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Wright, Erik Olin y Brighouse, Harry.

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Strong Gender Egalitarianism

Harry Brighouse and Erik Olin Wright

In this chapter we will defend a specific element in the Gornick–Meyers proposal for the design of institutions to support dual-caregiver families: the idea that such institutions should contain specific forms of incentives for men to do more child care, even if, by implication, this means constraining in certain important ways the choices of women. We will assume that these male caregiving incentive policies are joined with the full range of already existing anti-discrimination policies within the workplace and other institutions, as well as the other gender-equality policies proposed by Gornick and Meyers. Our focus, however, will only be on the caregiving problem. We will begin, in section I, by locating the Gornick–Meyers proposal within a spectrum of parental leave policies. Section II will define what we call "strong gender egalitarianism" and explain why we feel this is an appropriate goal of public policy. Section III will explain why we believe the Gornick–Meyers proposal might contribute to realizing the ideal of strong gender egalitarianism, but also why we feel a more radical form of this kind of policy might be needed.

I. THREE TYPES OF PARENTAL LEAVE POLICY

Parental leave policies can be roughly grouped into three broad categories:

Policy 1: Equality-impeding leaves. Certain kinds of parental leave policies can be seen as providing support to dual-earner families in ways which actively contribute to sustaining inequalities in the gender

division of labor within the family. Caregiving leaves that are exclusively available to mothers would be the clearest example, but *unpaid* leave allocated to families should also be considered an equality-impeding policy, since such leaves will almost exclusively be taken up by mothers. Given the strains on contemporary families, both mother-only leaves and unpaid family-care leaves may improve the quality of life for the women who take advantage of them; but such policies contribute nothing to reducing inequality within the gendered division of labor in the family.

Policy 2. Equality-enabling leaves. Equality-enabling leaves provide generous paid parental leave allocated to families, thus reducing the obstacles to women being in the labor market and having children, and making it easier, if families so choose, for men also to engage in more caregiving activity. The parental leave is provided to families as units, not to the individual members of the family; in a sense it comes with the child. This policy enables egalitarian strategies within families, but it puts no particular pressures on families to adopt such strategies. The best European policies have this character.

Policy 3. Equality-promoting leaves. Equality-promoting leave policies attempt to create incentives which put some pressures on families to move toward a more egalitarian gender distribution of caregiving activities within the family. We can distinguish between moderate and radical versions of such policies. Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers' proposal for individualized parental caregiving leaves is an example of a moderate equality-promoting policy. In their proposal, six months of parental leave allowances are provided separately to men and to women. Unused leave by either spouse cannot be transferred to the other. This "use it or lose it" feature creates active incentives for men to take more leave than they would if the same amount of time were available to the family as a unit without their participation. Even if both parents in a family would prefer the wife to take nine months and the husband only three, this is not allowed. A more radical equality-promoting policy would be one in which the amount of leave available to mothers was contingent on the amount of leave taken by fathers. This could be structured in the following way: 1) at the birth of a child, a mother gets one month of paid maternity leave to recover from childbirth;[2] 2) beyond this one month of maternity leave specifically allocated to mothers, mothers would be able to take additional paid leave equal to the amount of paid leave the father actually takes,

up to a limit of six months (thus yielding a maximum of thirteen months per couple—one month of maternity leave plus six months of parental leaves each for fathers and mothers). If a father only took three months, then the mother could only take three. If a father took no months, then the mother would only get the initial one month of maternity leave. This means that fathers would have to become engaged heavily in infant childcare very early on if the family were to receive any paid parental leave.[3] This policy in effect makes the amount of paid leave for mothers dependent upon the degree to which fathers are willing to take paid leave. It also means that overall, in a society with this kind of paid parental leave system, men and women would take the same amount of paid leave, thus undermining the grounds for statistical discrimination against woman.[4] Neither the moderate nor radical equality-promoting leave policy exists anywhere.[5]

There are two fundamental reasons why we defend the third type of policy. First, we believe that, in families with children, the prospects for both men and women to flourish would in general be increased if the activities associated with caring for and rearing children were more equally shared between them, and we also believe that prospects for flourishing would be distributed more equally under those conditions. There is, in a sense, a "flourishing deficit" for women because, on average, they do too much caregiving, and also a "flourishing deficit" for men because they frequently do too little. Second, the unequal gender division of labor constitutes a serious barrier—perhaps the most important barrier—to further progress in realizing the goal of equality of opportunity between men and women. Inegalitarian gender relations thus constitute a continuing source of injustice. On the one hand, the extra burdens and responsibilities women bear within the family constrain their ability to compete in the labor market, and on the other hand, the fact that women disproportionately take on these roles reinforces stereotypes about the work commitments and priorities of "women" which hinder the opportunities even of women without such responsibilities.

If these arguments are correct, then it would be desirable to eliminate gender inequalities in the division of labor over caregiving, both because this would increase the prospects for human flourishing in general and because it would eliminate a source of injustice rooted in gender relations. We believe that policies which actively attempt to create incentives for men to increase their involvement in caregiving labor are probably necessary to move in this direction.

II. STRONG GENDER EGALITARIANISM

By "strong gender egalitarianism" we mean *a structure of social relations in which the division of labor around housework and caregiving within the family and occupational distributions within the public sphere are unaffected by gender*. By "unaffected by gender" we mean that there would be no socially constructed gender-differentiated norms around the division of labor: no specific activities would be thought of as men's work or women's work, nor would any activities be seen as more appropriate for men or for women. This does not mean that there would be no norms *about* gender; indeed, strong gender egalitarianism implies norms endorsing strong forms of gender equality in terms of power, rewards, and burdens.[6] It just means that there are no gender differentiations in roles and expectations that have normative backing. This a strong view of gender equality, for it advocates not simply a world in which men and women should have equal rights, or even equal opportunities for jobs and power—although it presupposes equal rights and equal opportunities—but a world without a socially constructed gendered division of labor. The ultimate goal of such a process would be the withering away of gender.[7]

There are two things that strong gender egalitarianism does not imply. First, it does not mean that in all households men and women would necessarily do exactly the same amount of caregiving (or housework), but simply that there would be no *economic or gendered normative constraints* on the distribution of such activities within households. There would, of course, be strong norms of equal sharing of the *burdens* associated with housework and caregiving, but equal sharing of burdens does not imply equal time spent in the tasks of child care and other forms of caregiving labor. In some households men would do more than women, in others women more than men. There would be no *socially constructed* gender division of labor, but this does not preclude differences in how individuals construct specific divisions of labor within intimate relationships.

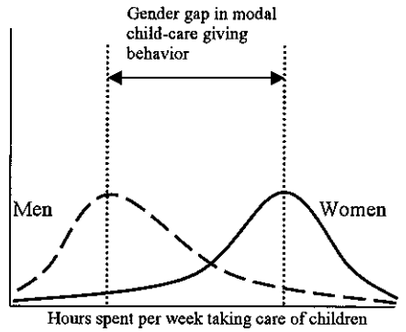
Strong gender egalitarianism also does not imply that, in a world with a de-gendered division of labor, the average or modal amount of caregiving would be the same for men and women. It could be the case that, in a world in which there were no material incentives for women to do more than men and in which the norms of caregiving validated male caregiving as much as female caregiving, nevertheless the average amount of caregiving activity done by women might be more than that done by men. One reason for this is that, for biological

reasons, it will always be easier for single women than for single men to have, and thus to raise, children; that alone means that, in the overall distributions of child-care labor in a population, the distributions for men and women will probably be different. It *could* also be the case—although on this we are more skeptical—that there would remain a biologically rooted differential in the distribution of preferences and dispositions for doing child-care labor between men and women in heterosexual families with two parents, even if

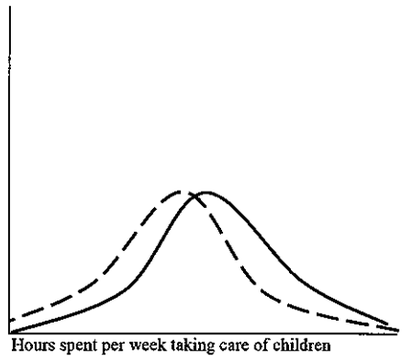
Figure 3.1

Hypothetical distributions of child-care provision by men and women living in households with children in alternative worlds

I. Existing distribution of child-care labor among men and among women with children



II. Hypothetical distributions of child-care labor among men and among women with children in a world in which there were no gendered norms of appropriate child-care responsibility and no gender-specific costs to doing child care



there were no normative pressures for women to do more and no gender-differentiated material incentives around child-raising.[8] Our expectation is that the distribution of proclivities for caregiving among men and among women would greatly overlap in a world without either normative or material pressures on men and women to behave in different ways, and we are certain that it would overlap much more than in the present world; but it is pure speculation that the two distributions would actually be identical. These assumptions are represented in Figure 3.1.

The empirical claim underlying strong gender egalitarianism is that, in general, men and women would flourish to a greater extent under strong gender egalitarianism *even if they do not recognize this under existing conditions*. The strongest version of this thesis would say that this applies even to most of the *actual* men in the world today: even most men socialized in a socio-cultural regime of deeply gendered norms around child care with existing masculine identities would flourish to a greater extent if they shared equally in caregiving. We are not prepared to defend this strongest version of the empirical proposition, although we believe that many (but certainly not all) men so socialized would gain from the changes we advocate.[9] In any case, it is likely that a rapid move toward strong gender egalitarianism from the status quo will impose what could be called "flourishing costs" on at least some men, and perhaps even on some women. In what follows we shall largely ignore this cost, which we think of as transitional. What we do believe, even if we cannot provide convincing empirical evidence, is that in a world without gender inequality, in which both boys and girls were socialized to value and participate in caregiving activities, adult men would in general flourish to a greater extent than they do in the existing world of strongly gender-differentiated identities, expectations, and roles.[10] Creating such a world is the goal of strong gender egalitarianism.

III. GENDER INEQUALITY AND THE PROBLEM OF TRANSFORMING NORMS

Our analysis of the problem of transforming gender relations is embedded in an explanatory argument about the mechanisms involved in the social reproduction of gender inequality. The gendered caregiving division of labor in the household is a significant, systematic determinant of broader patterns of continuing

gender inequality in the economy and politics, and these public forms of inequality in turn contribute to the reproduction of intra-family inequalities. Four clusters of causal processes interact to generate these patterns:

(1) Gender inequalities in labor markets and employment opportunities. In spite of the passage of laws against gender discrimination, women as a category continue to face disadvantages in labor markets and employment. Some of this is certainly due to direct discrimination—employers and managers treating women as a category differently from men in ways that disadvantage women. But some of this operates through more complex mechanisms, involving the way the norms of appropriate wages are attached to different kinds of jobs, and how this interacts with the occupational preferences of men and women shaped by a wide range of gendered cultural processes.

(2) Household economic incentives. Given the inequalities in (1), the careers of men in general have a bigger potential impact on household standards of living than do the careers of women. This means that the overall economic standing of the family will generally be higher if men devote more energy to work and career advancement than do their wives, and this both creates pressures on wives to devote more energy to domestic responsibilities, including child care, and reinforces the normative understanding of male careers as more important even in those households where the careers of wives are economically more important than those of their husbands. These gendered incentive structures linked to work may have weakened somewhat in recent years as earnings inequality between men and women has declined, but it is still the case that the economic trajectory of most married families depends more on the prospects of the husband's career than of the wife's. This creates economic incentives for women to take greater responsibility for non-market caregiving labor.[11]

(3) Inadequate institutional supports for caregiving activities. In much of the world it is difficult for individual families to overcome the inequalities, pressures and incentives generated by (1) and (2). In the absence of good-quality inexpensive child care, generous parental leave programs, non-punitive forms of work flexibility and other "family-friendly" policies, even if within a family husbands and wives want to move in a more egalitarian direction, it is generally difficult to do so because of a lack of external supports.

(4) Gender-regulating social norms. Prevailing social norms continue to differentiate appropriate "men's work" from "women's work," and to treat childrearing in particular as more of a responsibility for women than for men. These norms have a number of important consequences for the reproduction of gender inequality in caregiving and in the public sphere:

(a) Prevailing gender norms create widespread expectations about the likely behavior of men and women, and thus make it rational for employers to engage in statistical discrimination against women because the expected interruptions from work are greater for women in general than for men.[12] The normative backing for these expectations makes it more difficult for people to make judgments based on purely individual characteristics, and thus unmarried women, women without children, and women who declare that they do not have such caregiving responsibilities are still often treated as likely to have excessive caregiving responsibilities.
(b) These norms reinforce stereotypes about innate male and female competences, and the stereotypes in turn reinforce the norms.
(c) The norms are internalized by both men and women in identity-forming ways that influence their preferences for caregiving and career. Women are more likely than men to feel guilty in placing career demands above family, and more likely, in the "game of chicken" over the distribution of family responsibilities, to give in.
(d) To the extent that caregiving is not just a value, preference, or natural "talent," but a *skill*, and to the extent that the stereotypes about competences and the identities shaped by norms affect the acquisition of such skills, then there are likely to be differences in male and female practical competence in caregiving. This in turn reinforces the norms, stereotypes, and associated identities.

Taken as a package, these mechanisms constitute a system of relatively coherent social reproduction: discrimination reinforces behaviors that reinforce norms; norms reinforce preferences and identities that reinforce behaviors and skills that reinforce norms; the obstacles, in the form of inadequate support, increase the costs of individual defections from the cycle; and so on.

There was a time, not in the distant past, when this self-reproducing equilibrium was strongly integrated and coherent, but over the past several decades a number of dramatic social changes have disrupted some of the links within this self-reinforcing system. Of particular importance are, first, the unintended consequences of the decentralized

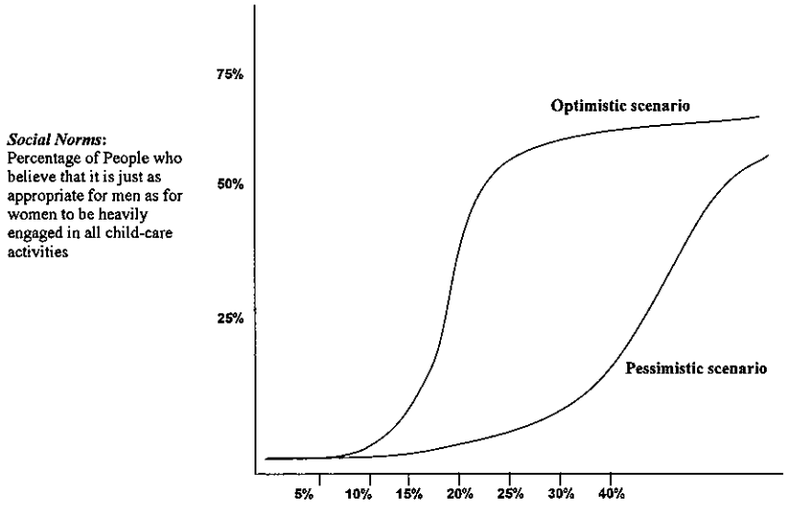
labor-market decisions of women and the wide-reaching ramifications of those decisions for fertility choices, marriage timing, and other "private" matters; second, the struggles against discrimination which have reduced, but have not eliminated, the incentives to discriminate against women in labor markets and work; and third, the reduction of material obstacles to changes in caregiving patterns, especially in some countries, through paid parental leaves and other measures. Nevertheless, this structure of inequality-sustaining mechanisms remains sufficiently strong to seriously impede movements toward strong gender egalitarianism. In particular, the normatively backed differentiation of gender identities and expectations remains strong, and the material incentives linked to those normative processes remain sufficiently real, that much less change in the gender division of labor within the family has occurred than might have been expected given the dramatic changes in the public sphere. This in turn continues to reinforce other aspects of the gender division of labor, blocking the movement toward a de-gendered division of labor necessary for strong gender egalitarianism.

The question, then, is whether we need stronger measures for furthering gender equality, measures designed to increase the involvement of men in caregiving activities, to erode these gender-differentiated norms around those activities. Perhaps we are just too impatient—perhaps the corrosive effect of women's labor force participation and ideological struggles over gender equality will gradually erode gender-differentiated norms of appropriate behavior. But perhaps such norms are sufficiently robust and deeply entrenched to remain very sticky unless directly undermined.

To sort this out we need to think about the relationship between patterns of observed behavior and the norms which endorse or condemn that behavior. Social norms and patterns of behavior mutually affect each other: the prevalence of a norm, especially when internalized, shapes behavior; but also, patterns of behavior we observe in the world either reinforce or undermine the existing norms, depending upon the extent to which they are congruent with those norms. Our concern here is with this second kind of relation: the way changing behaviors can subvert existing norms. The more people see men in public taking care of small children—pushing baby carriages, changing diapers in airports, supervising kids at playgrounds, having them in shopping carts at grocery stores—the more such behavior will be seen as "normal" in the purely statistical sense; and the more it is seen as normal in the statistical sense, then, over time, the more it is likely be viewed as normative as well. The essential strategy of

Figure 3.2

Prospects for changing norms by changing patterns of behavior: optimistic and pessimistic scenarios



a public policy aimed at changing norms in ways that move toward strong gender egalitarianism, therefore, involves trying to directly change patterns of behavior in ways which, over time, will shift the prevailing norms in the society at large.

Figure 3.2 illustrates two sharply contrasting images of how this might occur. In the optimistic scenario, if the percentage of fathers actively engaged in publicly visible care of children reaches about 15 percent, small additional changes generate very large changes in public norms, so that once 20 percent of fathers are so engaged, a majority of the population will see this as normatively appropriate.[13] Furthermore, since we also know that prevailing norms affect behavior, there is likely to be a feedback process in which, as the socially prevailing norms become more accepting of fathers doing visible child care, more men are likely to behave consistently with this norm. This is likely to be particularly the case for those men for whom gender roles are less a matter of deep identities and more a question of responsiveness to social standards. Depending upon how these different processes interconnect dynamically, the process of

normative change may have a real tipping point—a level of father child-care behavior which, if reached, generates a dynamic of accelerating normative change. If something like this optimistic scenario pertained, therefore, and we were currently, say, at around the 10 percent level, public policy would only have to create incentives to push this up to 15 percent or so to cross the tipping point in which the new norms stimulate new behavior, which would reinforce and extend the new norms.

The pessimistic scenario suggests that the tasks ahead are much more daunting. The gender norms around child care and caregiving are much more robust, and a strongly accelerating dynamic of change only begins when somewhere around 40 percent of fathers are visibly engaged in taking care of children. If this picture more accurately reflects the situation, then, if we were currently at the 10 percent level, public policy would have to exert a massive pressure on people to change behavior in order to set the stage for significant societal normative change. For a host of reasons, this might be very unlikely to succeed.

Data do not exist which would enable us to know what kind of curve we face in trying to move in the direction of strong gender egalitarianism. If the pessimistic scenario is in fact the accurate one, then the prospects for transforming through public policy the gender division of labor in the home—and the accompanying constraints this imposes on women—are fairly bleak. Our intuition, however, is that contemporary American and western European gender regimes are probably closer to the optimistic than to the pessimistic scenario. There has clearly been a significant softening up of gender norms already, even if behaviors have not changed as much as we would like. This at least makes it plausible that policies around caregiving could have effects on the reproduction of norms.

It is always possible that simply removing the caregiving-support obstacles currently faced by men and women when they make caregiving choices will, over time, erode the normative obstacles to strong gender egalitarianism. In Sweden a generous parental leave system and widespread availability of child-care services has, after all, had some impact on changing male behavior. While women do take much more parental leave than men, the amount men take has slowly increased. We suspect, however, that this will settle at an equilibrium below the tipping-point threshold in Figure 3.2. If this is true, and if we are serious about moving toward strong gender egalitarianism, we cannot rely on policies that simply attack discrimination or remove obstacles. It is also necessary to enact policies that actively undermine

the normative systems that shape preferences by interrupting the behavior–norm reinforcement cycle. That is, it is necessary to enact equality-promoting policies that impose constraints on decisions within families in order to encourage men to do more child care. This is what the two gender equality–promoting types of policy do.

Among gender equality–promoting policies, individual-allocated leaves of the sort advocated by Gornick and Meyers are more likely to receive political support than the more radical father-linked leaves, since the latter make the options available to women contingent on the behavior of men. This flies in the face of the central ideal of feminism to enhance the autonomy of women and enlarge their range of choices independently of men. People deeply committed to gender equality are therefore likely to be very reluctant to support a policy option that seems to subordinate women's access to paid parental leaves to the choices of men. Nevertheless, if the obstacles to strong gender egalitarianism are rooted in the normative processes we have discussed, especially if these are linked to deeply internalized gendered identities, policies directly designed to get men to do more caregiving may be needed, and such policies may require imposing significant constraints on women's choices as well.

NOTES

1 Our discussion here is pegged to the problem of parental caregiving leaves for infants, but the central arguments could be extended to all forms of caregiving responsibilities, including eldercare, taking care of sick children, and so on.

2 The rationale for a *maternity* leave is distinct from the rationale for parental caregiving leaves: maternity leaves are more like medical leaves—paid time off work in recognition of the physical recovery needs after childbirth. Parental caregiving leaves are a recognition of the value of facilitating parents' involvement in the direct child-care activities of infants.

3 The proposal implies that fathers must take some leave before mothers can take any, but there is no requirement that fathers take extended initial leaves. A likely scenario for this kind of policy would be fathers and mothers taking alternating weeks or days of leave, for example. Still, in the accounting system, the father must take a leave first to create the entitlement for the mother.

4 Statistical discrimination—as opposed to pure prejudice—is grounded in the behavioral differences between groups. If mothers and fathers are more or less equally at risk in taking parental leave, then the potential for parental leave-taking would cease to be a source of gender-specific statistical discrimination. There could, of course, still be statistical discrimination against *parents* (both men and women are "at risk" as parents in taking paid parental leave), but this is likely to be a weaker force than gender-differentiated childrearing responsibilities.

5 In Sweden a very limited form of equality-promoting policy has been introduced in the form of a one-month father-only leave that has been added to the twelve months of family-allocated paid leaves.

6 It should be noted that the norm of gender equality of power, rewards, and burdens is not derived from any distinctive feminist argument, but rather is simply a specific instance of general principles about equality of power, rewards, and burdens among people engaged in different forms of social cooperation. Cooperation within families is a particularly salient instance of social cooperation, and one within which power, rewards and burdens should be equally shared.

7 Throughout this paper we adopt the sociological convention of using the term "sex" to refer to biological difference and "gender" to refer to the socially constructed relations between men and women built around sexual difference. To speak of the withering away of gender, therefore, means the withering away of *socially constructed* differences between men and women and the socially enforced norms that sustain those differences, but it does not imply the disappearance of differences which are direct reflections of biological sex. The ultimate goal, therefore, is probably more accurately described as genderlessness rather than gender equality.

8 This possibility presupposes that our preferences and dispositions are not entirely socially constructed, but that there is a neurobiological component to the process of preference formation which interacts with these social processes. We know from work by Ernst Fehr (2004) and others that there is, for example, a significant neurobiological component to altruistic preferences. How strong this is in the case of possible sex-differences in caregiving dispositions, and what distribution of actual preferences among men and women would occur in a social context of strong gender egalitarianism, is impossible to determine from data gathered in a world of pervasive socially conditioned gender differences. Our assumption is that such biologically rooted distributions of temperaments and dispositions among men and among women would greatly overlap, but this does not mean that the distributions would be the same.

9 The claim that many men today would flourish to a greater extent if they were more involved in caregiving implies that, for many men, following conventional gender norms around caregiving is mainly a matter of conforming to social standards rather than acting on the basis of some deeply internalized identity.

10 We are not denying that there are certain privileges men have in a world of gender inequality and sharply differentiated gender norms and identities, and that they would lose these privileges in a world of strong gender egalitarianism. It is because of these privileges and advantages that come with gender inequality that moving toward gender equality is a matter of social justice, not just of enhancing the conditions for universal human flourishing. Our claim is simply that men also have something quite important to gain from strong gender equality. Because of the complexities involved and the problem of the ingrained dispositions of men as they are, we cannot say whether or not, on balance, the costs to men are greater than the gains.

11 These labor market differentials form the basis for Becker's (1981) arguments about how utility maximization within households generates a strong gender specialization in household responsibilities. This fact is also central to Goldthorpe's (1983) arguments that the location of married women in the class structure is determined by the class position of their husbands. For a discussion of these issues, see Wright (1997: chapter 10).

12 In statistical discrimination, employers substitute information about the average behavior of members of a group for information about the likely behavior of a specific individual in making hiring and promotion decisions. The standard explanation for this behavior is that the information costs of gathering reliable information on individuals are much higher than those of gathering information about the group. Of course, the cognitive practices that underlie statistical discrimination are quite vulnerable to stereotyping, which tends to exaggerate inter-group differences, and strong norms tend to reinforce such stereotypes.

13 There is no suggestion here that these shifts in prevailing norms are instantaneous. The actual process of adjustment takes time, which is not represented in the graph.

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4

Whose Utopia?

Shireen Hassim

The Real Utopias Project, and Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers' paper on gender egalitarianism in particular, raise some unavoidable questions for those located outside the globe's wealthy countries. Who is/can be part of this utopia? Can the vision of the dual-earner/dual-caregiver model be universalized? What steps would need to be taken to make this a vision for the global poor as well as the rich? And by whom would those steps need to be taken? One could respond with weary cynicism, but I prefer to take my cue from the question posed by Erik Olin Wright: what would it take to create social institutions free of oppression? He outlines real utopias as those that are "grounded in the real potential of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of muddling through in a world of imperfect conditions for social change." So I take as a common goal, regardless of global positioning, that the envisioning of utopias for those in the wealthier nations must, as a moral imperative, entail the possibility of universalizing institutional principles and core values. At the very least, it must be one that reshapes the structure of economy and society in the United States, as Gornick and Meyers wish, while not being built upon or reinforcing existing exclusions of huge swaths of humanity from access to global resources. In other words, our "real utopia" must be one that includes (in principle, and immediately or progressively) all of us.

Yet to imagine such an inclusive utopia raises a set of concerns that to some extent stands outside the framework of Gornick and Meyers' paper. I outline these concerns as a collective challenge to think about what institutional principles should inform movements for social change in contexts other than those with which we are most