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Perspectives on gender equality

Challenging the terms of debate

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TODAY IN THE WEST, it is not only self-proclaimed feminists who say that women should have the same right as men to vote, enter politics, go to university, work outside the home or receive equal pay when they do equal work. This kind of equality is now part of the ‘common sense’ of our society. These equal rights were, however, not won easily, and they have still not been won in many parts of the world.

Early feminist campaigns for equal rights used a range of arguments, many of which can still be heard today. Some feminists accepted and adapted traditional ideas about women’s ‘difference’ from men to argue that women needed political rights and legal protection in order that their needs as wives and mothers could be met, and/or so that their alleged qualities, such as peace-making and temperance, could raise the quality of public life. Some saw sex equality as a consequence and/or precondition for a more generally equal socialist society, in which human relationships would be free from ownership and control. Many others used the language of liberal democracy to demand rights on the grounds that women were in relevant respects the same as men, and that as rational individuals they should have the same rights and opportunities (for overviews of early feminism, see Evans 1977; Banks 1986; Bryson 2003). While some feminists continued to stress women’s different qualities and needs, or the interconnected nature of socialist and feminist goals, such liberal arguments became the primary justification for sex equality legislation in many western nations in the second half of the twentieth century, and they set the parameters for most public debate in the UK and USA today. This means that equality today is generally understood in individualistic terms and in relation to legal and political rights in the public sphere. From this dominant perspective, women in the West have now achieved equality with men; if we lag behind them, this reflects free choice and/or the legitimate results of free competition.

Most feminists today agree that the rights that most women in the West have won are not 'mere formalities', and that they should be campaigned for and defended wherever they are lacking or under threat. However, some feminists have been highly critical of the underlying assumptions of liberal thought, which they see as an inherently male approach that does not encompass women's needs and experiences and therefore cannot provide a basis for substantive gender equality. In this chapter, I argue that, if we are to achieve a more genuinely egalitarian and equitable society, we must move beyond liberal, male assumptions and reintroduce into public debate the ideals and analytical tools associated with radical feminism and with socialist and Marxist thought. In particular, careful use of the radical feminist concept of patriarchy can enable us to see and challenge the interconnected inequalities and values that permeate every aspect of society. This concept also decentres male experiences and assumptions, and this decentring in turn supports the development of an inclusive version of socialism that recognises the significance of experiences and activities associated with women. While conventional socialists can see that the effective pursuit of the kind of sex equality that would benefit more than an elite minority of women runs against the logic of market capitalism, so that feminism cannot be isolated from wider egalitarian goals, a more inclusive approach also sees that while some form of socialism may be a necessary precondition for sex equality, it is certainly not sufficient.

In considering what we mean by equality, it is also essential that privileged white western feminists such as myself do not assume that we can speak for the whole of our sex, and we must take seriously recent black feminist analysis of the dynamically interactive nature of gender, 'race' and class and the centrality of black women's experience for feminist analysis. While this chapter focuses on western societies, it is also important to remember that most of the world's women do not live in the West, and that while there may be some apparent commonalities of experience, there are also wide divergences.

Such arguments are reinforced by related developments in post-modern feminist theory and its analysis of the dangers of essentialism, the shifting and precarious nature of gender identities, and the role of language, logic and culture in sustaining or subverting these. However, while such theorising may produce significant insights, it should not be allowed to become a rarefied end in itself (or a boost to

our academic careers): rather, the role of theory should be to help feminists develop effective strategies that can both see beyond the hegemonic paradigms of inegalitarian societies and adapt to the specificities of particular social contexts. As Nancy Fraser argues in this volume, there are also dangers in a ‘politics of identity’ if this is prioritised over the politics of redistribution and representation.

Equality and inequality today

Although women in many nations now have more or less the same legal rights as men, women and men in general continue to play different roles and to receive different rewards – and in general this works to the disadvantage of women. Documenting these differences and inequalities is in many ways an important first step towards combating them – if people do not know about them, there will be no policies to address them. Demanding that statistics be disaggregated by sex¹ or measuring the time spent by women and men on unpaid work in the home remain important feminist tasks, which make continuing inequalities visible. Partly as a result of such feminist efforts, we now have plenty of evidence about the pay gap, the lack of women in senior positions and the numbers of women living in poverty throughout the world; there is also an increasing amount of information about the unequal division of unpaid work, particularly in subsistence agriculture and within the home. These differences are more stark in some nations than others, but even the Nordic countries, which occupied the first five places in the 2005 United Nations Human Development Report’s ‘Gender empowerment measure’, significant differences in pay and public voice remain and the domestic division of labour falls well short of equality (Nordic Council of Ministers 2005; UNDP 2005). In addition to these measurable inequalities, feminists have also documented and drawn attention to other problems experienced by many women, particularly domestic violence (which remains a serious problem in the Nordic countries), sexual exploitation and lack of reproductive rights.

Other inequalities and problems to do with culture and beliefs are often less easy to pin down, particularly in western societies, where

¹ Such analysis does not preclude questioning the basis for binary classification, critiqued by Terrell Carver in his chapter.

most official public rhetoric stresses equality of opportunity rather than approving traditional gender roles. However, it is clear that until recently our history, philosophy and public culture have been almost exclusively man-made, and that despite the success of some individual women, men still dominate decision-making positions in educational and cultural establishments and in the media (on the UK, see Equal Opportunities Commission 2005). Men have decided what is important and what counts as knowledge – and they have drawn on their own experiences, perceptions and priorities to produce a particular view of the world which they present as universal and objective. I am not suggesting that this is some kind of deliberate conspiracy, but I am suggesting that the resulting picture is inevitably partial and incomplete. Although feminists have had an impact in some areas, this man-made view of the world is the framework within which most women as well as men still have to work most of the time. It is ‘normal’; it is ‘common sense’.

Some feminists have a word to describe these interlocking inequalities: they use the term ‘patriarchy’. I have deep reservations about using this term, which has sometimes been endowed with inappropriate explanatory power or used in very simplistic ways to suggest that all women are in the same situation, or that all women are eternal victims of unchanging oppression and all men are oppressors. Nevertheless, I think that, handled carefully, the term is politically indispensable, and that it makes visible a number of interrelated points. First, inequalities between men and women are patterned, and cannot be reduced to *individual* experiences, behaviour and attitudes, although without the concept they may seem to be. Second, different kinds of inequality are interconnected, part of a wider pattern, in which disadvantage in one area is reinforced by that in another. Third, as I have already said, in a patriarchal society, men, their attributes and their values are the standard against which we are all measured; so that differences between the sexes generally become disadvantages for women and if women want equality they have to be like men (for an elaboration of these points and the debates around the concept of patriarchy, see Bryson 1999). It is in this context that debates around equality are conducted.

My argument in this chapter – and I am not claiming that it is an original one, just one that needs restating – is that to challenge

continuing inequalities we need to challenge the framework within which equality is debated, because most public debate on equality between women and men in the West has been conducted on inappropriate terms. These terms reflect the dominant values of our society – that is, they are liberal and they are male. These values have long been critiqued by many feminists, who have developed increasingly sophisticated theories. However, it often seems that we are simply talking amongst ourselves, and that liberal, male values remain the unquestioned ‘common sense’ of our society, so that if feminists enter public debate we are sucked back into a set of assumptions and a frame of reference that we would never have chosen and that we hoped we had moved beyond.

‘Common sense’ and feminist critiques

When we are talking about sex equality in western liberal democracies, we are talking about this in the context of societies that are in many ways profoundly unequal in terms of the gap between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, white and black. These inequalities of course exist in the context of an even more dramatically unequal world, in which living standards in the West are often maintained by the exploitation of workers in other nations. In the context of this widespread inequality, the dominant perspective on equality is based on what the ethical socialist Tawney called the ‘tadpole principle’ – that only a few of us will ever become frogs, but that we should have an equal right to try. In other words, it means equality of opportunity to compete for rewards and positions; it assumes existing hierarchies and inequality of outcomes (for a recent discussion of this concept of equality, see Evans 2005).

According to this ‘common-sense’ perspective, women in the West now have equality with men, because we have the same rights and opportunities, enshrined in and protected by law. No longer can we be refused employment or promotion just because we are women, no longer can the bank refuse to give us a loan unless we can find a man who can act as guarantor, no longer can schools refuse to let girls study physics or technology. Previous generations fought for these rights and won. The door is now open; all we have to do is to walk through, and we can see many examples of highly successful women who have done just that.

'Common sense' is sometimes forced to admit that there are some members of selection boards who do not understand the new rules and some rogue employers who deliberately break them, but it holds that these matters can be dealt with by stricter enforcement or tightening up of equality legislation. Faced with a wealth of statistical evidence, 'common sense' is also forced to concede that on average women earn less, are more likely to live in poverty and are concentrated in the bottom half of any hierarchy of public power and influence. However, this is seen as women's *choice*: they choose to have children, they choose to work part-time to fit in with their caring responsibilities, and they choose to work in occupations that are not well paid but which may provide other forms of satisfaction or reward. (See Catherine Hakim's chapter in this volume for an elaboration of this argument.) According to 'common sense', if women want to earn more money, they should take up the opportunities that are there and become engineers, plumbers or stockbrokers rather than nursery nurses, hairdressers and social workers. They should also stop whinging and realise that it is a tough old world out there; indeed 'common sense' often finds itself suggesting (although in a rather less confident tone) that perhaps women don't really have the skills and attitudes to succeed: they can't hack the hours, they haven't got the determination, they haven't got the ambition.

From the 'common-sense' perspective, women and men can now expect to be judged equally on their individual qualifications and merits, and feminists should concentrate on ensuring that the rules of equal competition are enforced so that the best people are able to succeed. Increasingly, this perspective also sees the main threat to such fair competition as now coming from obsessive feminists, who have succeeded in discriminating against men by choosing parliamentary candidates from women-only shortlists, passing men over for promotion to reach artificial gender quotas, and insisting on long periods of maternity leave every time they have a baby.

I disagree with such 'common sense'. Confronted with its arguments, it is however difficult to know where to start, because they rest on a whole set of interlocking values and assumptions. As I have already said, many feminists argue that these values and assumptions are liberal and that they reflect male interests in a patriarchal society. As such, they are neither adequate nor always

appropriate for women's needs. Here, I will look briefly at just four overlapping points of criticism: that the 'common-sense' approach ignores the gendered context within which equal rights are exercised; that it focuses too narrowly on the public sphere; that it accepts a scale of values biased in favour of men; and that it fails to question the continued existence of steep hierarchies and inequalities of outcome.

Gender equality in context

The focus on individuals' right to compete equally abstracts people from their society and does not consider the gendered starting-point of the competitive marketplace. In contrast, many feminists have claimed that women are disadvantaged by deep-seated cultural assumptions and ascribed gender roles which produce stereotypes that make it difficult for women to succeed. Much of this feminist work originally built on Kate Millett's pioneering work on patriarchy and her claim that gender expectations and roles are learned within the family, and reinforced by education, the media and religion (Millett 1985, first published 1970). From this perspective, gender roles are particularly difficult to change because they are learned and internalised at an early age, so that women seem out of place in positions of public authority, while even the most 'liberated' woman is likely to feel that running the house is her responsibility and that she is 'lucky' if she has a partner who shares this with her. Others have drawn on psychoanalytic theory to argue that the female monopoly of childcare not only has profound effects on gender identity, but also means that we associate female authority with the anxieties, conflicts of will and humiliations of early childhood (see in particular Chodorow 1978 and Dinnerstein 1987).

All this means that, even when equal opportunities recruitment methods are in place, a woman applying for a senior post or seeking to be selected for political office is likely to be judged as a woman as well as an individual, producing a 'lose-lose' situation of a type not experienced by men: if she is attractive and 'feminine' she cannot be taken seriously, but if she is not, there is something wrong with her; if she has children it is expected that she will find it difficult to do the job, but if she has not, or if she has a full-time nanny, she is unnatural or a bad mother; if her management style is based on persuasion and team working then she lacks leadership qualities, but if she is

more assertive she is problematically unfeminine, and may trigger deep-seated insecurities about female authority figures – and anyway, the kind of person the selectors want is like that really excellent chap they had before and this woman is not like him at all.

That kind of discrimination is certainly not confined to men, it is often subconscious, and it can be hard to prove. However, recent research about the way prospective parliamentary candidates in the UK are treated provides evidence for its continuation: women hoping to stand in the 2001 general election faced discriminatory comments and questions such as ‘Can’t have her, she has young children’ and ‘What would your husband do for sex when you are away during the week?’ (Conservative Party) and ‘Well you didn’t do so bad for a little woman’, ‘You are the best candidate but we are not yet ready for a woman’, ‘We do enjoy watching you speak, we always imagine what your knickers are like’ (Labour Party) (Shephard-Robinson and Lovenduski 2002). What seems particularly shocking about these examples is not just that some people think like that, but that some of them still think it is acceptable to say it in public. Tightening up the legislation and getting proper job specifications can obviously help, but the underlying mindset is much harder to change.

Inequality in the private sphere

Another important aspect of the gendered context within which competition takes place is men’s and women’s domestic situation. This leads to the second point of criticism: that liberalism’s focus on the public sphere has no way of conceptualising domestic inequalities, and of understanding that these are important both in their own right and because of their impact on women’s and men’s employment and political opportunities (for related arguments, see Rosemary Crompton’s chapter in this volume). From a liberal perspective, the killing of an average of two women a week in the UK by their partners or ex-partners, and the domestic violence experienced by 25 per cent of women at some time in their lives (Women and Equality Unit 2005) is not a political issue; such violence is interpreted as a series of personal tragedies and criminal acts, rather than a reflection of and contributor to broader patterns of inequality or oppression. The unequal domestic division of labour has similarly been largely ignored by liberal political thought, which sees it as a private matter.

Although there have been significant changes in recent years, and there is a widespread perception that many men now play a much greater role in the home than in the recent past, the evidence from time-use studies around the world indicates that domestic and caring work still remain disproportionately the responsibility of women (for an overview, see Gershuny 2000). Some feminists see this continuing domestic inequality as a product of gender role socialisation as discussed above, while others see gender identity as essentially fragile, something that has to be constantly reasserted through appropriate action, so that people are in effect ‘doing gender’, making statements about their gender identity, at the same time as performing other tasks. From this perspective, men’s gender identity is under threat if they take on household or caring roles, while ‘Her doing the laundry and his fixing the light switch not only produces clean clothes and a lit room, they also produce a reaffirmation of gender roles’ (Blumberg 1991: 20; see also West and Zimmerman 1991). More prosaically, the traditional gender allocation of labour is often a rational allocation of time, given that in most couples women earn less than their partners. Although a minority of women are able to pay others to do their domestic and caring work for them, as Ruth Lister has pointed out such a strategy reinforces traditional roles, leaving men’s ‘domestic absenteeism’ undisturbed (Lister 2003: 134). Men’s exemption from these time-consuming responsibilities clearly limits women’s opportunities to compete equally with them outside the home; in the UK a report from the Fawcett Society (a long-established feminist organisation) identified this as a key reason for continuing economic inequalities (Bellamy and Rake 2005). However, from a liberal equal rights perspective, this work is invisible; and because it is not seen, it is neither valued nor rewarded.

This failure to see the value of domestic work and its impact on women’s opportunities is certainly not confined to liberalism, but is shared with other male theorists, including those theories of citizenship which stress paid employment as a key responsibility which is also a key source of entitlement, and which have influenced New Labour’s thinking in the UK. While some early utopian socialists provide an exception (see Taylor 1983), most male socialist and Marxist writers and activists have neither seen the economic importance of this work nor questioned women’s responsibility for it. Indeed, many have seemed to think that a fair division of labour is ‘You make the tea; I’ll

make the revolution'; the effect of this on women's opportunities for political participation is captured in the complaint of Hannah Mitchell, an English suffrage campaigner and socialist, who pointed out nearly 100 years ago that 'No cause can be won between dinner and tea, and most of us who were married had to fight with one hand tied behind us, so to speak' (Mitchell 1977: 130).

The partiality of male perspectives

Such issues are tied in with my third point of criticism of 'common-sense' approaches: that public debate is conducted within the terms of a scale of values which reflects men's experiences and priorities and presents these as 'normal', and which marginalises, devalues or ignores those associated with women. This view treats men as the 'default setting' for what it is to be human, compared to which women are 'different'. This means that equality has been granted to women on terms which have been set by men, and that men are the standard against which we are measured. And this means that women can be 'equal' only to the extent that they can be like men (although, as I suggested above, they may be regarded with suspicion if they do this too well).

According to these dominant values, the ability to give birth is not something to be prized and rewarded, but a disadvantage that may prevent women behaving like men – that is, like proper human beings. This is connected to a more general under-valuing of activities on which women are more likely than men to spend their time. To take the most obvious example: if asked, many people would agree that one of the most important jobs in any society is the care and upbringing of the next generation. However, this is not something that has attracted economic reward or political recognition. Rather, those who look after their own children suffer economic penalties and, according to most of the political and academic rhetoric about citizenship or stakeholding, they are not active citizens, and they do not have a stake in society – it is paid employment that is the key to this. At the same time, if this paid employment involves the caring work traditionally done by women, it is still economically penalised. In the UK, this under-valuing of caring work is illustrated clearly by the rates paid to young people starting work after completing modern apprenticeships, with those qualified in early years childcare and

education (97 per cent of whom are women) recently earning an average of £148 a week, compared with £242 for those qualified in engineering (96 per cent of whom are men), although all qualifications were assessed as being at an equivalent skills level (Wild 2003 and Equal Opportunities Commission 2003). The message for women seems to be that if they want economic independence, if they want to be valued as citizens, they should behave like men. The same message applies to men who might think of taking on traditionally female roles, but who should do so only if they do not mind losing status and economic independence.

However, the paid and unpaid work that women have traditionally done will not go away if they start behaving like men – so this equality on men's terms leaves open the question of who is to do the work that women used to do, and how we are to meet the 'caring deficit' that is likely to result when women enter paid employment. There are a number of possible solutions. One set of solutions involves providing good, affordable childcare, restructuring employment around family needs and encouraging men to play a greater role in the home. Although many argue that there is still much to do and there are distinct national differences, this has been the general approach in the Nordic nations, where men as well as women are able to take extensive leave for family reasons, educational programmes have been deliberately designed to challenge gender stereotypes from the earliest possible age and care workers are relatively well paid. This collectivist approach clearly involves a high level of taxation and state intervention, and is the product of a form of democratic socialism very different from the liberal assumptions which dominate in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in the UK. It also involves a shift in the terms of debate, as equality is premised upon changes in men's behaviour as well as women's. While such change so far falls well short of equality, the principle that enabling people to take time out of paid employment to look after family members is not 'special treatment' but a way of helping them to meet socially important responsibilities is widely articulated.

In contrast, the individualistic assumptions of the United States mean that it is largely up to each woman to find her own solution within a framework of formal equality of opportunity. Within this framework, caring responsibilities are seen as a consequence of private choices which may impede full citizenship and employment

opportunities, but which are not a matter of public concern; although some employers and insurance schemes now provide maternity cover, this has in the past been seen by the courts as unlawful discrimination against men, and there is still no statutory right to maternity leave. As discussed in the [final section](#) of this chapter, there is now significantly more support for workers with family responsibilities in the UK; however the ‘choices’ available to individual women are still often highly constrained. Some of course try to juggle work and family. However a long-hours culture makes this extremely difficult. Long hours also make it difficult for male partners to contribute more at home, even if they want to; indeed, fathers in the UK work even longer hours than childless colleagues, with a third spending more than fifty hours a week at work (Cousins and Tang 2003; for good comparative overviews of such policies, see Daly and Rake 2003, and Gornick and Meyers 2003).

A minority of women are able to behave more like men by paying others to perform domestic duties. However, many women who buy such services may also feel guilty at not spending more time with their family, and fall into the ‘super-woman’ syndrome of frenetic activity during their limited time at home, as described in Allison Pearson’s novel *I Don’t Know How She Does It* (2002). This kind of ‘solution’ does not challenge existing patterns, and means that many women in full-time employment are still competing with one hand tied behind them; many have complained that, contrary to the earlier feminist promise that they could ‘have it all’, they are simply ‘doing it all’.

Unsurprisingly, given existing conditions of full-time employment and the lack of good, affordable childcare in the USA and UK, many other women attempt to reconcile employment with their traditional domestic role by working part-time (women are 46 per cent of the UK labour force, and 45 per cent of women employees work part-time). Such work is in general particularly badly paid: while the hourly rate of full-time women workers is now 82 per cent that of full-time men workers, for part-time women workers it is only 59 per cent; in the USA the gap is even larger (Bellamy and Rake 2005). Part-time employment is also frequently insecure, and often offers little opportunity for training or career advancement. A significant number of UK women still leave paid employment in order to meet family commitments. Over a third of mothers, more than one in ten fathers and nearly one in five people with another unpaid caring role have

given up or turned down a job because of their caring responsibilities (Equal Opportunities Commission 2005). Lone parents (90 per cent of whom are women) face particular difficulties; only 56 per cent of lone parents are in paid employment, compared with 72 per cent of those with a partner (Bellamy and Rake 2005).

The alternatives for many women in the UK and USA therefore seem to be the stress of trying to combine long hours of full employment with family responsibilities, the ‘sticky floor’ of badly paid and insecure part-time work which provides only a degree of economic independence and is unlikely to be a route out of poverty, or total financial dependency on a male partner or on means-tested state benefits. Contrary to the arguments of Catherine Hakim in her chapter, this is often experienced not as a set of choices, but as a dilemma. The experience of the Nordic nations suggests both that state policies can provide more meaningful choices and that these policies must challenge the workplace norms that assume men’s domestic absenteeism.

Equality in an unequal society

As noted above, in a world in which women are economically penalised for not behaving as men, domestic and caring work is generally either unpaid or poorly paid. This means that while off-loading such work may enable a minority of women to succeed in the competitive employment market, their success is likely to involve the continuing exploitation of others. This is perhaps the logical result of the kind of advice given by the influential American feminist writer and activist Betty Friedan in the 1960s, when she exhorted women to get out of the home and into the workplace – and promised them that it would be worth it in terms of fulfilment and self-realisation, even if they had to spend most of their salary on a cleaning lady (Friedan 1986: 303). Quite how the cleaning lady would be fulfilled was not clear. Today, paying other women can involve exporting the ‘care deficit’ to places such as Mexico and the Philippines, as women leave their own children to work as nannies in the West (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). Women’s low average earnings also mean that most simply cannot afford to pay their childminders a decent wage; even when childcare is provided or subsidised by the state, rates of pay remain extremely low.

This ties in with my final point of criticism, which also takes me back to where I started – the ‘tadpole’ philosophy which accepts that most people will never have a taste of frog life and that outcomes will continue to be profoundly unequal. The kind of equality that enables a few high-flying women to behave like privileged men is a very limited kind of equality. I am interested in a much more substantive and inclusive kind of equality that addresses overall inequalities and issues of class and ‘race’ as well as sex. As Nancy Fraser says in her chapter, such a model of equality cannot be achieved within the frame of the modern territorial state, and feminists are increasingly working through trans-national organisations.

A non-patriarchal approach to equality

Criticising is easy; coming up with positive proposals can be more difficult. However, I think that the points I have made so far have some positive implications which could provide the basis for a non-patriarchal approach to equality. By a non-patriarchal approach, I mean one which does not assume that men are the starting point and the measure of worth, and which sees women as ‘normal’ rather than ‘different’.

This means that a non-patriarchal approach to equality would value the activities and qualities traditionally associated with women as much as those associated with men. It would also expose men as ‘free riders’, benefiting collectively, and often individually, from the caring work of women. This has clear practical implications. Most women have always known that their unpaid work was important; most men have either ignored it, or paid lip-service to it without taking it seriously; from this new perspective, it would be central to economic, social and political analysis and planning. Status and adequate economic reward would no longer be denied to women or men who do this work either inside or outside the home.

Such a model of equality would require a major re-evaluation of what we understand by ‘merit’, ‘worth’ and ‘importance’, and it would assume that the behaviour and situation of men as well as women would have to change. Employment would be organised on the assumption that ‘normal’ workers – men as well as women – have family responsibilities and a life outside the workplace. Flexible and shorter working hours would be seen as standard, rather than ‘special

treatment' for women, and long hours working would be actively discouraged as a cause of 'domestic absenteeism'. There would be good support for caring responsibilities, including childcare provision and the care of elderly people. These changes would facilitate a more equitable division of labour within the home. The importance of domestic and caring work would be recognised, and people would no longer have to sacrifice economic independence if they looked after others. Ultimately, we could move to a 'universal caregiver' model of society, in which 'women's current life-patterns [become] the norm for everyone' (Fraser 2000: 25; see also Kershaw 2005 for development of this idea).

All this adds up to some very major changes which are clearly not going to be put into practice in the short term. Although men might benefit from them in many ways, they have a lot to lose: not just the practical advantage of earning more or not being expected to clean the lavatory, but the less tangible benefits of being central and 'normal'. Expecting men to forgo their advantages and displace themselves from the centre of the world is asking a lot. The kind of changes I have suggested are also clearly expensive, particularly in the short run. They are highly unlikely to be achieved in a pure market economy in which services are provided only if they make a profit. Good-quality, affordable childcare with well-paid workers is never going to be profitable.

In contrast to those who say that there is no necessary connection between feminism and socialism, I would therefore argue that the kind of feminism that is relevant to more than an elite few will never be realised without a more collectivist approach and a modification of market capitalism. Because poverty is disproportionately concentrated amongst women, increased substantive equality between men and women would also inevitably involve a redistribution from the rich to the poor. As I have argued elsewhere, my theoretical starting-point is also a product both of an acceptance of the classic Marxist claim that, if we are to understand the history and future potential of human society, we must look at the production and reproduction of material life, and of an insistence that Marxism must be reconceptualised from a perspective which includes women on an equal basis and recognises the importance of their activities. From this more inclusive perspective, if we are to understand how societies have developed and how they might be changed, we must include an

analysis of the changing nature and conditions of (re)production, which I define as ‘those human activities (physical and emotional) which are more or less directly linked to the generational reproduction and maintenance of the population and the care of those unable to look after themselves’ – that is, activities traditionally associated with women (Bryson 2004, 2005).

A non-patriarchal model of equality may appear to be simply a dream. Nevertheless, and despite the continuing ‘retreat from socialism’ and rise of neoliberalism in the West, there may be a number of encouraging signs. I do not want to overstate these, but they do suggest that, in Britain at least, the terms of debate may at last be beginning to shift.

First of all, workers in most western nations now have some rights to work more flexible hours and to take time off for family reasons. The UK has lagged behind most of Europe, but there is now an acknowledged need for ‘family friendly’ hours, or ‘work–life balance’; and the TUC has put ‘work–life balance’ at the top of its political agenda; even in the United States, there is a right to two weeks of unpaid parental leave. This is not enough, but it may be the beginnings of a change, a recognition that men have children too, that equality can be reconstructed on different terms, that women do not have to do all the adjusting.

Second, in the UK we now have a national childcare strategy, and Gordon Brown has repeatedly said that childcare needs to be at the heart of economic policy. In practice the provision is inadequate and the funding insecure – but again, it is a step in the right direction, and an important statement that governments are responsible; as such they may be held accountable.

Thirdly, the Platform of Action agreed at the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing committed governments to measuring the value of the unpaid work that is primarily done by women. One key way of doing this is to measure the time that is spent on this work, and time-use research has become a major academic growth area: all over the world, people are being surveyed and asked to complete time-use diaries in which they record their activities throughout the day. Time-use diaries assume that time-use can be recorded as a series of discrete events. Critics have suggested that they therefore cannot capture the ‘being there’ nature of much caring work, or the extent to which this is often a constraining background to other activities

(for example, time diaries would record a mother watching television on her own in a house with a sleeping child as enjoying 'free time', even if she would prefer to be in the pub or at a political meeting) (see Everingham 2002; Budig and Folbre 2004). They may therefore over-record women's free time and under-estimate the impact of the domestic division of labour. Nevertheless, they have revealed the economic importance of unpaid productive work (according to initial analyses in the UK, the GNP is at least 40 per cent and possibly 100 per cent bigger if unpaid work is included). They have also confirmed that, despite some evidence of 'gender convergence' in western nations, this important work remains disproportionately the responsibility of women (for overviews and discussion, see Gershuny 2000 and Folbre and Bittman 2004; for recent research see the conference papers on the website of the International Association of Time Use Research (IATUR)).

Together, these three changes – the introduction of more flexible working practices as a standard condition of employment, the acceptance of some collective responsibility for childcare, and the measurement of unpaid work as valuable productive activity – have the potential to transform the political agenda and the terms on which equality is debated. If politicians say that we are entitled to balance our work with the rest of our life, we will start to expect that fathers as well as mothers should be able to do so; if they say that they are developing a national childcare strategy, we will expect them to deliver; if they discover that unpaid work is economically important, we may expect it to be properly rewarded. We may even start exploring the full potential of our legal right to equal pay for work of equal value, extending these claims to work within the home. These changes therefore might be seen as straws in the wind, a sign that thinking just might be beginning to shift, and that we might be able to think about equality in very different terms.

There are other aspects of women's situation that are difficult to conceptualise within an equality framework, although they are clearly relevant to it. I am thinking in particular of women's right to live free from male violence and to make their own reproductive decisions. However, because different aspects of women's situations are interconnected, changes in one area can have a knock-on effect in others. For example, the increase in women in public life, although far short of equality, has led to an increased awareness of the extent

and seriousness of violence against women, while greater economic independence would make it easier to leave a violent partner. Once again, it is not enough, and I would not want to suggest that the relationships are simple. Nevertheless, it may suggest some possibility of transforming the vicious circle of inequality and oppression into a virtuous circle of increased equality and progressive change.

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