The Continuing 'Gender Revolution' in Housework

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1. Introduction

In her influential *Scientific American* article, "Housework Still Takes Time", Vanek (1975) argued that women's housework had not declined since the 1920s, despite the widespread diffusion of labor-saving home appliances. From that same time, though, evidence was emerging of a 'gender revolution' spurred by women's greater entry into the paid labor force, a trend that has continued to this day. In parallel with women's entry into the paid labor force, there is increasing evidence of less time being spent in housework. However, some authors are now wondering whether this gender transformation of paid and unpaid labor in society has hit a wall, or at least "stalled". Recent *New York Times* articles by the family sociologists Stephanie Coontz (2013) and Philip Cohen (2014) have emphasized this "stalled" view of the US movement toward gender equality. While women made wide gains in the public sphere of employment over the past half century, on many fronts the progress made in gender equality appeared to slow in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Stalling has been identified in the areas of women's employment, gender segregation of school subjects, attitudes towards gender equality and the division of unpaid labor (e.g. England, 2010; Cotter, Hermsen & Vanneman, 2011).

One explanation offered for this apparent stalling is that it reflects a new "egalitarian essentialism", blending "aspects of feminist equality and traditional motherhood roles" (Cotter, Hermsen & Vanneman, 2011). The idea is that women and men are 'essentially' different: women want to maintain their traditional roles as mothers, as well as seeking equality in the workplace.

Much of the evidence on which the claim for stalling is based relates to the late 1990s in the US. Various trends in the direction of greater gender equality show a levelling off during this period. But the use of the term 'gender revolution', implying a dramatic moment of change, conveniently allows any such reversal observed over a relatively short period to be described as an 'end' of that revolution. We doubt that progress towards gender equality has genuinely ceased. On the other hand, it is quite clear that neither the institutional context, nor men themselves, have adapted sufficiently to women's increasing engagement in the labour force.
It is clear that we need to take a longer perspective on processes of change, and our long term cross-national time use data series puts us in a unique position to do this.

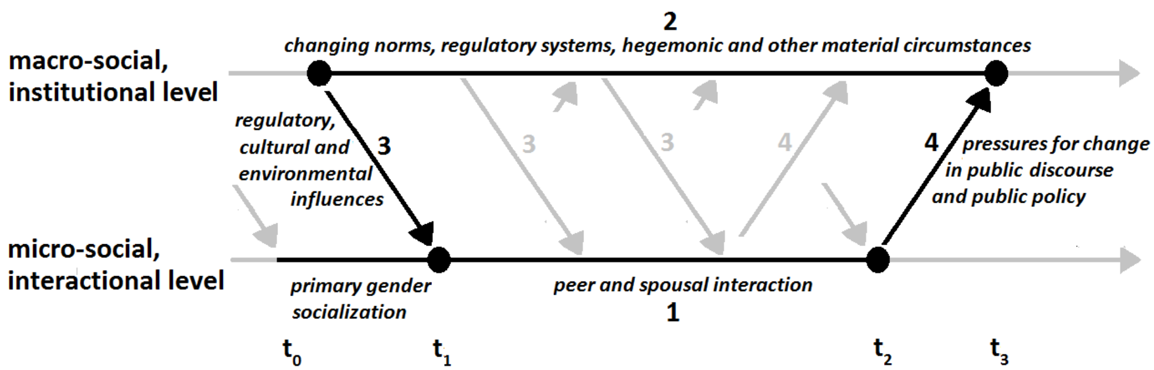
In what follows we set out an alternative theoretical perspective, and a discussion of key evidence on trends across 14 developed countries over a 50 year period in the gender division of labour, which shows no decisive evidence of a stall, but rather, a continuing trend towards gender equality.

2. An alternative perspective on slow change in gender relations

Our preferred alternative approach to understanding the slow or stuttering progress of change that provokes the "stall" metaphor involves a combination of institutional and interactional sociological processes. Large-scale social changes involve complex patterns of relations between institutional factors, ideological structures and individual-level resources. We propose a theoretical frame that links changes at the institutional level to processes of change as they occur in interaction between men and women in the domestic sphere (Sullivan, 2004; 2006).

This type of recursive interaction may be usefully conceptualised in a "Coleman's Boat" (or "Bathtub") type of model.

Figure 1. An alternative to gender essentialism (after Coleman 1990)



Coleman (1990 p10) distinguishes two parallel levels of social change, societal and individual, and two balancing directions of influence and pressure, respectively from macro- to micro- and from micro- to macro-sociological. For conceptual purposes what is particularly useful about Coleman's representation of these relationships is the explicit longitudinal dimension. Figure 1 envisages time flowing from left to right across the page, from time $\mathbf{t_0}$ to time $\mathbf{t_3}$. The influence indicated by the arrows labelled **3** in Figure 1 is that exerted on the individual, household or other primary group (level 1) by its understanding of the prevailing norms, expectations and constraints within which it acts. Arrows labelled **4** represent the countervailing influence exerted by individuals, households and other primary groups on systems of public discourse, regulation, and hegemonic power (level **2**). Implicit in Coleman's classic depiction, explicit in the repeated arrows in Figure 1, is the *continuous* counter-position of pressure and influence in both directions.

We start at the micro-level, with a child's initial gender socialization in her household-of-origin at t_1, her parents' domestic practices reflecting a previous generation's t_0 gendered norms and expectations. These are *already* out of step with current real conditions because of, for example slow and imperfect communication of policy changes, as well as parents' commitment to ideologies and conventions inherited from *their* parents. This generational delay is the essence of the Gershuny *et al* initial (1994) "lagged adaptation" model of slow change. The employment options for girls growing up in the 1960s or '70s differ from their mothers'—though their brothers' options were not (at that time) understood to be different to their fathers'. Therefore, within a heterosexual couple, *her* paid employment, combined with *their* inherited expectations of differential gendered work responsibilities, leads to an unfair accumulation of paid and unpaid work burdens on her shoulders. She experiences these as reduced life chances, limiting and fragmenting leisure time, restricting choice among family formation options, closing off career development opportunities, or all of these.

Over the period t_1 to t_2 she is involved in interactions relating to these issues of work-family balance, particularly in the context of her marital conversation with her partner. It is the mixed outcomes of this discourse that provides the "exit, voice or suffering" title of Gershuny *et al* 2005. Their analysis of UK, US and German panel data (British Household Panel Study, Panel Study of Income Dynamics and German Socio-Economic Panel) investigates how couples adapt their domestic work following changes in spouses' relative employment positions. The "suffering" and the "exit" (whether from the labour market or the marriage) reflect the incomplete nature of husbands' adaptation to wives' increasing paid employment.

As a result of these discursive processes at level 2, pressures build at the individual or household level for new forms of regulation (eg statutory parental leave provisions), for changes in tax and benefit systems (eg allowances for childcare costs), and for new public service provision (eg improvements in availability of childcare services) . So the influences of macro-level norms and regulatory systems on individual level socialization and interaction (represented by the arrows numbered 1), are recursively linked to the influence that marital and peer conversation has on the public discourse (represented by the arrows numbered 4). And in both cases we might *expect* a substantial time lag. In the first case, there is delay while information about regulatory or normative changes diffuses to households and individuals, and while the implications of these changes are articulated in changed behavior. In the second case, delay while changes in individual level gender ideologies and strategies diffuse into the public discourse, and then eventually, perhaps, become manifest in the programmes of social movements and political parties, and in the policies of governments and government agencies.

3. Methods

Our objective is to identify the balance of work activities carried out by men and women within households. There are various methodologies employed for collecting this information. Conventional questionnaire items such "How much time do you normally spend each week in (paid work/cooking/cleaning)?" are widely used (eg in the PSID). But it has frequently been demonstrated (eg Kan and Pudney 2008, Robinson and Glorieux 2012) that questionnaire respondents are unable to answer these questions accurately, presumably as a result of lack of knowledge of their own aggregates of time use over a specific period (all the more for the PSID where the respondent acts as proxy for the spouse). A similar issue is faced by analysts of money expenditures: respondents do not in general maintain running budgetary totals for particular expenditure categories, so researchers ask them instead to record each individual purchase sequentially in an "expenditure diary" (Sudman and Ferber 1974).

By a similar argument time diaries, in which national random samples of both women and men provide a complete account of all their activities across the full 24 hours of a day, are to be preferred to "stylised" questionnaire items on time use. These diaries preserve the key zero-sum characteristic of time, such that if time on one activity (say paid work) increases, it must be matched by declines in some other activities (like housework). Time-use diaries also allow us to identify tradeoffs within housework, through which time on tasks that are more labour-intensive or obsolete (like fetching water or scrubbing) are replaced as newer technologies become available.

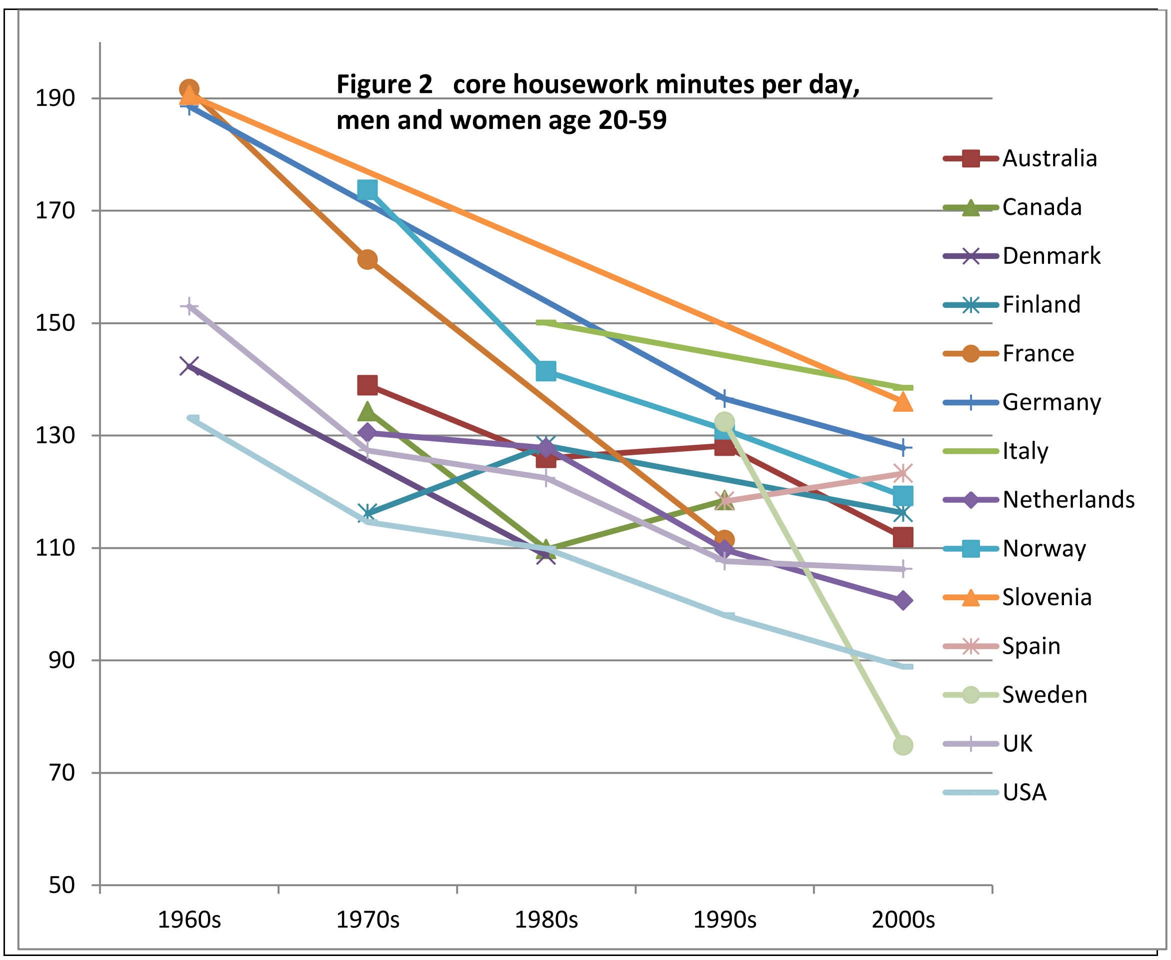
The time-diary method is well established. Russian agricultural economists started to collect these materials, for the purposes outlined in the previous paragraph, at the end of the 19th century, though the resulting time budget evidence only survives in the fragmentary summary form used in the "Peasant Studies" literature (eg Chayanov [1929], 1960). The use of time diary studies in post-revolutionary Russia is documented in Zuzanek (1980). The first English language publication using time diary methods uses a sample of London housewives in 1912 (Pember-Reeves, 1913; the Columbia University doctoral thesis by Bevan, 1913, often referred to as the first US contribution to this literature emerges, on closer reading, not to use a diary methodology). The US Department of Agriculture collected several thousands of weeks of time diary data during the 1920s and 1930s (Kneeland 1929, Ramey 2009, Harms and Gershuny 2014), and several US sociological studies using this method emerged during the 1930s (Lundberg et al 1933, Sorokin et al 1937). The first cross-national comparative (12-nation) time-diary survey in the mid-1960s (Szalai 1972) provided a standard methodology and design adopted by virtually all subsequent studies (other than the American Time Use Study). And this *de facto* standardization explains the relative ease through which surveys from different countries and subsequent historical periods can be harmonised on a post-fieldwork basis, even where the original researchers had no such purpose in mind.

The Multinational Time Use Study (MTUS), which is constructed on this *post hoc* basis, is by far the largest collection of comparative and historical time-use materials available anywhere, with currently nearly 70 surveys from 21 countries (Fisher and Gershuny 2013). A full description of the study is accessible at www.timeuse.org/mtus . It consists of three sets of files. A majority of the surveys are maintained in a fully harmonised version of the original diary sequence, with primary and secondary activities, co-presence and location identified in ten minute intervals throughout each diary day, the activities classified into 69 standard categories (the Episode File). Most of the studies are also available in an easier-to-use format, providing the minutes per day devoted to each of these 69 activity categories (ie individual "time budgets"), together with 30 demographic and classificatory variables describing the diary respondents and their households (the Aggregate File). Some of the surveys survive only in the aggregated form, while many of the earlier ones have rather deficient lists of classificatory variables. So we also maintain a Simple File (HSF) including all the usable surviving surveys in the aggregated time budget format, with a simpler 20-activity classification system and a much shorter list of socio-demographic classifiers.

In what follows we use a subset of 53 surveys from the Simple File, covering the 14 countries for which studies were available for more than one decade, and the period 1961-2010, including only the 500,000 days of diary data contributed by respondents aged between 20 and 59 (detailed in Appendix Table A1).

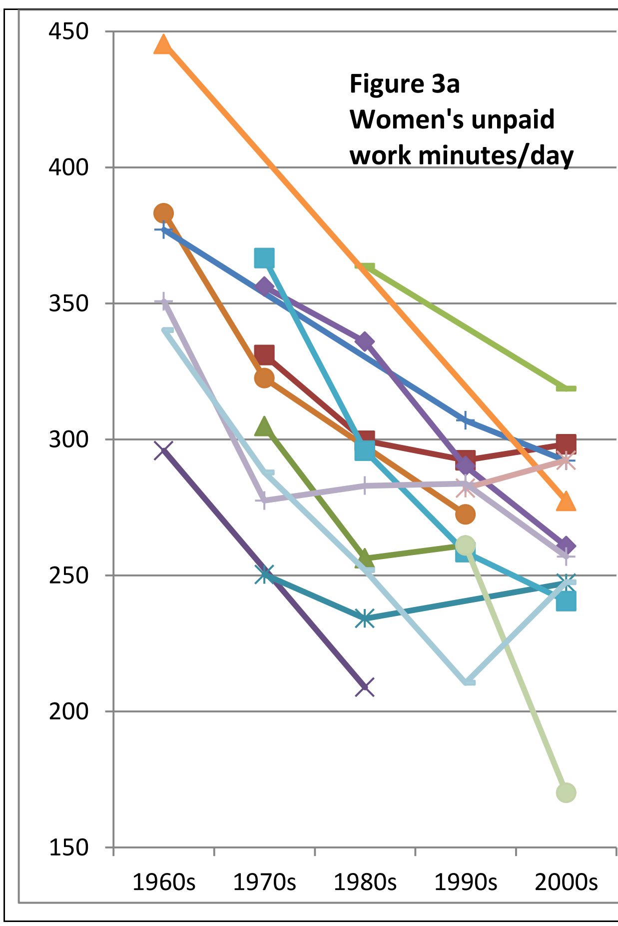
4. Findings

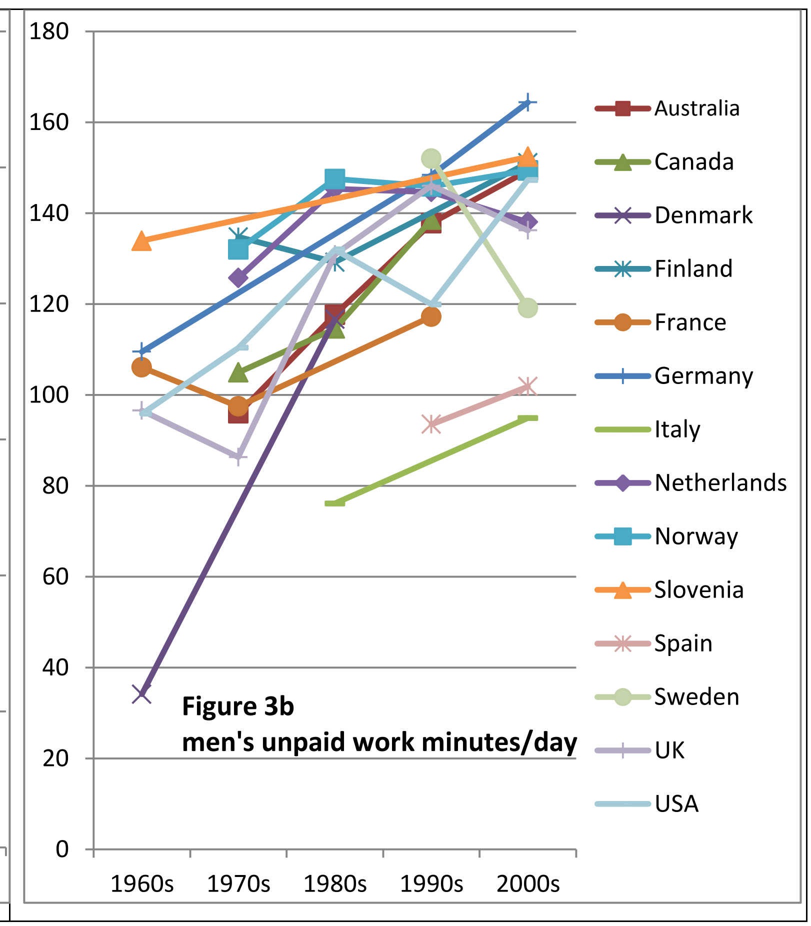
We use these data to examine trends in women's share of unpaid work in 14 countries, from the 1960s through to the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Figure 2a shows core domestic work (cooking, cleaning and laundry) in 14 developed nations across the period from 1961-2011. Far from indicating a 'stalling' in the gender division of unpaid labor, we find a striking general downward trend, indicating notable reductions in housework, cooking, laundry and cleaning tasks over this extended period.



However, this decline has been offset by two other general changes in household work and care. One is a growth in time spent in shopping, reflecting: (1) an increase in the volume of consumption as a result of the rising tide of affluence throughout the second half of the 20th century; (2) the flip-side of the decline in "self-provisioning" activities—sewing clothes and preserving food—through the 20th century is the need to spend time purchasing them; and (3) over this period, progressive replacement of small full-service local retail establishments by large self-service supermarkets, requiring extra time in travel in private cars, and for walking aisles and queuing.

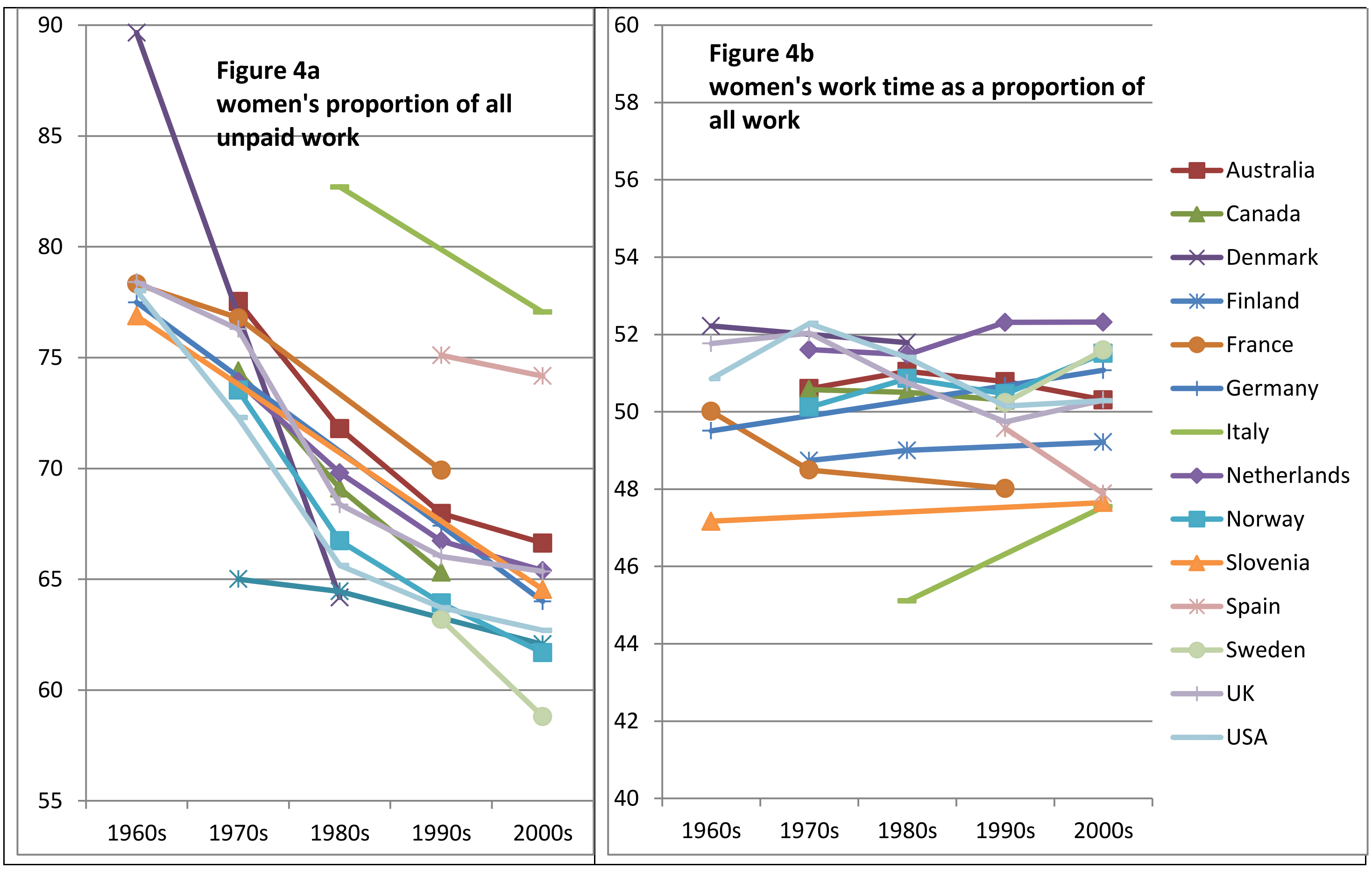
The other is growth in time devoted to childcare. Again a range of reasons can be adduced (Sayer et al (2004): (1) another correlate of reduction in time devoted to routine chores, is the unmasking of time with children previously hidden by simultaneous cleaning, cooking or laundry activities; (2) increasing levels of anxiety about child safety (whether media-generated panics or well-founded concerns about child abuse) ; and (3) additional "quality" time spent, particularly by middle class parents, in activities which might directly increase their children's human capital or indirectly increase their chance of access to elite higher educational institutions.





It is sometimes asserted that such change as there has been in the gender balance of work, reflects entirely women's reduction rather than men's increase. Figures 3a and 3b, showing the total of unpaid household work and care, make it clear that this is not so. In each of the fourteen countries (with the apparent exception of Sweden[1]) it is plain that men's minutes of unpaid work and care per day have increased over the period covered by the surveys. Although the axes on the two graphs barely meet, reflecting women's disproportionate load of unpaid work, there is nevertheless a clear, cross-national increase in men's contributions.

Figure 4a, showing the proportion of all unpaid work and care performed by women, suggests that the Anglophone countries perform slightly better in terms of gender equity than the continental European states (like France, Germany and Netherlands), and *much better* than the southern European countries (Spain and Italy)—where men still do less than 30% of the unpaid work. Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland), on the other hand, have recently been shown to be best places to be a woman (World Economic Forum, 2013).



[1] This reflects an error in the Swedish data provided to the current version of MTUS: the correct swedish HETUS data show an increase for Swedish men .

Figure 4b looks at the overall balance of all work and care, combining paid and unpaid, between men and women. This is a cross-time version of the 'isowork' phenomenon (Burda et al 2013). Women's proportion of all work clusters closely around the 50% egalitarian target. The ratio, for the great majority of countries and periods, lies within the 48%-52% limits, with women in some countries (Finland, France, Slovenia, and most notably Spain) throughout the period doing slightly less than half of all work, in some others (Netherlands, Sweden, Australia) doing marginally more work than men throughout the period, and in yet others (US, UK, Germany) hovering either side of the 50% line.

But is this target a *sufficient* goal? It would arguably be unfair for one or other sex to do more or less than 50% of all the work. But this does not mean that 'isowork' constitutes equality. The clearly equal-but-different *composition* of work time (described carefully by Young and Willmott in their pioneering 1974 study as gender *symmetry* as opposed to equality), and established incontrovertibly in Figures 3 and 4, implies a situation of evident unfairness in terms of economic life chances. If a man does more paid work then his female partner, he also accumulates more human capital—ie more earning power in the long term. And if she stays at home to care for the babies, while he works longer hours at his job, the earnings-capability gap widens. Wherever we look, women still do more unpaid, less paid work. Can it be a coincidence that, everywhere we look, we also find gender wage gaps?

5. Conclusions

Time diary evidence allows us to observe continuing long-term trends in both paid and unpaid work in the in the direction of greater gender equality. In any long-term process of social change we might expect to see some stalling, even reversals, in the general trend. But among the countries surveyed here, the combination of a historical trend in the direction of both public and domestic gender equality and the general increase in attitudinal support for greater equality (Coontz 2013), together with the trends in domestic labour presented in this paper, seriously challenges the idea that progress towards gender equality has permanently stalled. It suggests, rather, that we are still in the midst of a long term process of social change in the direction of greater equality.

In contrast to metaphors of rapid, dramatic change, such as 'revolutions', we would argue for an understanding based on a different metaphor; a slow dripping of change, perhaps with consequences that are barely noticeable from year to year, but that in the end is persistent enough to lead to the dissolution of existing structures (Sullivan, 2006). In such changes, daily practices and social interactions both *reflect and are constitutive of* institutional level factors (attitudes, public discourse, regulatory systems), which change as a result of processes that stretch perhaps over generations. These changes *are* important. But we should not expect too much from them in a short period of time. Neither, despite the good news we have described in this paper, should we be complacent about the future of gender equality.

Despite a widespread desire for 'fairness' in the gender division of labour, the combination of post-childbirth biology, existing gender ideologies and policy measures means that it is still, generally, the woman in a couple who takes time out of the workforce, or goes part-time following the birth of child. This is turn has knock-on effects on the gender wage gap, the disadvantage women experience in respect of their opportunities for career advancement, earnings and, ultimately, pensions.

Two possible institutional solutions which would help promote greater gender equality in both paid and unpaid labor have been suggested. One is to raise taxes so as to substantially subsidize childcare provision. The other is to implement statutory reduction of working hours for both partners in combination with polices supporting genuine work-family flexibility, permitting couples to stagger their paid work in order to care for their children. This would enable a shorter duration of paid childcare, making it more affordable. It would also allow fathers to spend more time with their children – a desire which is already manifest in the increasing time that fathers are spending on childcare (Sayer et al 2004). A combination of both of these lines of policy action helps explain why the Nordic countries continue to perform better than the Anglophone in terms of gender equality, and why they remain the best countries in which to be a woman (The Global Gender Gap: World Economic Forum, 2013).

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