

## Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

### International Women’s Day 2021 series

Episode 3: Gender inequalities in work and care

Speakers: Dr Helen Norman and Professor Jennifer Tomlinson

Helen: Hello, I’m Helen Norman and I’m a Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change at Leeds University Business School.

Jennifer: I’m Jennifer Tomlinson and I’m Professor of Gender and Employment Relations, also at Leeds University Business School.

Helen: This episode is part of Leeds University Business School’s miniseries for International Women’s Day on the research and innovation podcast, and we’re going to be talking about gender inequalities in work and care, with a particular focus on fathers’ involvement in their children’s care.

Jennifer: So, Helen, can you provide a bit of background to your research and maybe explain why you were particularly interested in fathers and their childcare involvement?

Helen: Yes. So, one of the root causes of persistent gender inequalities in economic and political life is that women continue to take on more of the unpaid domestic and care workloads. So, they do more housework, childcare and care for other family members, on average. So, although we’ve seen, over the last few decades increasing numbers of women returning the labour market after having children, men’s contributions to childcare and housework has grown at a much slower rate.

So, men are doing more than they used to, particularly more childcare, and we’ve seen an even bigger shift during the COVID pandemic where men are doing even more childcare following the closure of childcare settings and schools, yet it remains the case that, even in this situation, women are on average still doing the majority of childcare, home schooling, more of the mental load around managing the household and family. So, I think it’s really important to try and understand what are the main reasons for this, and why the gender division of paid and unpaid work remains so uneven.

Jennifer: Absolutely, I couldn't agree more. So, why do you think that fathers' and mothers' roles remain so unequal at home?

Helen: Well, I think there are many reasons for this. One of the biggest reasons is traditional gendered cultural norms and ideals around fathers' and mothers' roles are really embedded within our society, and this is really hard to change. So, there is still a significant proportion of the population, it's around a third according to the British Social Attitudes Survey of 2018. So, around a third of the population believe that mothers should stay at home when they have preschool children, and, for mothers of preschool children that do engage in paid work, the desirable option is to work part time rather than full time.

So, that cultural ideal of mothers being the primary care giver remains quite persistent. And that ideal is supported by work family policy in the UK, which is always focussed on supporting the mother, rather than the father to adapt to employment hours and schedules after having children, so she is encouraged to take a much longer period of maternity leave, she is more likely to request and take up flexible working and there is a lack of affordable and flexible childcare that makes it very difficult for the mother to find a job that is compatible. And then, for dads, we find that their employment rights are much poorer. So, in the UK we have shared parental leave, which is essentially transferrable maternity leave. It's poorly paid, it's not really targeted at fathers like parental leave is in other countries such as Sweden which have daddy month that are exclusively and explicitly the father's right.

So, it's not surprising that shared parental leave is very low, you know... its take up is very low in the UK, it's about 2% of eligible dads compared to, say, 80% or more of eligible dads in Sweden. And then, on top of this, there are organisational barriers, so men are expected to work long hours to demonstrate their commitment to the job, it's much harder for them to request flexible working within a workplace culture that, kind of, values presenteeism and long hours of work.

Jennifer: Absolutely. And organisational expectations about working long hours is so difficult for women who are still expected to assume primary responsibility for household and care within the family. And this has often been termed, hasn't it, the work family narrative, and it's used as a way to explain, if you like, why women seem to progress less well in their careers over time. So

often, I guess, we see women downgrade or move to part time work, which we know is often lower skilled with less pay. And of course, then that becomes a leading cause of the gender pay gap, so it, in turn, perpetuates that logic, I guess, of the second earner, typically the woman, being the one that adapts and revises and reduces their paid work when there are children and other care work to do.

So, I mean, I guess this normative assumption about women and care work and the secondary earner status is really entrenched, and I can relate that to a study that I've been involved with, with a colleague, Reece Garcia, looking at the domestic division of labour within dual earning households, and we found that even in cases of male redundancy, the unequal domestic division of labour, where women, as you say, are doing more of the care work, more of the household work, and, critically, more of that mental load, remains intact even when women become primary earners. So, it does seem to be a real pervasive issue to look at and resolve. So, how does your own research contribute to these debates?

Helen:

So, my research particularly focuses on what enables or hinders fathers' childcare involvement, and that is defined in my research as sharing childcare equally or doing the most within the context of the two parent mother/father household. And that was the focus of my PhD work which was then developed after I won an ESRC grant in 2016/7 to explore what influences fathers' childcare involvement as children grow older.

So, for this work, I use longitudinal survey data from the millennium cohort study, and the follows children from the age of nine months old. And my sample for that is, kind of, covers over 5000 households in the UK. And that research found that fathers were more likely to become and remain involved in caring for their children up to at least the age of three if they were involved in childcare during the first year of parenthood. And my, sort of, preliminary analysis around that indicates that that involvement might even continue as the child gets older as well. So, that first year involvement is important. But I also found that mothers' and fathers' employment hours affect fathers' childcare involvement too, during the first three years of parenthood. But in most cases the mother's full time employment hours had a stronger effect on paternal care. So, if she works full time hours in the preschool years, the father is more likely to be involved at that time. But

also, interestingly, employment hours seem to have a, kind of, longitudinal effect.

So, the hours the parents work in the first year of parenthood affect how involved the father is when the child is age three. So, in other words, if the father work long full time hours in the first year, he's less likely to be involved at that time, but also less likely to be involved at age three. So, it suggests that ways of working and caring in the preschool years sets up a pattern of care giving that persists two years later.

Jennifer: I think this is really important and really fascinating, actually, Helen. It really highlights the importance of being involved in the first year, or the first few years, of a child's life, you know, particularly among fathers.

Helen: Yes, absolutely. It's... yes, it's highlighting that really important period, and it suggests that it's important to provide those conditions for dads to be involved in the first year, and we can help enable this through things like well paid paternity leave, access to flexible working, good quality, affordable childcare, which also supports the mother to return to work, which my research shows, you know, mothers' employment hours have a positive effect on fathers' childcare involvement.

Jennifer: Yes, absolutely. I mean, but we also know, don't we, that accessing affordable childcare remains quite an issue for many families. For example, we know that funding for childcare doesn't start for most families until a child turns three, and the costs are high, and the parents tend to use part time childcare, which is then, again, maybe not conducive for women to have jobs with longer hours and, perhaps, more routes for career progression if they are seen as that primary carer. Thinking to the research that we're both involved in on our current ESRC funded project on the impact of COVID on early years childcare in England and Wales, I mean, that has highlighted that COVID has really disrupted formal and informal forms of childcare provision. And, as you mentioned earlier, it's really resulted in that disproportionate impact on women who have picked up the majority of childcare through the pandemic and, notably, for those under five. So, it's a critical time now to be doing this research, I guess, and I just wanted to finish by asking you about those next steps and how you plan to build and develop this research.

Helen: Yes. So, there has been a bit of a change in the focus of my research because I'm moving from looking at what influences fathers' childcare involvement to how fathers' childcare involvement might influence child outcomes and development. So, I've just been awarded a second grant from the ESRC secondary data analysis initiative to build on my research, to explore whether, how, and at what stage, fathers' childcare involvement might affect children's educational attainment as they progress through primary school. So, I'm really interested in fathers' preschool and school age involvement and their involvement in particular types of childcare activities and how that might affect child development and their educational progression.

So, I'll be using the same longitudinal data from the MC... millennium cohort study, but that will be linked to the national pupil database in England which are the official educational records of children, and I will be collaborating with the Fatherhood Institute as well to two academics from the University of Manchester, Professor Colette Fagan and Mark Elliott. And the purpose is to provide more evidence for why fathers' involvement in the child's early life is so important, but it's also about to address gender and socioeconomic inequalities in educational pathways, given in the UK boys continue to underachieve at every level, girls underperform in science and maths, children from poorer families consistently do worse at school than their peers, so understanding what underlies variations in school attainment and what can be done to address this is really important, and that's what I'm going to try and address next in my research.

Jennifer: Sounds really great. So, finally, what would be the summary, you know, the take home messages from your research on fathers so far?

Helen: So, I think, to address gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work it's vital for fathers to be more involved in the care of their children. Not only does this help to produce a more, kind, egalitarian division of labour, as I've just described, but it also can help promote more progressive gender roles for children, because it kind of sets an example for how it should be. And my research suggests it's key to provide the conditions for dads to be involved in the first year of parenthood because it sets up a pattern of work and care that persists as the child gets older, but it's also really important that we support mothers back into

employment post-childbirth through affordable, good quality childcare and rights for dads to take time off work through well paid, targeted parental leave, flexible working, so that they have the opportunity to properly engage in their children's care.

Jennifer:

They sound like a really good set of recommendations taken from your research which, you know, focuses on both men and women as mothers and fathers within households. Really interesting to listen and hear about that. So, thanks so much for sharing your research with us today, Helen, and thank you for listening to today's episode. If you're interested in finding out more about this research or would like to get in touch, our contact details are available in the episode description.