

Council on Contemporary Families Gender Rebound Symposium

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Council on Contemporary Families Gender Rebound Symposium

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CCF Gender Revolution Rebound Symposium Overview

News from CCF: After a Puzzling Pause, the Gender Revolution Continues

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The Council on Contemporary Families releases [The Gender Revolution Rebound Symposium](#) as public support for working mothers and dual-earner families is on the rise; new research suggests that in marriages formed since the early 1990s, men and women are much more happy with non-traditional arrangements than in the past.

This good news comes on the heels of a [puzzling pause](#) in the movement towards gender equality. For the last several years, researchers have reported on a seeming stall in markers of progress toward gender equality. Women's labor force participation rose dramatically between 1970 and 1990, but then slowed and actually fell between 2000 and 2010. Convergence in men's and women's hourly wages also slowed and then stalled over the same time period, despite women's continuing educational attainment. The public's confidence that working women could be good mothers grew rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s, but slipped in the 1990s, while support for egalitarian work-family arrangements also dipped during the second half of the 1990s.

In [four briefing papers](#) prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families, however, researchers suggest that despite setbacks, there has been more motion behind the scenes than previously recognized.

Changes in attitudes

In "[Back on Track? The Stall and Rebound in Support for Women's New Roles in Work and Politics, 1977-2012](#)," [David Cotter](#) (Union College) [Joan Hermsen](#) (University of Missouri) and [Reeve Vanneman](#) (University of Maryland) profile a significant rebound of support for gender equality since 2006. *Although the highest support for gender equity is found among millennials, men and women of all ages, liberals as well as conservatives, have rebounded since the dips from the late 1990s to the early 2000s.* In fact, conservatives have shown a greater increase in support for gender equity than liberals, even though their total support levels remain lower.

Specifically:

- After slipping from 62 percent to 58 percent between 1994 and 2000, the percentage of people disagreeing that it is better for men to earn the money and women to tend the home rose to an all-time high of 68 percent in 2012.
- Less than a third of Americans now say that a male breadwinner family is the ideal arrangement.

- In 2000, almost half of the public thought that preschool children suffered if their mother worked outside the home, but by 2012, this had dropped to 35 percent, with 65 percent of Americans rejecting this idea.
- The percentage of respondents agreeing that a working mother can establish as warm a relationship with her children as a homemaker had dropped to 60 percent by 2000 (the same as it had been in 1985) but by 2012 it was back up to 72 percent.
- And the percentage of respondents saying that men and women are equally suited to politics had grown to 76 percent by 2012, following a decline between 1993 and 2004 from 75 to 69 percent.

Historian Stephanie Coontz, CCF co-chair, notes “These findings are particularly impressive in light of the severe recession we have been in. The last time we had such severe job losses for men was in the Great Depression, and that led to a huge backlash against working women, whereas since 2006 the recession has if anything *increased* the respect for female earners.”

Sex is better and divorce less likely for egalitarian couples today

Two other papers, [“Is the glass half empty, or three-quarters full?”](#) by [Sharon Sassler](#) (Cornell University), and [“It’s Not Just Attitudes: Marriage Is Also Becoming More Egalitarian”](#) by [Christine Schwartz](#) (University of Wisconsin-Madison), refute the widespread idea that modern men are threatened when they have to share household chores equally or when they are less educated than their partners. This seems to have been true in the past, but is no longer the norm in marriages formed since the early 1990s.

Earlier this year, a much discussed New York Times story, using data collected from people married over twenty years ago, reported that couples who shared household chores equally had less sex than couples who adhered to a traditional division of labor around the house. Many commentators responded by advising men to put down the broom and never touch the iron. But *using data from 2006, and confining her analysis to marriages formed after the early 1990s, Sassler reports that heterosexual couples who shared domestic labor had sex at least as often and were at least as sexually satisfied as couples where the woman did the bulk of the housework.* The only exception was the tiny number of couples (less than 5 percent) where the man did *most* of the housework.

Up until the 1980s, reports Schwartz, marriages where the wife had more education than the husband were more likely to end in divorce than marriages where the husband’s education was the same or higher. *Today, however, couples in which the wife has more education than her husband have no added risk of divorce, and couples in which husbands have more education than their wives may now be more likely to divorce than couples with the same education, suggesting that older hierarchical gender patterns may now be a threat to many marriages.*

Schwartz reminds us, though, that the gender wage gap persists – so that women’s advantage in education isn’t the same thing as women’s advantage in overall earnings. The jury still is out as to whether that remains a risk for contemporary marriages.

What comes next? The sneaky dilemma of overwork and gender inequality

While the median hourly wages of women 35 and under are now 93 percent of their male counterparts, the pay gap among men and women older than 35--those most likely to be married and to have children – remains large. In “Overwork may explain 10 percent of men’s wage advantage over women” Youngjoo Cha (Indiana University) makes the case that one reason for this is accelerating wage inequality that now fuels working long hours. “Overwork” (the practice of putting in 50 or more hours a week) is increasingly prevalent, especially among managers and professionals, and so is the trend toward rewarding such workers disproportionately, which began in the mid-1990s. Overwork is especially difficult for women, who still bear the main responsibility for family life in most cases, so when workers who hew to a traditional work week are penalized in their hourly wages, women are more likely to lose out. *In fact, Cha argues, the overwork effect accounts for 10 percent of the gender wage gap, offsetting the equalizing effect of women’s educational gains since the early 1990s.* One implication of her argument, notes Coontz, is that “If employers continue to penalize workers who do not place work above family life, public support for combining work and family might once again fall.”

Brief: Back on Track? The Stall and Rebound in Support for Women's New Roles in Work and Politics, 1977-2012

Six charts demonstrate a renewed progress towards gender equality starting around 2006.

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For almost a decade now, researchers have been struck by a stall in what had been a remarkably rapid and seemingly unstoppable increase in support for gender equity and approval of women's workforce participation up until the mid-1990s. This research paper provides evidence of what may be a rebound in support for gender equity since 2006.

The General Social Survey contains four questions about gender roles that were first posed to the American public in 1977 and have been asked on every survey since 1985. While some of the questions may feel dated (remember they were first asked 37 years ago), they remain useful to show the degree of change in our attitudes about proper roles for men and women. And between 1977 and the mid-1990s, the rate and extent of change were nothing short of remarkable.

- In 1977, 66 percent of Americans agreed 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," with just over a third of respondents disagreeing. By 1994, less than 20 years later, just over a third of respondents thought this was the ideal family arrangement, while 63 percent disagreed.
- In 1977, 68 percent of respondents believed that a preschool child was likely to suffer if her or his mother worked outside the home, with less than a third disagreeing. By 1994, almost 60 percent of Americans disagreed that maternal employment was harmful to preschoolers.

- In 1977, more than half of respondents (52 percent) believed that a working mother could not establish as warm a relationship with her children as a fulltime homemaker, but by 1994, only 31 percent of Americans still believed this.
- The percentage of Americans who believed that men and women are equally well suited to politics rose from just 48 percent in 1977 to 75 percent by 1993.

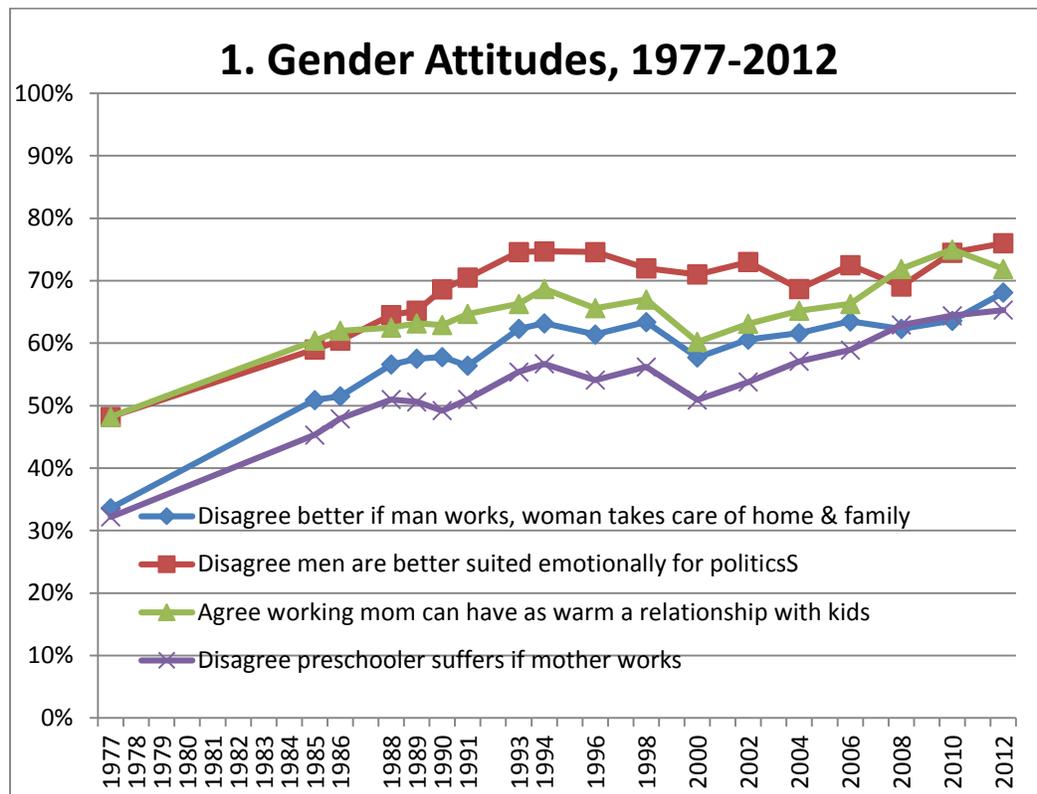
But in the late 1990s, the trend toward acceptance of new gender roles stalled and even dipped. The percentage of Americans disagreeing that a woman's place was in the home slipped from 63 percent in 1994 to 58 percent in 2000. In the same six years, the number of Americans disagreeing that preschool children were harmed if their mothers worked fell from 57 to 51 percent and the number agreeing that a working mother could have an equally warm relationship with her child as a full-time homemaker fell from 69 to 60 percent. Between 1993 and 2004 the percentage of Americans saying that men and women were equally suited to politics fell from 75 to 69 percent.

A number of explanations have been put forward for this "stalled revolution," with some authors attributing it to the economic prosperity of the 1990s and some to the decline of the women's movement, as organized campaigns for better work-family policies gave way to an emphasis on individual solutions, such as "opting out." Other researchers pointed to a rise in cultural conservatism, while still others emphasized the emergence of intensive parenting, based on anxiety about children's chances in an increasingly competitive world.

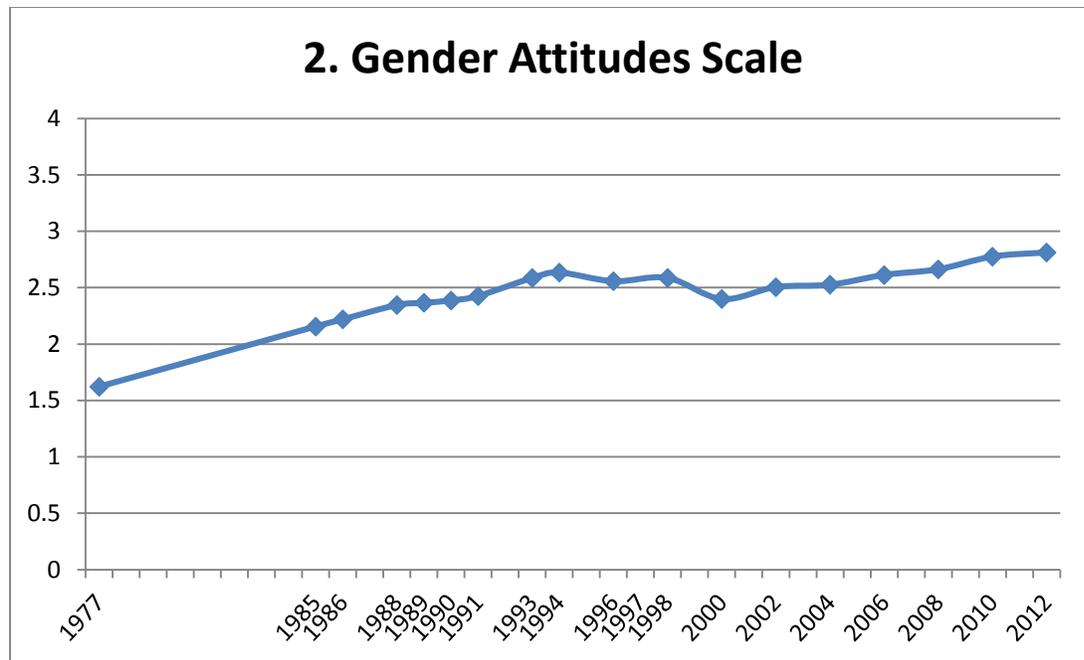
But our latest analysis shows that since hitting their low points, and especially since 2006, there has once more been upward progress in the values associated with approval of new gender roles and relationships. After slipping from 62 to 58 percent between 1994 and 2000, the percentage of people disagreeing that it is better for men to earn the money and women to tend the home rose to an all-time high of 68 percent in 2012. Less than a third of Americans now say that a male breadwinner family is the ideal arrangement.

In 2000, only about half (51 percent) of Americans disagreed that preschool children suffer if their mother worked outside the home, but by 2012, 65 percent disagreed with this. The percentage of respondents agreeing that a working mother can establish as warm a relationship with her children had dropped to 60 percent by 2000 (the same it had been in 1985) but by 2012 it was back up to 72 percent. (This was the only attitude question that has showed any slippage in the last few years, as it had reached a high of 75 percent in 2010). And the percentage of respondents saying that men and women are equally suited to politics had rebounded to 76 percent by 2012.

The following chart (1) summarizes the long-term upward trend, along with the fluctuations, in the four questions that measure acceptance and approval of new gender roles.



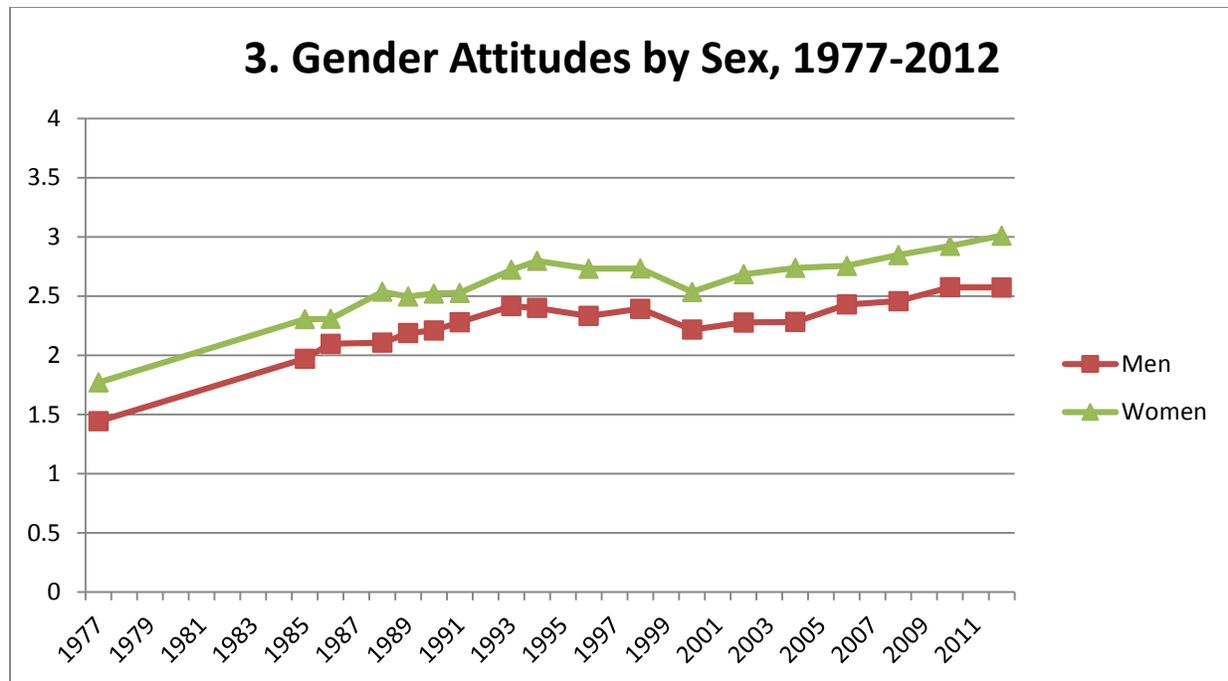
In the next chart (2), we simplify and clarify the patterns by creating a simple scale of these four items, where if an individual responded in a gender egalitarian manner she or he received one point, resulting in a scale ranging from 0 to 4. This summary measure illustrates the larger picture -- nearly forty years of progress towards egalitarian attitudes with a puzzling pause between the peak in 1994 and the present. In 1977, the typical American endorsed 1.5 of these questions in an egalitarian direction, and by 1994 that had risen to 2.6. Endorsement then hovered at about that same level, even falling a little, until 2008, after which it reached nearly three (2.8) out of the four questions.



What Lies Behind these Changes?

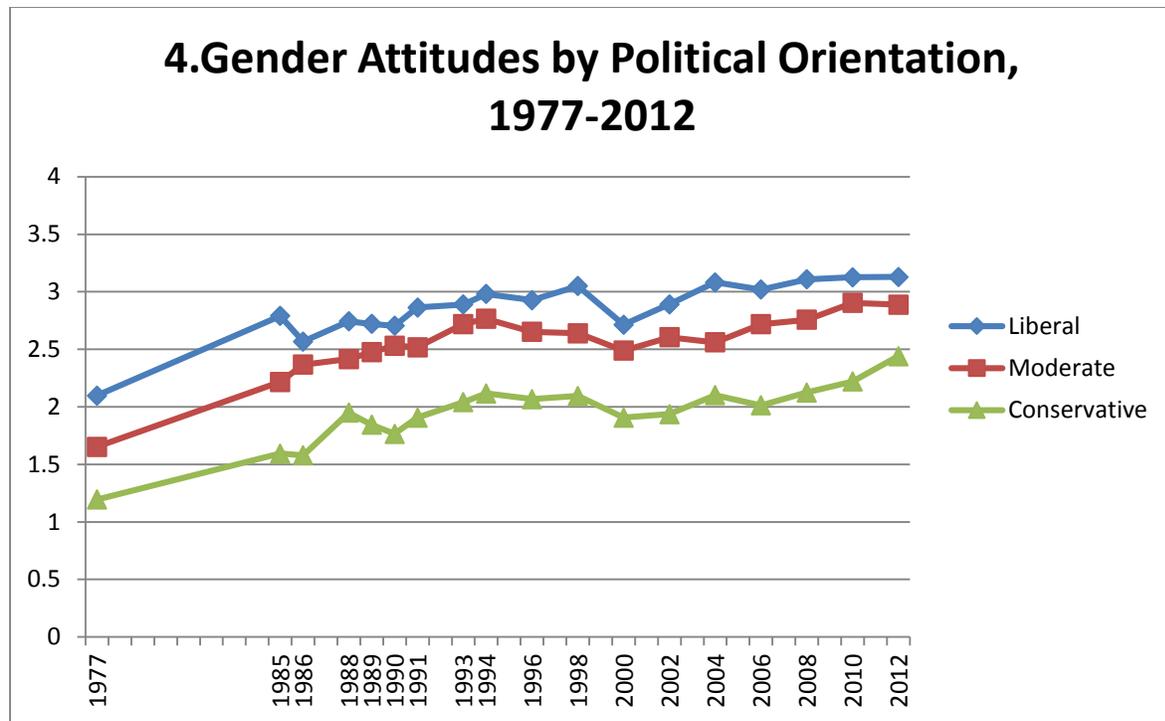
The following charts help us explore whether these changes in public attitudes reflect demographic or political changes in the population.

One possibility might be a growing gender gap on these attitudes: that men and women have been changing their views at different rates. But a comparison of trends for each gender does not support this (Chart 3). On average, women are slightly more egalitarian than men, but the difference has remained fairly consistent over time. The general pattern over time has been the same for both men and women - early movement toward egalitarian attitudes, a stall in the second half of the 1990s, and then a resumption of egalitarian trends.

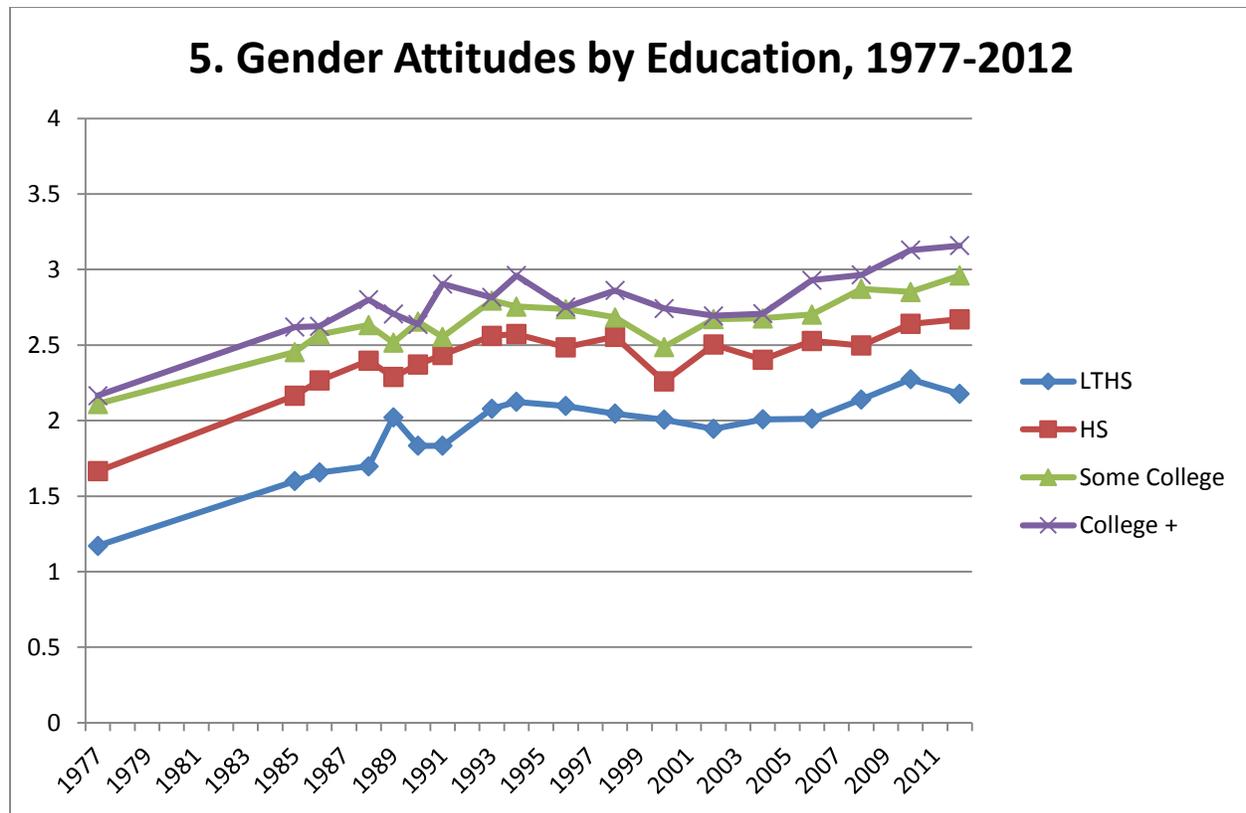


A second possibility is that these trends are explained by changes in political affiliation or ideology over the period. Perhaps the stall in the mid-1990s represented a swing back toward conservatism in those years, and the restart in the 2000s a resurgence of liberalism. Although people who describe themselves as “liberal” tend to be more egalitarian and those who are “conservative” are more traditionalist in gender attitudes, the differences between them have not changed much during the entire time period. Furthermore, the same pattern of stalling and restarting can be seen for each group (Chart 4).

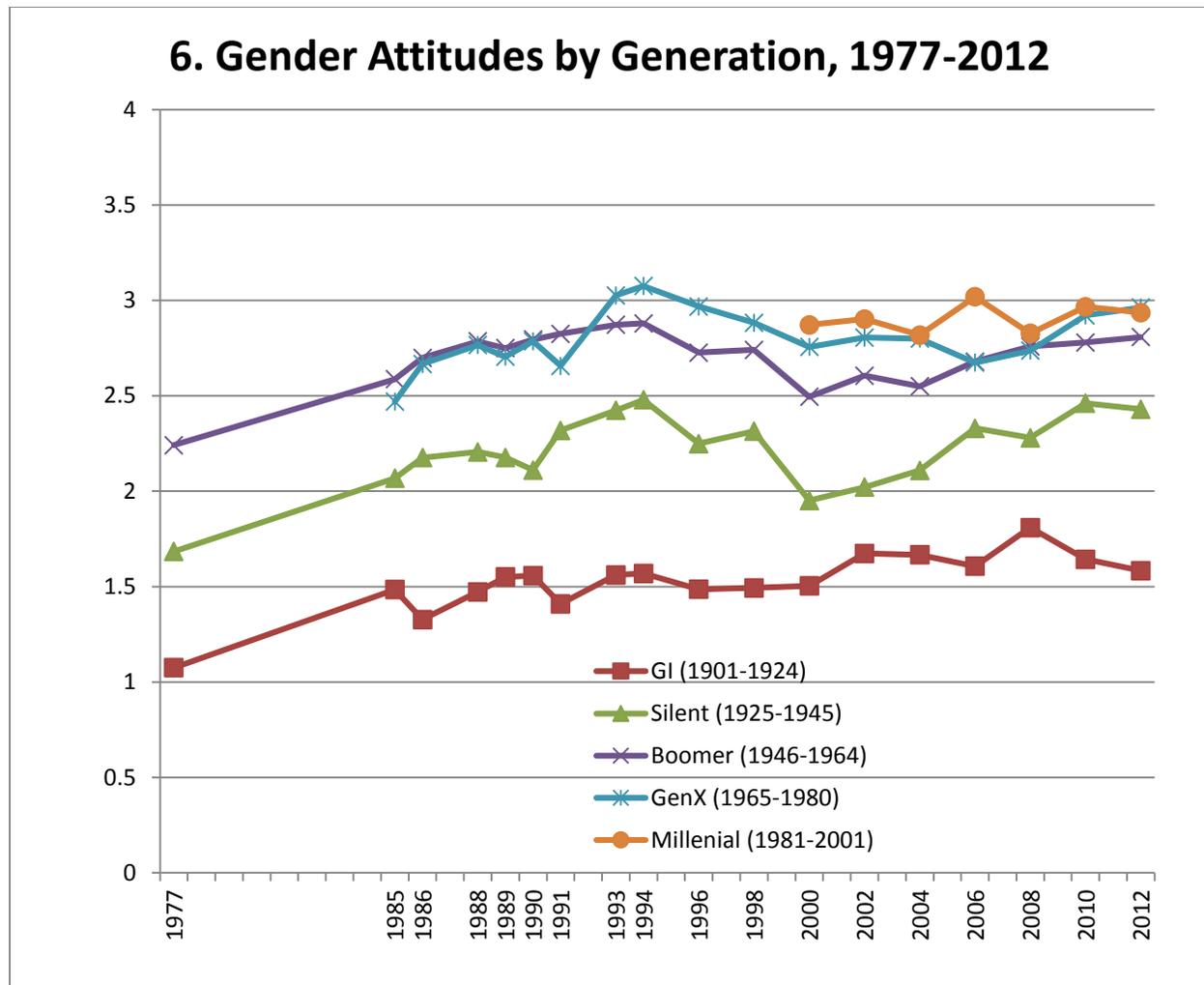
If anything, the long-term trend has been toward a narrowing rather than a growing gulf between liberals and conservatives on these questions. In fact, during the “restart” of the gender revolution in the 2000s the greatest increase in the extent of egalitarian views has occurred among conservatives.



The higher people's level of education, the more egalitarian their answers (Chart 5). On average, in both 1977 and 2012, people with a bachelor's degree or more scored one point higher than those with less than a high school degree, and one half-point higher than high school graduates. The half-point gap between high school and college graduates in 1977 narrowed for most of the period but since 2000 has opened back up to a half-point difference. The trend over time for education follows the same familiar pattern - early progress, stalling, and restarting in all educational groups.



Finally, we look at generational differences in gender attitudes (Chart 6). Each subsequent generation has a more egalitarian orientation than the ones before it, although the gaps progressively decline for the newer generations. The same pattern of upward motion, stall in the 1990s, and then a restart is seen in the Silent Generation (born 1925-45), the Baby Boomers (1946-64), and the GenXers (1965-1980). But even after the restart, the scores for these generations never exceed their mid-1990s peaks. The restart is real for all these groups, and egalitarian views may continue to rise in all or most, but at this point the main force pulling the overall average up beyond its earlier high point is the entry of the Millennial generation, which displays the most gender egalitarian attitudes of all.



At this point, it is unclear why the progressive pattern may have resumed. The timing of the major events that might spur period changes – 9/11, the Great Recession, etc., is wrong. But the fact that the restart takes place within generations at approximately the same time suggests that something may have happened – we just don’t yet know what.

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Brief: Is the glass half empty, or three-quarters full?

This look at sexual frequency among younger couples in equal marriages refutes recent claims that when a man share the housework equally, it is bad for the couple's sex life.

By Sharon Sassler

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For several decades, research has suggested that attitudes and laws favoring gender equity have changed more quickly than people's actual behavior in intimate relationships. One recent [highly publicized article](#) reported that married couples who split domestic chores in an egalitarian manner had sex less often, and reported less satisfaction with their sex lives, than couples who adhered to more to conventional gender behaviors. The depressing message heard round the world was that couples remain stalled in their attachment to old "gender scripts," and that attempts to revise these scripts decrease sexual desire and satisfaction, even among couples who claim to hold egalitarian values.

But the underlying study, based on data gathered over a quarter of a century ago, was focused on the sexual behaviors of married couples in the late 1980s, many of whom had met and married in the 1960s and 1970s. My colleagues Dan Carlson, Amanda Miller, Sarah Hanson and I wondered if the apparent erotic resistance to gender equality still applied to more recent marriages and partnerships, so we turned to newer data (from 2006), examining a sample of low- to moderate-income young married and cohabiting couples with minor children.

[Like Cotter and his colleagues](#), we found evidence that things have changed significantly in more recent years. Couples who shared domestic labor had sex *at least* as often, and were at least as satisfied with the frequency and quality of their sex, as couples where the woman did the bulk of the housework. In fact, these egalitarian partners were ranked slightly higher in all these categories, reporting more frequent sex and greater satisfaction with the frequency and quality of that sex than conventional couples, although these differences did not reach the level of statistical significance. This suggests that it is good news for couples, not bad, that men have more than doubled the amount of housework they do since the 1960s.

The one group that *did* score significantly lower than both egalitarian and conventional couples? Couples where men did the bulk of the domestic labor. Apparently, completely reversing gender roles in housework was not a sexual turn-on to either the men or women involved. But such couples accounted for only a small share (less than 5 percent) of those in our sample.

Although it is very clear that progress toward gender equality in Americans' attitudes and behaviors has not come to a standstill, it is true that some areas remain stubbornly resistant to change. For example, only about three out of ten couples in our sample reported that housework was equally shared (and men were more likely to report they share things more equitably than were their female partners). The majority of our sample couples (63 percent) practiced rather conventional divisions of domestic labor, where the woman did approximately two-thirds of the housework. Perhaps if more men realized that sexual frequency was higher when the domestic load was more equitably shared they would grab that Swiffer more often.

Another area that seems especially resistant to change, despite being perceived by many men as an onerous responsibility, is the tradition that men are responsible for initiating relationships. In heterosexual marriage, for example, it is still usually the man who is expected to propose. In my research with Amanda Miller on cohabiting couples in the U.S., we find that even though such couples are egalitarian in many ways, with the women often having more schooling than their partners or contributing the same amount of income, the vast majority of both men and women view proposing as the right and responsibility of the man. It will be interesting to see if this pattern also changes in coming decades or if it will remain one of the last bastions of traditional gender arrangements.

Brief: It's Not Just Attitudes: Marriage Is Also Becoming More Egalitarian

Husbands and wives who share similar levels of education now enjoy a lower risk of divorce than those in which husbands have more education – a trend consistent with a shift toward egalitarian marriages.

By Christine R. Schwartz
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The prevailing view for the past several years has been that the gender revolution stalled in the 1990s. In that decade, there was a flattening or slowdown in many trends associated with progress toward gender equality: women's labor force participation, women's entry into male-dominated occupations, reductions of the gender pay gap, and egalitarian gender attitudes.

But [recent research](#) throws doubt on the conclusion that the gender revolution has stalled. Through the 1990s and 2000s, for example, one trend that did not slow was women's increasing educational advantage over men.

This has created a major shift in marriage patterns: Men once tended to have more education than their wives, but it is now wives who have the educational advantage. This change in spouses' relative education has been large: Only about 35 percent of couples married in the 1950s who had different levels of education were ones in which wives had more education than their husbands. For couples marrying in the late 2000s, the share had risen to [over 60 percent](#).

And during the 1990s – the era of the stall in many trends – couples forming these marriages became less divorce prone. Up until the 1980s, marriages in which wives had more education than their husbands were more likely than other couples to end in divorce. But among marriages formed in the 1990s and later, this was no longer the case. Instead, couples in which wives have more education than their husbands are no longer at higher risk of divorce. And husbands and wives who share similar levels of education now enjoy a [lower risk of divorce](#) than those in which husbands have more education. This trend is consistent with an ongoing shift away from the breadwinner-homemaker model of marriage toward an egalitarian model.

Data on attitudes also suggest people are increasingly tolerant of relationships in which women have higher status than their male partners. In 1997, a Pew Research study found that 40 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, "It's generally better for a marriage if the husband earns more than his wife." That percentage had dropped

to just 28 percent in 2013. In addition, as the new paper by [Cotter et al. shows](#), the 1990s may have been a temporary rather than a long-term stall in egalitarian gender attitudes.

But these findings provide no basis for complacency. Despite continued upward trends in some markers of gender equity, progress in one realm can be offset by the shoring up of male dominance in other realms. For instance, wives who outearn their husbands may compensate by [deferring more to their husbands'](#) authority and doing more housework. (However, [other research casts doubt](#) on the finding that wives do more housework when they outearn their husbands, so the jury is still out on the issue.)

Finally, it is possible that, while wives' educational advantage no longer appears to be associated with divorce, wives' higher earnings are, despite the growing number of people who now accept the latter arrangement, in principle. Perhaps couples are now willing to ignore a wife's educational advantage as long as her husband still earns more. In other words, the "line in the sand" that triggers a threat to men's gender identity may have moved from a wife's educational advantage to her earnings advantage. Research on the relationship between spouses' relative earnings and divorce has been primarily based on marriages formed in the 1980s and earlier, and thus whether there has been change or stability in these relationships remains to be seen. But the attitudinal shifts in men's stated tolerance for these relationships suggests that even the "line in the sand" for wives who outearn their husbands may be shifting.

The new findings suggest that the evidence for a stalled revolution may not be as uniform as it once seemed, but why the trends vary calls out for explanation. Social scientists are still exploring why some trends move together and others do not and what changes represent real progress toward gender equality and which are offset by compensation in other areas.

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Brief: Overwork may explain 10 percent of men's wage advantage over women

The growing wage premium for long work hours slows progress toward gender equality. If the relative hourly wages for overwork had stayed constant between 1979 and 2007, the gender gap in wages would be about 10 percent smaller than it is today.

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The new data presented by [David Cotter and his co-authors](#) suggest that support for gender equality and respect for women's ability to combine work and family have resumed their upward progress. [Other evidence](#) reveals that millennial men express greater interest in more involved fatherhood and want more balance between work and family than previous generations. However, it remains to be seen whether these ideological changes will substantively reduce such structural inequalities as men's continuing earnings advantage over women and women's underrepresentation in highly paid occupations.

The rise in overwork. [My research](#) with Kim Weeden suggests that one reason for the stall in gender equity during the 1990s was a change in typical work weeks and remuneration patterns, which could reinforce a gendered division of labor in many households. This period saw a significant rise in "overwork," the practice of consistently working 50 hours or more a week, along with a dramatic increase in the financial incentives for working long hours. [My earlier research](#) suggests that these trends may have encouraged some couples to revert to a more traditional division of labor, by increasing the likelihood of wives' quitting their jobs and prioritizing husbands' careers.

The history and significance of overwork. Since salaried workers are not directly paid for overtime, those who put in longer hours than their coworkers, at the same salary level, may end up being paid less per hour. And in fact, in the 1970s, workers who put in 50 or more hours per week earned less per hour than comparably educated and experienced workers who worked an ordinary full time shift. As of the early 1980s, fewer than 9 percent of workers put in 50 hours per week or more.

In the mid 1990s, however, employees who worked long work weeks began to receive wages so much higher than their regular full-time counterparts that they actually earned more per hour. This wage premium for overwork has continued to increase since then. By 2009, overworkers were earning about 6 percent more per hour than their full-time counterparts. This creates a substantial incentive for overwork – and a substantial penalty for working "just" full-time.

Overwork as a vicious cycle. Overwork also creates a vicious cycle, in that the more workers take advantage of the financial rewards of overwork, the less other workers are seen as productive. This exacerbates what Joan Williams calls the “ideal worker norm,” in which workers are seen as truly dedicated only when they give undivided attention to work and are willing to be on call 24/7, whenever their employer, supervisor, colleagues, or clients need them. Those who do not work long hours, or those who take time off from work for family responsibilities, are viewed as uncommitted, not serious about their careers, and lacking in loyalty to the organization.

Overwork helps explain the gender wage gap. The growing wage premium for long work hours, we believe, has slowed progress toward gender equality. Because women’s work hours are generally more limited by their greater responsibility for childcare and housework, there is a consistently large gender gap in who is willing and able to work long hours. Women are less likely to benefit from this rising wage premium for overwork and to reap the rewards for being an “ideal worker.” As of 2007, 17 percent of men, but only 7 percent of women, were working 50 or more hours a week.

Our analysis indicates that if the relative hourly wages for overwork had stayed constant between 1979 and 2007, the gender gap in wages would be about 10 percent smaller than it is today. The effect of the rising relative hourly wages for overworkers on the gender wage gap trend was large enough to essentially offset the pay-equalizing effect of women’s gains in educational attainment during this period!

It is encouraging to learn that approval of more egalitarian work and family arrangements has been growing again and is especially strong among millennials. But in order to turn this ideological progress to a reduction in structural inequalities such as the gender gap in pay, employers and policy-makers need to recognize that the majority of workers have children, older parents, and/or working spouses and to set a more realistic standard for what constitutes a “good worker.”

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About CCF

The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners.

Founded in 1996 and now based in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences, open to the public, and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

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