

Gender, Work, and Family in the Twenty-First Century

Julie and Max met playing music together in college. “He was a year ahead of me in college, so he was a scary upperclassman at the time,” Julie said, chuckling as she recounted their relationship history. After being friends for a few years, Julie and Max started dating. At that point, they both wanted to be doctors and ended up going to separate medical schools in different cities. They kept up their long-distance relationship for several years, taking turns driving over two hours each way to visit each other every few weeks. Max described this long-distance arrangement as “frustrating, especially at first because we didn’t really know how much we would be seeing each other.” The couple hoped their next step of training—medical residency—would finally put them in the same city. They imagined that once they were in the same location, they could make more serious plans related to their relationship, like living together, getting married, and perhaps having children. Yet when I asked Max how he ended up in a residency program in a small city three and a half hours away by plane from Julie, he said:

Out of all the places I interviewed, I liked [the Mountain West institution] the best. Knowingly, it wasn’t ideal for our relationship because if I was to move to [Julie’s city] that would have been simpler. But it would have probably been better to go to places like [the East Coast] where there would be more programs for her to apply to. I knew already that she was applying to [residency] programs this year, like now. My second choice on the list was [an eastern institution], and for example, [that East Coast city] has four or

five [residency] programs [in her specialty] where [this city] has one. So, it was maybe not the best decision at that point, but it was the place I liked the best.

Recall that Julie was a year behind Max in school. When I began interviewing her, she was preparing to submit her residency applications. I wanted to know what she was going to do. Did Max and Julie have a plan for her transition between medical school and residency? Maybe she would only apply to Max's hospital and risk getting rejected, without any backup options for her training. Max's hospital was the only institution in a sparsely populated part of the country, so even if Julie considered other "nearby" programs, the next closest option for her was an eight-hour drive or an hour-and-a-half plane trip away. Maybe they would decide that Julie should move to Max's city regardless of whether she could continue her medical career. Perhaps Julie saw other career paths for herself and would consider changing occupations if her residency application did not work out. Maybe she thought taking a break from pursuing a medical career, or giving up having a career altogether, was the right fit for her at this point in her life. That decision would still allow her to accomplish her other goals: she and Max could live in the same place, get married, and start a family. Or Julie could apply broadly to the best residency programs across the country. That plan would maximize Julie's training opportunities but could extend the couple's long-distance relationship—unless Max decided to quit his program to follow Julie or found a way to complete his training wherever Julie ended up. Whatever they chose, what would this decision mean for Max's and Julie's careers and for their relationship for the next year—or for the next five years?

Participation in paid work is increasingly expected of both young men and women in the United States.¹ Americans with postsecondary, graduate, or professional degrees like Max and Julie are particularly likely to express high professional ambitions, with men and women both expecting to pursue careers. At the same time, these highly educated young people want marriages or other long-term, committed relationships, and many expect to have children as well. Given the assumption that men and women in different-gender relationships will both work for pay, many of these young adults hope to share housework with their partners and equally share the responsibilities of raising children while maintaining two careers.² Yet we know that working couples' realities

often deviate from these egalitarian ideals, usually with women trading off paid work to take on unpaid family care. Will this contemporary cohort of young adults repeat this pattern, or will they come closer to achieving equality in work and family?

This book documents what partnered men and women like Max and Julie do when difficult decisions about careers, relationships, and families have to be made. These couples' expectations for egalitarian partnerships in which both partners are equally responsible for working for pay and providing unpaid caregiving may sound good in the abstract but may not become a reality. Men and women may face material and cultural challenges that can block their attempts to have equal relationships as they launch careers and build their families together. Yet there may be pathways toward gender egalitarianism in work and family, and these contemporary young couples may be blazing those trails toward more equal partnerships.

Using data from 156 interviews collected over the course of six years from the partners of twenty-one different-gender couples, I argue that consistently supportive workplace contexts, partners' steadfast attitudes about gender egalitarianism, and men's and women's jointly coordinated efforts all need to come together for couples to experience gender equality in work and family. I show that weaknesses in any of these areas can divert partners away from equal sharing and toward gendered power imbalances in these domains. If workplaces present material challenges to dual earner-caregiver partnerships, if men's and women's attitudes about gender equality shift over time, or if partners fall out of step in aligning their activities with each other, couples may find themselves in work-family arrangements that deviate from an egalitarian division of labor. Because there is self-reinforcing feedback between workplace conditions, cultural attitudes, and partners' interactions, a couple's particular balance of work and family—and the resulting power dynamics across partners—is likely to persist over time. Yet changes to men's and women's work-related landscapes; their attitudes about gender, work, and family; or the way they take action together can reverberate through a work-family ecosystem and result in a new balance that may be more—or less—gender equal. By illustrating the way couples navigated their job applications, learned to balance two demanding work schedules, helped one another grow in their careers, and coordinated childcare, I shed light on the state of gender inequality in work and family among young professionals in contemporary American society.

THE STALLED GENDER REVOLUTION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The stories of couples like Max and Julie are embedded in and influenced by their broader social context. The gender revolution—the movement of women into the paid labor force and men into the household and family—has mostly stalled in the United States in the twenty-first century.³ Women make up 47 percent of American workers,⁴ but they still earn 82 cents for every dollar that men make.⁵ Such earning disparities are even starker when broken out by race and ethnicity: Black women make 62 percent and Latina women make just 55 percent of what White men earn annually.⁶ Women remain concentrated in feminized, lower-paid occupations like teaching and nursing and are underrepresented in company leadership roles and other workplace positions of power.⁷ Even if women equally participated in all occupations, though, most of the gender wage gap comes from within occupations, so disparities across men and women in paid labor would remain.⁸ Not only do men and women work in different occupations and receive different levels of pay, men and women experience different employment rhythms. Women are less likely than men to work full-time and are more likely to have gaps in their career histories,⁹ a pattern that became especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ These résumé characteristics may be interpreted negatively by employers,¹¹ making it harder for women to reenter full-time positions if they ever deviated from the “standard” pattern of employment. In a stratified society in which incomes and occupations matter to individuals’ access to power,¹² men remain more powerful than women in the domain of work.

Men’s and women’s unequal performance of unpaid labor at home further reflects persistent gendered power imbalances.¹³ Women remain responsible for the majority of household chores and childcare despite their participation in paid labor. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, women spent an average of eighteen hours a week completing housework and thirty-five hours caring for children while men spent just ten hours on household chores and seventeen hours taking care of children.¹⁴ These figures jumped for both men and women during the pandemic lockdowns, but the gender gap persisted.¹⁵ Even though men’s participation in domestic and family-related work varies by race and class and has increased over time,¹⁶ they tend to do different tasks from women. For example, when men spend time on childcare, they are more likely to do the “fun” activities with children like reading to or playing with them,

while women are more likely to do the routine physical work associated with childcare like bathing and feeding them.¹⁷ It is unsurprising, then, that married mothers do more housework, sleep less, and have less leisure time than single mothers, despite having a partner who could presumably relieve them from these burdens.¹⁸ If power is also measured by one's freedom from obligations to complete unpaid, devalued, or undesirable labor,¹⁹ men remain more powerful than women in the domestic realm, too.

Cultural norms—attitudes and beliefs surrounding gender, work, and family—and structural factors—material conditions that shape men's and women's paid work in the labor market and unpaid work in families—both contribute to this stalled gender revolution and reinforce power imbalances across men and women. At the cultural level, ideas about gender, work, and family link men and masculinity to paid employment while linking women and femininity to unpaid family care.²⁰ To successfully perform gender given these cultural logics, men must work for pay,²¹ and women must put family first.²² These messages may resonate particularly loudly for White Americans and upper-middle-class Americans²³—meaning these specific gender attitudes are bound up with race and class privilege—but also circulate among communities of color and working-class Americans.²⁴

These societal beliefs about gender, work, and family are reinforced by structural conditions at work.²⁵ Greedy white-collar workplaces that demand long hours and expect “face time” pressure workers, often presumed to be men,²⁶ to devote their energy to their jobs at the expense of other activities.²⁷ Difficult working conditions are exacerbated in working-class jobs and can push workers, especially women with family care responsibilities, out of the labor force.²⁸ Paired with a lack of supportive organizational- or state-level policies like guaranteed childcare support, paid time off for personal and family care, and other resources for people to complete activities outside of paid work, men and women must find individualized solutions to balance their responsibilities.²⁹ Caitlyn Collins, for instance, shows that American mothers who lack access to public policies supporting working parents are more likely to see themselves as personally responsible for achieving work-family balance than their counterparts in other countries with more expansive social safety nets.³⁰

When these material conditions intersect with cultural beliefs about whether men or women should work for pay or provide unpaid care to the family, many different-gender couples may be pushed to adopt

a traditional, gender-unequal division of labor.³¹ Research by Mary Blair-Loy and Pamela Stone depicts how masculinized logics at work and feminized ideals of motherhood push professional women toward gender-traditional roles.³² Blair-Loy's and Stone's respective interview studies show that workplaces structured around an ideal worker with no other responsibilities—that is, a man with a wife at home who takes care of the housework and children³³—hamper professional women's ability to advance at work. When women enter these masculinized workplaces, they are assumed to have parenting responsibilities and are mommy tracked—placed into part-time positions with no upward mobility or otherwise given no accommodations if they do have other responsibilities. At the same time, cultural norms around intensive motherhood pressure women,³⁴ especially White upper-middle-class women, to devote their time and energy to raising children, supporting husbands, and caring for the home. These workplace pushes and domestic pulls result in women leaving careers to become full-time mothers. If women return to work, the persistence of family-unfriendly workplaces and race- and class-based pressures to mother intensively channel women into freelance jobs or positions in feminized fields—both of which are characterized by lower earnings and few pathways to leadership relative to the professional career tracks they left behind.³⁵

Yet cultural attitudes, workplace conditions, and public policies may be changing for contemporary young adults. Endorsement of gender-traditional work-family arrangements is low among Americans aged eighteen to thirty-four. In the 2021 General Social Survey, only 22 percent of young men and women agreed or strongly agreed that it is better for men to work outside the home and for women to take care of the home and children.³⁶ Instead, young adults are more likely than their counterparts in the past to support an egalitarian division of labor in which labor market, household, and family responsibilities are equally shared. For example, a recent study found that young adults in America hold strong egalitarian opinions about the ideal way to divide work and family responsibilities across partners.³⁷

In addition to these attitudinal changes, some institutional changes are taking place across the United States. A few state and local governments and various private employers have adopted policies to provide workers with parental leave and job protection for those who take time off for family reasons.³⁸ For example, California's paid family leave policy offers 55 percent of weekly wages up to \$1,129 and up to six weeks off for family care leave. Further, workplaces increasingly offer employee-driven

flexible working arrangements such as remote work, a policy that has become even more available in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁹ These cultural and structural changes may offer contemporary young people more opportunities to build equal partnerships with shared work and family responsibilities than men and women had before.

Still, cultural and structural barriers to gender equality in work and family remain. A detailed probe into young Americans' cultural attitudes suggests that support for gender equality in the public sphere outpaces support for equality at home.⁴⁰ Men and women support women's entry into and advancement at work but still hold gender-essentialist beliefs about women's "innate" desires for intimate relationships, "expertise" in all things domestic, and "natural" capacity to do care work. Ellen Lamont finds, for instance, that although young adults want to partner with an equal in terms of education and work accomplishments, they continue following gender-traditional dating scripts because they believe men and women have fundamentally different romantic and family orientations.⁴¹ These gender-unequal patterns continue into young adults' long-term, committed cohabiting and marital relationships. Research by Amanda Miller and her colleagues shows that young adult cohabitators often establish a gender-unequal division of housework without much discussion and assume that men's careers will take primacy over women's careers when they become parents, even if both partners currently have equally strong career orientations.⁴²

Neotraditional attitudes that a woman can work as long as it does not interfere with her family responsibilities may become especially pronounced when working conditions do not facilitate equal sharing of all responsibilities. Prior research has found that when workplace and public policies do not exist to support gender equality, people who would have otherwise preferred egalitarianism instead endorsed gendered work-family arrangements.⁴³ For example, Kathleen Gerson's interview research and David Pedulla and Sarah Thébaud's survey-experimental research show that most young men's and women's "Plan A" for balancing work and family in the future involves sharing these responsibilities equally with their romantic partners.⁴⁴ Yet these attitudes are contingent on material supports for dual earner-caregiver households. When asked what they would do if external conditions at work made egalitarianism hard to achieve, the young people in Gerson's study and in Pedulla and Thébaud's research express gendered "Plan B's": men favor a neotraditional arrangement in which their careers are prioritized, but women prefer to forgo partners in favor of working while raising children on