative and social system that shapes the choices people make. The solution, at least here, lies not through regulation of the firm (i.e., Goldin 2014)—where room for success may be limited—but rather through regulation of the family. A transformation of the gender division of domestic labor will have deep consequences, affecting the shape of current gender norms, the norms children are raised with, the costs and opportunities firms perceive, and the pay gap between men and women. The model of mother as primary caregiver and father as primary breadwinner will likely therefore weaken iteratively. This in turn may undermine the process of “self-selection” into typically gendered roles in the labor market; women may be less likely to be channeled into gender-typed and poorly remunerated labor market positions—and these transformations accordingly feed back to reshape social norms. As shown in Figure 1, norms run in both directions and serve to buttress the model, stabilizing social changes in both the market and the family.

GENDERLESSNESS AS A POLICY OBJECTIVE

A useful concept introduced in Wright and Brighthouse (2009) is that of “genderlessness,” which refers to the *absence* of normative sanctions and affirmations (Therborn 1999) that enforce gendered roles and behaviors at macro- and micro-levels.¹⁵ To clarify, in this view, “gender” refers to a system of social power that reinforces certain kinds of cultural expectations and behavioral roles, which may be historically linked to distributions of biological characteristics expressing sexual difference. “Genderlessness” describes a social configuration where that social power is absent. For example, although female childrearing—a social arrangement—may be historically linked to female pregnancy—a biological fact—genderlessness implies that it is no longer *fortified* through the exercise of social policy, cultural pressure, and power.

It is important to note what this definition of genderlessness does not mean. The concept of gender as socially enforced roles can be distinguished from the concept of gender as identity. Consequently, the definition of genderlessness does not imply the absence of gendered *identities*, which may well remain, or even thrive; it implies the absence of gender as a system of social power, *enforcing* the reproduction of those identities. Thus, in the example

above, the framework of genderlessness cannot provide detailed predictions about some future frequency of female childrearing in a genderless world (even if it would predict a much more egalitarian division of childrearing labor). It says rather that if female childrearing continues to be the most common way children are raised, it has not emerged out of social power and pressure, negative or positive, which underpin and structure people's choices. Put differently, if power is about getting people to do things through coercion, incentivization, or moralization—that is, through the exercise of political, economic, or social power (Wright 2012)—the argument that genderlessness may not obliterate gendered identities means that those identities still might form in a world without external pressure to sustain them. By way of analogy, gender roles are to gender identity as race is to ethnicity; if race is (among other things) a system of power and oppression, ethnicity is a nexus of identity, whereby common history, language, mythology, music, cuisine, and other cultural forms come to take individual and collective expression. It is of course true that the concepts are distinct, but with respect to the role of power and oppression there is a parallel to be drawn: Each operates dually, as categories of oppression *and* as categories of identity expression. After the external pressure of racial domination is eliminated, the internal culture of ethnicity may remain—and even renew itself. Similarly, after the external pressure of gender roles is eliminated, the spontaneous self-identification with gender may very well remain too. That is, in a world without power and oppression, without sanctions and affirmations serving to enforce gender structures, people might retain gender identities in how they feel and wish to express themselves to the world. I suspect those identities would be a great deal more diverse than the current distribution, but it is also entirely possible that familiar forms of gender expression would continue to proliferate in a genderless world.¹⁶

Drawing the comparison with race prompts a related question: How might genderlessness interact with race? To my mind, genderlessness is perfectly consistent with a world of racial domination. One popular school of thought suggests that because race and gender interlock so deeply, if we are really to make robust and sustainable progress on gender we will have to undermine racial inequality at one and the same time. My own reading of the history leads me to believe this intuition is false. We have seen genuine changes in the gender system, and these did not move in lock step with changes around race, or class for that matter. That race, gender, and class intersect need not imply that they operate according to the same mechanisms, nor that they all diminish in accord with the diminution of some master category called General Oppression. There is no good reason to believe genderlessness is impossible in a world of racial and class oppression, even if genderlessness requires material resources to become reality, and even if it would be desirable for the opposite to be true. But the fact that genderlessness cannot function as a universal solvent for all social ills does not make it any less desirable.

Thus, while its concrete effects would be desirable in my view, the normative goal of genderlessness is in fact somewhat narrowly defined. To take another example, it does not imply that sex—a shorthand for what you “get” when you are born—will change too dramatically. Nor does it imply that people's bodies will physically appear different than they currently do. It is sometimes stated that sex, like gender, is also socially constructed (Butler 2011). While there is truth to this assertion, it can obliterate an analytically valuable theoretical distinction between sex and gender. The strict male-female sexual binary may be socially constructed, but stable, theoretically robust categories called “biological male” and “biological female” are not necessary to retain the sex/gender distinction. “Sex” remains a term capturing the set of biological attributes that you get, forming the raw material that is ultimately converted into a particular set of social consequences called “gender.” In this view, “male” and “female” represent shorthand expressions of statistical biological clusters. That

is, in a genderless world it will still be the case that pregnancy, male-pattern baldness, and various other biological attributes will be probabilistically circumscribed by sexual difference.¹⁷ But sexual difference will be decoupled from power relations.

What genderlessness does imply is that what you get when you are born does not translate into preset outcomes with respect to social powers and possibilities. It implies, for example, that social power would not affirm social expectations that pressure women to fill traditional roles in early childcare work. It implies that men acting as primary caregivers would not expect to experience an array of normative social sanctions from friends and strangers alike (thereby disincentivizing caregiving among men). It implies that trans people would not suffer social punishment on the basis of identity in a variety of public arenas, from labor markets to health care. The concept also implies a transformation of certain interpersonal experiences, one notable example being the disparities in experiences of violence on the basis of actual or perceived gender identity (Johnson 2006; Johnson and Dawson 2011).

Theorizing about the future shape of social relations is an inescapably nebulous activity; however, a final distinction can add some form to the nebula. Genderlessness can be theorized in two divergent ways depending on some basic assumptions about the world. First, once achieved, genderlessness will stabilize spontaneously after the sanctions and affirmations of gender are removed. In this sense gender is a social construct, but genderlessness is not; it is conceived here as a kind of natural form, spontaneously emerging once the barriers to it are removed. To be clear, this vision does not imagine a world without social institutions. It simply refers to a world without affirmations and sanctions associated with gendered behaviors, a world where sex brings with it no normative burden to adopt certain behavioral patterns. The second view suggests that genderlessness, like gender, is equally socially constructed. In this view genderlessness will not stabilize spontaneously; to stabilize it requires continual reinforcement and social pressure from a variety of institutions. For example, this view might predict that a preference distribution along neotraditional lines could emerge spontaneously, absent the old sanctions and affirmations, which would then regenerate norms, and as a consequence, a gender system would reassert itself. Thus, to stabilize as a social form, genderlessness needs perpetual propping up through its own unique set of sanctions and affirmations.

The second case, if true, should not be seen as a consolation prize. Peace may emerge spontaneously absent the institutions of war, but peaceniks would be no less happy if it turned out that we need peace-mongering institutions to reinforce the peace. Glasses correct natural flaws in eyesight, but that does not make them any less desirable.

The importance of active planning and the deliberate organization of social life is a broader point highlighted by this article. Namely, a social policy that takes genderlessness as its objective must be one that intervenes in the family. It will not be a liberal public policy that plucks the high-hanging fruit required to push toward a genderless society. Genderless outcomes may be desirable and well worth pursuing, but they will not come easily or cheaply.

If genderlessness is an important, broad feminist goal, then particular institutions and policies should be judged with respect to impeding or promoting its realization. The parental leave policies described above may have flaws that exclude them from consideration in feminist policy and activist circles. Moreover, while they may be construed as too strong by some, they are almost certainly too weak on their own to give rise to genderless social relations. Nonetheless, they take seriously the project of designing policy that is motivated by far-reaching objectives. Although genderlessness can operate only as a lodestar, a distant goal from which to evaluate particular policies and institutions, it should not be taken as a woolly abstraction. Rather, it provides a way to judge the virtues and deficits of existing

concrete institutions, as well as the array of policy proposals advanced by academics, think tanks, and government. From the perspective provided by the social reproduction model above, a feminist agenda ought to include the policies mentioned herein only insofar as they operate to weaken the existing gendered equilibrium while at the same time strengthening the social reproduction of genderlessness.

The feminist approach to social policy discussed above has its limits as a transformational strategy, particularly in the face of multiple political and institutional barriers. This should be expected from a policy deliberately designed to reshape people's choices and preferences. It also is possible that the most significant feedback created by this type of policy will be stiff political backlash, depending on the details and their framing. Moreover, any theory of transformation that pivots to some extent on cultural transformation will entail an inescapably long time horizon. The claim, however, is not that the policy options offered here will realize the vision of a genderless society but rather that an energetic embrace of this policy approach would constitute a move in the direction of genderlessness. The degree to which particular strategies, schemes, and institutions push toward this goal is one way—not the only way but arguably a useful one—to evaluate the success or failure of a feminist agenda.

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NOTES

1. On the complicated methodological problem of “negative selection” in social science—how to go about explaining something that does *not* occur—see Crenson (1971) and Offe (1993).
2. It is important to register a major caveat to this story. The Standard North American Family (SNAF) was never universal and, notably, was not the dominant narrative for black families, where more often than not both men and women worked in the formal economy (Goldin 1990). Historic exclusions from the social security systems for agricultural and domestic workers, racial closure in access to housing and education, employment discrimination, and the pressing need for two-earner families actually left the gender wage gap in black families smaller than the average (Polachek 2004). This made the racial wage gap—an important topic, but outside the scope of this article—perhaps more pressing for black Americans. That said, in recent decades we have seen a growing bifurcation of the black experience, with many families moving into the middle classes and no doubt confronting aspects of the SNAF ideal type (Landry and Marsh 2011; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Wilson [1978] 2012). For these reasons, it would be false to exclude wholesale the black experience in the United States from the processes discussed herein.
3. These remarks are not meant as a wholesale endorsement of the socialization model of reproducing gender. On the contrary, I focus on the social structure of constraint and opportunity. See my further comments on socialization in the Social Policy and Cultural Transmission section.
4. Other proposals for the emancipatory transformation of parental leave policies would likely attempt to delink them entirely from employment insurance systems. It is well known that those least likely to benefit from leave policy often are “mothers in part-time work, self-employment, nonpermanent jobs, lower paying jobs and young (early) mothers” (Pulkingham and van der Gaag 2004:117). An alternative to the more exclusionary employment insurance approach might be the universal basic income strategy (Calnitsky 2017, 2018). In this case, a policy parallel could have top-up payments made conditional on egalitarian distributions of care work for young children.
5. For international comparative perspectives on differences in family leave policy, see Ray, Gornick, and Schmitt (2010) and Moss and O'Brien (2006).

6. To be fair, it is *also* a recognition of the physical recovery needs of women post-childbirth. This natural fact, however, does not sufficiently explain extended maternity leave policies.
7. This is equally true for people committed to social change who may find it easier to change their beliefs about how the world ought to look than their habits of living within it.
8. Okin, Susan Moller. *Justice, gender, and the family*. New York: Basic books, 1989.
9. See discussions in Jaggard (1983), Pateman (1983), and Okin (1989). Okin (1989:198) points out, for example, that John Rawls (1985) is explicit that his principles of justice are not meant to apply to the family, which belongs to the “private” sphere.
10. However, the behavioral impact on children is subject to controversy and dispute. See Baker, Gruber, and Milligan (2005) and Magnuson, Ruhm, and Waldfogel (2007) on the one hand, and Felfe, Nollenberger, and Rodríguez-Planas (2015) on the other.
11. See Laitin and Weingast’s (2006) equilibrium theory of culture for a comparable approach to theory making.
12. It is worth noting that statistical discrimination models can operate both when firms observe actual productivity differences between groups and when they simply imagine average group differences (Dickinson and Oaxaca 2009).
13. The authors are careful to note that one might also view these preferences themselves as caused by “premarket discrimination.” However, neoclassical microeconomics at bottom is a theory of exogenous preferences. For the basic theory to work—to generate consumer surpluses in market transactions and thus for markets to optimize and improve people’s subjective utility—market exchanges have to reflect people’s underlying preferences, not preferences formed through some kind of external influence (for a classic statement, see Pareto 1909). For that reason, theories of endogenous preference formation fit uncomfortably in neoclassical economic theory (see Gintis’s 1969 dissertation for an elaboration on this deep inconsistency in neoclassical theory). Thus, insofar as empirical research finds that choice accounts for much of the motherhood penalty, one straightforward conclusion to be drawn from the underlying theory would suggest that policy has no business transforming people’s preferences.
14. It is downplayed because of the illiberal implications, but egalitarian political philosophy sometimes makes a similar qualification to the importance of “choice-sensitive” systems of distribution. That is, they argue that people ought to be held responsible for their choices *only* if their preferences and capacities were formed under conditions of justice (Arneson 1981; Rawls 1979).
15. This approach can be usefully compared and contrasted to Lorber’s (2000, 2005) “degendering,” Deutsch’s (2007) “undoing gender,” and Gonzalez’s (2012) “abolition of gender.” The concept of genderlessness used here dovetails with the contributions above, even if there are differences. Lorber (2000) is inclined to tie together gender identity and gender roles, where I see at least the possibility of separating the two, as discussed below. Deutsch takes a critical stance toward the socialization model, making her time horizons for radical transformation shorter than those derived from my approach to cultural change. Gonzalez views the abolition of gender as organically linked to the abolition of capitalist production relations, where I believe the concept of genderlessness is more or less neutral with respect to capitalist production.
16. This claim is in principle testable. Were we to construct a continuous measure of gender as power and another of gender as identity, the hypothesis suggests the two are far from perfectly correlated and indeed that the link in some circumstances is weak.
17. If feminist objectives involved the transformation of sex rather than gender, feminism would cease to be a *social* movement, requiring instead time horizons on the scale of evolutionary mutations.

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