



## The Sexual Division of Labour and Women's Heterogeneity

Catherine Hakim

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Catherine Hakim

## The sexual division of labour and women's heterogeneity

The comments by Bruegel and by Ginn et al. (hereafter the Eleven) on my article 'Five feminist myths about female employment' (Hakim 1995b) do not constitute a step forward in research and debate on female employment. Bruegel agrees with me on all main issues; her disagreements are on points of detail rather than fundamental substance and are presented too briefly to be clear. The Eleven provide a catalogue of selective evidence of the kind that characterizes advocacy research rather than detached and dispassionate social science. What they say is generally arguable. The problem is that they do not give the *complete* story and the parts they leave out change our conclusions fundamentally. To take just one example, the Eleven quote a paper by Rubery et al. showing that women part-timers are 'overqualified' for their jobs, but fail to mention that the paper also shows full-timers to be similarly 'overqualified' for their jobs. The paper also shows that it is full-time workers, men and women, who most often wish to change their employer if they could, *not* part-timers. This is hardly consistent with the notion that employers exploit part-timers in particular. They also fail to note that in the same paper part-timers report their jobs to be just as secure and permanent as full-time jobs – so this can hardly be the cause of higher turnover among part-timers (Rubery et al. 1994: 214, 225, 227). There is a great deal of valuable research evidence in this source and other recent publications that the Eleven similarly ignore. On balance, the research evidence shows that part-time work does not change a woman's primary self-identity as a housewife, does not change her bargaining power and weight in decision-making and does not change her role in the household. From a sociological perspective, part-timers can be grouped with housewives rather than with wage workers in aggregate data. We cannot expect the expansion of part-time work to be the catalyst for social and economic change, and this is the key point about the myth of rising female employment, which the Eleven do not even address.

It will not do for social scientists to be economical with the truth, giving one half of the story but failing to mention the inconvenient evidence. Social scientists are supposed to take account of *all* the evidence rather than relying on sample selection bias and selective perception to support personal convictions.

The unpalatable truth is that a substantial proportion of women still accept the sexual division of labour which sees homemaking as women's *principal* activity and income-earning as men's *principal* activity in life. This acceptance of *differentiated sex roles* underlies fundamental differences between the work orientations, labour market behaviour and life goals of men and women (Hakim 1991, 1996b). The proportion of women who accept the homemaker role varies from half to two-thirds, depending on the precise formulation of the sexual division of labour presented to them in interview surveys. It is true that attitudes and expectations are changing, among both men and women. But not as fast nor as completely as some commentators would have us believe. It is precisely because changes in attitudes are partial, uneven, moving at different speeds in different social groups and cultures, that we now have a heterogeneous and polarizing population of adult women.

A few women have rejected the sexual division of labour. Apart from the isolated defiant souls that occur in all societies and all times, such women are generally the most highly educated, most highly motivated women who are the cause of a sudden sharp increase in the female share of professional, managerial and other highly-paid occupations in Britain in the 1980s (Hakim 1992: 136). They are found everywhere, in all countries, East and West, but the size of the minority varies from the invisible few thousands to the more vociferous minority that gets its voice heard. However most women still go along with the sexual division of labour, many actively preferring it and colluding with men, others not sufficiently inconvenienced by it to be willing to make a stand against it. Whether they are labelled as the victims of false consciousness or not, or simply foolish, is a matter of intellectual taste. The acceptability of the sexual division of labour clearly owes something to the fact that most women choose to spend a part of their life producing children and rearing them, and they prefer to be supported financially by someone else while they are doing it, either a husband or the state. Another reason is that the sexual division of labour can be efficient and mutually advantageous, as rational choice theorists keep pointing out (Becker 1991: 54–79). Whatever the reason, it is widely accepted, and not only by the men who gain from the arrangement but also by women, because they too perceive themselves as gaining from it.

I agree with Bruegel and the Eleven that the key issue is the explanation for women's position in the workforce. The reason the five myths<sup>1</sup> described in my article are feminist myths is that they all rest on the assumption that women reject the role of full-time homemaker; that they seek to participate in the labour market on exactly the same basis as men, so that sex differentials in work rates or within the workforce can be read as the effects of discrimination rather than personal choice; and that as soon as the barriers come down, women will flood into wage work on a full-time basis if at all possible. I held this view once. My own research proved me wrong.

TABLE I: *Western views on the roles of men and women. Percentage disagreeing with these two statements:*

A *A husband's job is to earn the money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family*

B *Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay*

	Separate roles		Housewife job	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Britain	47	58	33	36
USA	47	52	22	21
Irish Republic	40	50	17	24
West Germany	33	35	29	32

Source: 1988 International Social Survey Programme data reported in Scott, Braun and Alwin (1993: 30-1).

#### THE MODERN SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

Most surveys measure attitudes somewhat crudely in terms of acceptance or rejection of statements proposing a complete division of labour between wives and husbands, in the sense that income-earning is presented as an *exclusively* male function and home-making as an *exclusively* female function. This approach is illustrated in the International Social Survey Programme's item 'A husband's job is to earn the money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family' which is often treated as a measure of 'modernity' in attitudes. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s this statement (or equivalents) attracted roughly 50 per cent of men and women disagreeing and 50 per cent agreeing or indifferent, in the USA, Britain and other European countries, with attitudes fluctuating over time but broadly balanced (Witherspoon 1988: 189; Scott 1990: 57; Kiernan 1992: 97-99; Scott, Braun and Alwin 1993: 34; Haller and Hoellinger, 1994: 102). In Germany, Italy, Austria and Hungary, support for the statement is stronger than disagreement. For example only one-third of German men and women reject the sexual division of labour compared to half in Britain (Table I). Attitudes to the housewife role are less ambivalent and more positive, with a majority of women as well as men agreeing that it can be just as fulfilling as working for pay; only one-third in Britain and Germany and even fewer in the USA reject the idea (Table I).

However the complete separation of roles has been updated in the postwar decades to accept wives going out to work as a secondary activity. Vogler's landmark study shows that the domestic division of labour is now relative rather than absolute; that attitudes to income-earning can change at a different, faster pace than attitudes to the homekeeping role; and that there are qualitative differences between the work orientations of women

working full-time and part-time. The majority of part-timers regard breadwinning as the *primary* (but not exclusive) responsibility of men, and see women as secondary earners whose *primary* (but not exclusive) responsibility is domestic work and homemaking. The majority of women working full-time reject both these propositions (Vogler 1994: 45, 55).

One EC Eurobarometer survey provides a unique measure of support, across Europe, for the *modern* sexual division of labour, which falls half-way between the completely equal sharing of income-earning and domestic functions to separate and parallel roles (Table II). Roughly one-third of the EC population supported each family model. The egalitarian model attracted most support in Greece, Denmark, Italy and France, followed closely by the Netherlands and UK. The complete separation of roles attracted most support in Luxembourg, Ireland and Belgium. But in all countries there was a wide spread of support for all three models of the family, none receiving majority support, with the single exception of Greece's majority support for the egalitarian model. This suggests that the 'modern' egalitarian family is really a reversion to a pre-industrial model. Overall, a two-thirds majority of European men and women favour the idea of the working wife, and a two-thirds majority also favour the wife retaining all or the major part of the domestic role. Within countries, differences by sex are negligible except in Greece, Italy and France where men are distinctly less favourable than women towards the egalitarian marriage (European Commission 1984: 9). Age has by far the strongest influence on attitudes (Table II) and in this case we can safely read the results as reflecting generational differences. The key contribution of this survey is that it shows, for all European countries, that people who reject the complete separation of roles for men and women do not necessarily accept egalitarian or symmetrical roles: at least half only go as far as supporting a secondary earner role for the wife, who retains the larger share of domestic and childcare work. Attitude surveys have often presented people with a false dichotomy which failed to recognize the *modern* version of the sexual division of labour, a compromise that stops a long way short of truly egalitarian attitudes (Table II).

#### THE LIMITS OF SOCIAL ENGINEERING

There have been three important attempts to eliminate the sexual division of labour and create symmetrical sex roles: in the Israeli *kibbutzim*, in Sweden and in China. All three have been partially but not completely successful, revealing that there are limits to what social engineering can achieve. Tables III and IV display the relative success of Sweden compared with other European societies and of China compared with other Far Eastern societies. The attitude statement in Table III proposes the complete separation of roles; the statement in Table IV does not completely exclude wage work for wives.

TABLE II: *European views on the sexual division of labour. Percentage supporting each of three models of the sexual division of labour*

	Egalitarian	Compromise	Separate roles	Total
Greece	53	23	25	100
Denmark	50	33	17	100
Italy	42	28	30	100
France	41	27	32	100
Netherlands	41	27	32	100
UK	39	37	24	100
Belgium	35	25	40	100
Ireland	32	26	42	100
West Germany	29	38	33	100
Luxembourg	27	23	50	100
Men				
15-24 years	49	33	18	100
25-39	40	38	22	100
40-54	28	36	36	100
55 and over	26	28	46	100
Women				
15-24 years	60	25	15	100
25-39	45	32	23	100
40-54	36	34	30	100
55 and over	31	29	40	100
Total for EC of 10	38	32	30	100

Notes: The question asked: People talk about the changing roles of husband and wife in the family. Here are three kinds of family. Which of them corresponds most with your ideas about the family?:

- A family where the two partners each have an equally absorbing job and where housework and the care of the children are shared equally between them.
- A family where the wife has a less demanding job than her husband and where she does the larger share of housework and caring for the children.
- A family where only the husband has a job and the wife runs the home.
- None of these three cases

Percentages have been adjusted to exclude the 3% not responding to the question and the 3% choosing the last response.

Source: Derived from the Eurobarometer report by European Commission, *European Women and Men 1983* (1984)

In 1993, one-quarter of women aged 20 and over in Britain, France, Germany and the USA agreed with the rigid separation of roles in the statement 'The husband should be the breadwinner, and the wife should stay at home' (Table III). In Japan and the Philippines two-thirds accepted the complete sexual division of labour. The long-term trend is for declining acceptance and a decade earlier, in 1982, acceptance of the idea was invariably higher, except in the Philippines, even though the earlier survey was limited to women aged 20-59, excluding older women who are usually more conservative in outlook. Sweden demonstrates that

TABLE III: *The sexual division of labour: East and West comparisons.*  
*Percentage of women agreeing with or indifferent to the statement:*  
*The husband should be the breadwinner, and the wife should stay at home*

	1993	1982
Sweden	13	16
UK	21	28
France	24	..
Germany	29	38
USA	27	35
Korea	33	..
Japan	62	76
Philippines	67	56

Notes: .. Not available

Results from nationally representative random samples of 1000 or more women aged 20 and over in 1993 for all countries except Japan where results are based on a nationally representative random sample of 2000 women aged 20 and over interviewed in November 1992. Data for 1982 relates to women aged 20–59 years. The survey covered West Germany only in 1982 but the whole of unified Germany (including East Germany) in 1993.

Source: Calculated from Figure 1–35 in Tokyo Metropolitan Government (1994: 78).

energetically 'egalitarian' policies, which in this context means policies promoting symmetrical roles for men and women and supported by vigorous fiscal and social security rules to prevent backsliding, can substantially change social attitudes: the vast majority (around 85 per cent) of women reject the complete separation of roles. However there remains a stubborn minority of women (16 per cent in 1982 and 13 per cent in 1993) who still accept this design for living, albeit a lower proportion than in the rest of Europe (Table III). While these results show how malleable attitudes are at the aggregate level, they also point to small minorities of women across Europe whose perspective has not changed, for whom the complete separation of domestic roles remains entirely satisfactory. China demonstrates both these points even more sharply.

China implemented the most determined social engineering policy aimed at eradicating the sexual division of labour and associated attitudes. The Marriage Law of 1950 laid down the principles of equality between the sexes, monogamy, freedom to choose marital partners and the right to sue for divorce, marking a break away from Confucian patriarchal values which supported an essentialist conception of the difference between the sexes and sharply segregated roles for men and women (Stockman, Bonney and Sheng 1995: 141–54). The successes and failures of this largest-ever real-world social experiment are immensely valuable to social scientists, particularly for the study of women's position in society. Success

TABLE IV: *Far Eastern views on the roles of men and women*

	Beijing		Seoul		Bangkok		Fukuoka	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
<i>Percentage agreeing with each statement:</i>								
There are no significant differences of abilities between men and women	70	77	62	67	87	90	55	54
The ideal is for men to have a job and for women to take care of the family	40	24	69	51	68	71	72	60
If my husband earned enough money I would rather stay at home as a housewife (asked only of married women)	..	35	..	..	..	..	..	..

Notes: .. Not available

Source: Calculated from Figures II-5-1, II-5-20, III-6-1 and III-6-2 in Ma et al. (1994: 122, 154, 344). The surveys were carried out in 1989 (Fukuoka), 1991 (Seoul), 1992 (Bangkok) and 1993 (Beijing), with representative samples of N = 1736, N = 1608, N = 1570 and N = 1920 respectively.

was greatest in eradicating centuries-old perceptions of sex differences in ability and in the practice of male dominance in the household. There was also substantial success in eradicating the sexual division of labour: a low-wage full-employment policy made it necessary for all adults to work and hence for couples to share domestic work as well. However in 1988, after the economic reform programme begun at the end of the 1970s had introduced a new climate of opinion, there was a major public debate over a new trend for women to withdraw from wage work and their reasons for doing so. A survey carried out in Beijing in November 1993 showed that one-quarter of all women, one-third of wives and two-fifths of men accepted the sexual division of labour as the ideal to aim for (Table IV).

The attitude statement here was worded sufficiently vaguely as not to completely exclude wage work (social labour in China), but the relatively large minorities of women (especially wives) agreeing with the sexual division of labour is still remarkable. Respondents to the survey were aged 20-69 years (typically 30-50 years) and resident in Beijing, thus including the most educated and most cosmopolitan groups in Chinese society, 40 per cent of them professionals and senior administrators, who had lived in a communist society for virtually all their adult lives. Half the wives had earnings similar to or higher than their husbands. The policy of one child per family meant that in 1993, and for the foreseeable future, the great majority of couples had only one child to raise, and they had access to good socialized childcare facilities staffed by professionals. Yet even in



these most favourable circumstances, a consistent one-third of wives in all age groups (varying slightly 27 per cent–40 per cent) preferred to stay at home as a housewife if their husband earned enough money to permit it. Similarly, acceptance of the sexual division of labour as the ideal was found in all age groups, varying only from 20 per cent for people in their 60s to 38 per cent among people in their 30s.

It might be argued in this case that people were simply reverting to traditional patriarchal values which had been suppressed but not abandoned. This might have been so in some rural areas, but not in urban areas, let alone Beijing. The 1993 survey found strongly egalitarian attitudes on all aspects of family roles and relationships. For example over three-quarters of husbands and wives in all age groups stated that family decisions were made jointly, whereas the husband dominated decision-making in Bangkok, Seoul and Fukuoka, the three other cities surveyed. Acceptance of the traditional family division of labour was lowest among people in their 20s, but also among people in their 50s and 60s. It was only among people aged 30–50 that acceptance rose to two-fifths, clearly linked to childcare concerns. Four-fifths of men and women in all age groups thought women should stay at home when a child is young (Ma et al. 1994: 122–33, 344–63). This is strong evidence to support Becker's argument that the sexual division of labour in the household can be accepted voluntarily as efficient and mutually advantageous rather than as something imposed on people by custom and patriarchy. The other side of the coin is that only one-third of wives (one-quarter of all women aged 20–69 years) would prefer this option; two-thirds of Chinese wives rejected it firmly, despite the extra burden of combining wage work and domestic work, with consistent views on related topics (Ma et al. 1994; Stockman, Bonney and Sheng 1995: 141–54).

The impact of social engineering in China is highlighted by comparisons with almost identical surveys in Bangkok, Seoul and Fukuoka (a large town in central Japan with attitudes closer to the national average than to those of Tokyo residents) carried out in 1989–1992 (Table IV). Acceptance of separate sex roles is much higher in Bangkok, Fukuoka and Seoul than in Beijing. The Thai case shows that this is not necessarily related to beliefs about sex differences in abilities, as the Thais do not believe there are any significant differences of ability between men and women, whereas in China this belief had to be eradicated. It appears that the complete separation of roles between men and women will continue to attract support, even if minority support, because it does, as Becker argues, offer certain concrete benefits to couples. The modern version of the sexual division of labour, which is relative rather than total, attracts even greater support.

There is no evidence that attitudes cease to be important once women gain access to higher education and better paid jobs. If anything the opposite is the case, as women can afford to choose between competing lifestyles, given homogamy (Table V). A two-thirds majority of women,

TABLE V: *Employment rates by sex role attitudes*

Sex role attitudes	Percentage of each group in employment		Distribution of sample	
	Highly qualified	Other women	Highly qualified	Other women
Modern	92	76	23	14
Ambivalent	84	66	63	67
Traditional	64	54	15	20
All women aged 20–59	82	65	100	100
Base = 100%	746	2700	746	2700

*Notes:* The highly qualified have tertiary level qualifications, beyond A-level; other women have no qualifications or only secondary school qualifications. Sex role attitudes were scored on the basis of nine attitude statements, including the ISSP sexual division of labour statement shown in Table I of this paper.

*Source:* Calculated from Tables 6.21 and 6.22 in Corti et al. (1995:69) reporting 1991 survey results from the British Household Panel Study.

whatever their level of education, hold ambivalent views on sex roles, with minorities firmly accepting or rejecting the sexual division of labour. It is well established that higher education qualifications are associated with higher work rates – a ‘mark up’ of 17 percentage points in Table V (65 per cent versus 82 per cent). But the impact of sex role attitudes is greater, especially among highly qualified women, producing a ‘mark-up’ of 28 percentage points in employment rates when modern and traditional women are compared (64 per cent versus 92 per cent).

The comments by Bruegel and the Eleven rightly point out that my evidence and discussion were incomplete. Inevitably a journal article could not cover all the topics the Eleven wished me to address. A fuller assessment of the evidence on labour mobility has been made available (Hakim 1995a, 1996b). Further evidence on change over time and the marginal nature of women’s part-time jobs is presented in two other articles (Hakim 1994, 1995c). A broader assessment of the evidence for competing explanations of women’s social and economic position will be published shortly (Hakim 1996a).

We must stop presenting women as ‘victims’, or as an undifferentiated mass of mindless zombies whose every move is determined by other actors and social forces, as the Eleven do. Women are responsible adults, who make real choices and are the authors and agents of their own lives. Some women choose to be home-centred, with work a secondary activity. Some women choose to be career-centred, with domestic activities a secondary consideration. Female heterogeneity is a result of the choices women

make, reflecting not just different but conflicting preferences between two qualitatively different life courses.

(Date accepted: October 1995)

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NOTE

1. The Eleven claim that I misused the term myth, and really meant mistakes. I used the definition in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English*: 'A purely fictitious narrative embodying popular ideas on natural phenomena etc.'. The feminist myths I describe embody popular feminist ideas on human nature and motivation, on social trends and on women as universal victims.

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