

Is Gender Equality a Self-defeating Goal?

One of the great [obsessions](#) of politics and economics today is “gender equality”. This is the doctrine that men and women should be equally represented in public office and in currently male dominated professions, enjoy equal average earnings and do an equal amount of domestic work. Obviously, we are not there yet, but countless academics are beavering away at research that might identify why not.

Most of this research assumes that, freed from traditional role expectations (sexism) women will enter male domains such as technology, brain surgery and front-line military service, and with the proper co-operation of spouses (he does half the home work) and the state (paid parental leave and childcare) will want to remain in the workforce continuously. They will then be able to rise through the ranks, shattering glass ceilings and lifting their collective average wage to the same level as men’s.

They will, by the way, replace the children they are not having in the workforce.

In most Western countries this process is well under way. A high level of economic development produces new aspirations and goals (choice) and at the same time, in welfare states at least, meets the cost of “equality”. But perplexing gaps remain. In egalitarian countries like Sweden, young women still tend to [plan their careers](#) along traditional gender lines. Elsewhere, highly qualified women [interrupt](#) successful careers to become fulltime mothers, forfeiting years of high earnings.

How can this be?

A [research article](#) published in Science magazine last week

suggests an answer: it is precisely the gender equality achieved by highly developed economies that enables women and men to choose the work and lifestyles they prefer. That these choices often turn out to be “gendered” may disappoint equality boffins, but they seem to correspond to deeper inclinations that diverge in men and women.

This is the hypothesis that two economists – Armin Falk, a researcher in the Behaviour and Inequality Research Institute at the University of Bonn, and Johannes Hermle of the University of California, Berkeley – tested in their recent study.

The hypothesis is based on “post-materialist theory” which holds that once basic material needs are met (a gender neutral requirement), a society moves towards free self-expression. If both men and women have independent access to sufficient resources they will be able to express their specific preferences.

Falk and Hemle used the 2012 Gallup World Poll to administer their Global Preference Survey to around 80,000 individuals from 76 representative country samples.

To get behind work preferences they focused on six behavioural preferences: How willing are individuals of either sex to take risks? How patient are they (how inclined to wait for rewards)? How altruistic, how trusting? And how ready to reward kind actions or punish unkind actions (take revenge)?

Analysing the responses at the global level they found that “all six preferences featured significant gender differences.” Women tended to be “more prosocial” and “less negatively reciprocal” (inclined to pay someone back for an offence). Women were also less risk-taking and less patient on the whole than men.

The researchers then analysed these results at the country level, comparing gender differences in preferences to the

country's level of development (GDP) and its gender equality rating. The latter was based on UN and World Economic Forum rankings, as well as its female-to-male labour force participation rates and the number of years since women's suffrage.

One might guess that the most economically developed countries would have the smallest difference between male and female preferences, but the reverse was true:

“Gender differences in all six preferences increased with a country's level of development. ... The positive correlations between log GDP per capita and country level gender differences were large and significant for all six preferences...”

Comparing preference differences with countries' level of gender equality produced similar results:

“Gender differences in preferences were found to increase with gender equality for each preference separately ... as well as for the index of gender differences in preferences.”

Thus the US, Canada, the UK, the Scandinavian countries and Australia were among countries showing the greatest gender differences in preferences.

This relationship was also found for the four individual indicators of gender equality. The findings stood up to further analyses and controlling for response bias.

“In sum,” say the authors, “these findings provide evidence for the resource hypothesis that higher levels of economic development and gender equality are associated with stronger differentiation in preferences.”

Interestingly, a [paper](#) by two psychologists published last year, “The Gender-Equality Paradox in Science, Technology,

Engineering, and Mathematics Education” found the same thing in relation to STEM graduates: the more gender equality a country has, the less likely women are to choose maths and science professions. The United Arab Emirates was among the countries with the most female STEM graduates.

Of course, preference is only one part of a bigger picture, and Falk and Hemle do not rule out the influence of gender specific roles on preferences (as a gender studies professor might say: women still tend to follow what their mothers did – unfortunately), or “a role for biological or evolutionary determinants for gender differences.”

In fact, a [study](#) published in Sweden last year found that preferences do *not* explain gender inequality in that country. Sweden is among those legendary female-friendly Nordic states that, nevertheless, have a high degree of gender segregation in their labour markets and a persistent pay gap.

One reason is that although less than 8 percent of Swedish women are full-time mothers, a large proportion work in the public sector – in health care, for example –where they can get family-friendly [part-time hours](#). To move into higher paying male dominated fields in the private sector means working long hours and sacrificing family life.

Feminist academics cannot abide the idea that women would have to sacrifice hours of paid work, and higher-paid work at that, for the family. Of course, there should be family-friendly working conditions for men and women, since men are being asked to sacrifice family life too. But perhaps, given the choice, the majority of mothers would prefer to sacrifice paid work rather than family – and not even regard it as a great sacrifice.

Put it down to social conditioning if you like, but the evidence from Falk and Hemle’s study, among others, suggests that such a preference makes sense in terms of deeper

“gendered” tendencies and even, as they suggest, evolutionary imperatives.

It would also make sense in terms of that factor seldom mentioned in social science literature: love, which is a complementary relationship. Gender equality aims at a self-sufficiency of sameness even in marriage and family life. How many people really prefer that?

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