

Family-friendly feminism

Professional, middle-class women have captured the feminist debate and ignored the preferences of the majority, argues Belinda Brown.

The dominant strand of modern feminism in Britain is based on the assumption that the public realm is superior to the private realm and that women will remain subordinate to men so long as they participate less in this realm of politics and paid work.

But feminism has focused so hard on women's status in the public realm, on how many female politicians there are, on how equal we are in the workplace, that it has largely ignored women's actual preferences on how best to combine the raising of children with work and career. And because the debate has been dominated by a rather narrow band of highly educated professional women, who give a lower priority to family than most of their lower status sisters, Britain has one of the most family-unfriendly tax and benefit regimes in the developed world. It has a particular bias against single earner households and an assumption that even mothers with young children should work as much as possible.

But there is another strand of feminism represented by organisations like Mothers at Home Matter – what one might call maternal or familial feminism – that is beginning to find its voice and seems to be winning more support from the daughters of the baby boom generation. This strand also believes in equality of status between men and women but does not regard the private sphere, where women tend to dominate, as subordinate to the public. Indeed, it regards the private realm of community, family, domestic activity, as of greater consequence and importance than the public realm of politics and work. The public sphere is ultimately there to serve the private sphere, not the other way round.

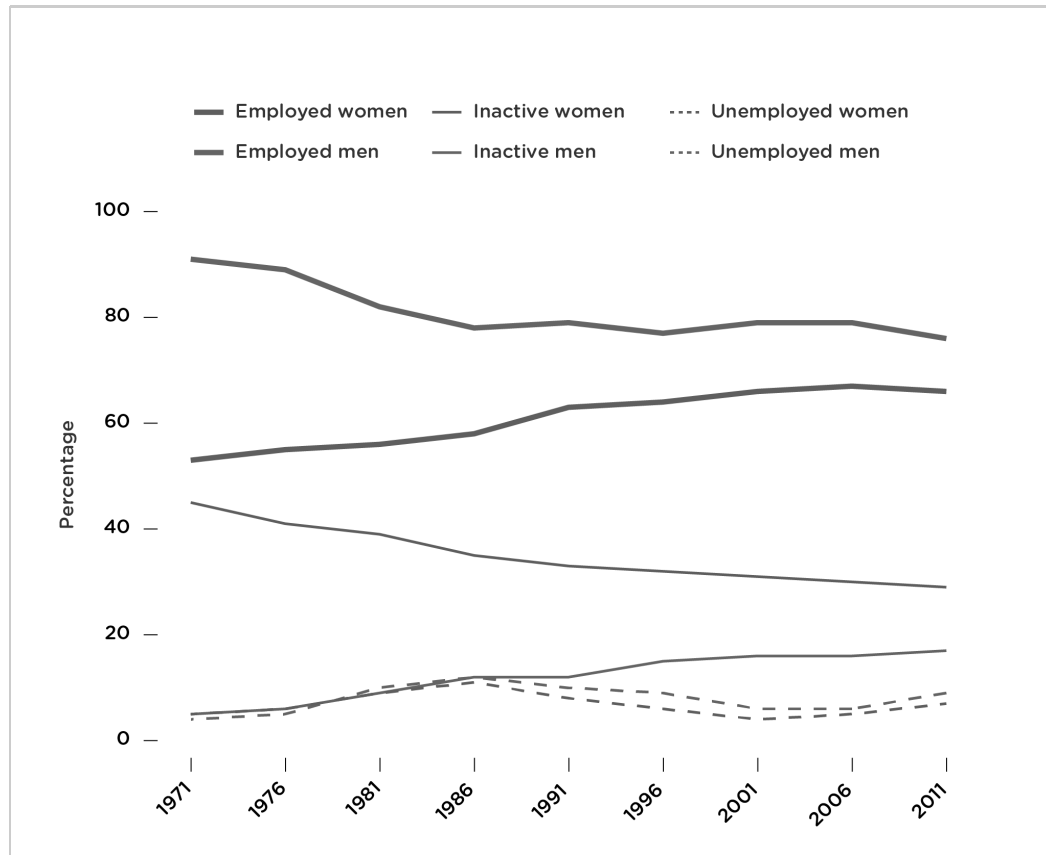
Economic necessity combined with the bias of public policy means that many women who would like to be full-time mothers, at least before children attend school full-time, and would like to have several children end up with just one or two children much of whose care they then have to delegate to strangers in the care or schooling system.

Modern feminism is based on the false assumption that for most women employment is the central organising principle, the measure of equality, the source of identity and means to realise our potential—the goal around which we shape our lives. It talks endlessly about choice but then denies choice, or at least makes life harder, for women who want to put family first.

It's not just that anything short of a proper career is frowned upon, especially in middle class circles. What one might call 'professional feminists' have also had a hand in creating the economic pressures which then require many mothers to work more than they would like. Where there are many two (high) income families competing for housing those of us with more modest aspirations just don't stand a chance. And, partly at the prompting of these feminists, people since 1990 have been taxed as individuals, regardless of whether or not they support a family (in this regard at least Margaret Thatcher supported feminist aims). Moreover, men and women in single earner households in Britain are not able to pool their tax allowances – as is common throughout the developed world – contributing to a tax burden on middle income single earner households with children that is almost 50 per cent higher than the average across rich countries (and more than one third higher than two income families in Britain).

Professional feminists argue that increasing female employment at all levels will maximise company efficiency and raise output and tax revenue. But there is no evidence that 'women-friendly' employment practices increase company productivity. And women do not significantly increase the size of the workforce overall (see Figure 1). Rather, as rates of female employment go up rates of male employment go down and rates of male inactivity go up. This is displacement not growth. Increasing the number of women on boards does have a positive impact on performance indicators such as talent management and market representation but there is no evidence to suggest that financial performance improves, despite extensive research.

Figure 1: Employment rates by gender



It is not just that the benefits of professional feminism have been oversold, the costs have been underplayed. For poorer women, those who clean your houses and look after your children, it's not having more women on company boards that is going to help, desirable though that might be, it's having a supportive and decently earning man. And feminism is doing nothing to help here. As we have just seen female employment has increased male inactivity. In nearly all areas of employment and education women are gaining ground relative to men.

Although there are 65,000 more young men aged 18-20 than young women, in 2011 there were 40,000 more female A-level applicants than male, and the numbers are getting worse. Female school leavers are more likely to apply to university. Once at university men are more likely to drop out and women are more likely to get a degree. Women bag the apprenticeships, especially those at the higher levels. However the Department of Education appears unconcerned:

It could be argued that the widening gender gap... does not matter if this advantage either disappears by the time the girl enters the labour market or if it helps to ensure greater equality for women in the labour market.

Public sector employment (almost a quarter of all jobs) is skewed towards women with 67 per cent of the workforce being female. It is bound by rigorous legislation with an emphasis on positive action to ensure equal opportunities at work. The penalties for failing in this area are high. It seems

quite likely that this results in the favouring of women to avoid the penalties which unintentional discrimination could incur.

Unemployed women have an alternative to turn to – mothering – and appear to highly value this role. While men too may be excellent carers, access to their children is de facto mediated by the mothers. And in today's welfare state the mothers have alternative sources of financial support particularly when 'their' men are unemployed. With no one to need them lower skilled men swell the ranks of the homeless or those in prison. They also have significantly higher rates of suicide.

The costs of downplaying family life are borne by children too. It is well known that long hours of institutionalised childcare have a damaging impact on very young children (unless they are from deprived backgrounds or the quality of the childcare is very high).

What is less acknowledged is that high rates of female employment have a negative effect on equality itself. Pushing women into the workforce leads to increased gender segregation and pay differentials. This is because the women who work are no longer those who prioritise their careers, but all of us. And as work isn't as important to the majority of women as our home life we choose less demanding jobs, go part-time and do not push for promotion. So gender differences increase in the workforce and attempts to achieve equality are set back.

WOMEN SING TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

However perhaps the biggest weakness in the career feminist argument is that most women do not share its principles. Few women want the top jobs and it is the family, not the workplace, which shapes what they want from their lives.

Rather than prioritise our careers survey after survey shows we are keen to maintain our lead role in the family and therefore we prioritise part-time work. Netmums conducted a survey of 4000 mothers of young children and found that of those working full time, only 12 per cent were entirely happy with their situation while 62 per cent of the part-timers were happy with their hours of work. Moreover, nearly a third would have chosen to spend all their time looking after their children if they could afford it. An analysis of British Social Attitude data also found women were happier in part-time work.

Another survey asked mothers about a family with two children under five and a working father, only one per cent said it was right to work full time in such circumstances and nearly half, 49 per cent, thought a mother should not work at all.

And far from being a means of fulfilling ones potential, entering the workplace for many women is just a way to pay the family bills. The Resolution Foundation conducted a survey of 1,610 part-time working women with half being in the low to middle income group. They found that low income women were much more likely to say that they were planning to increase their working hours when their children got older whilst the higher income group were least likely to.

There is quite clearly a significant value divide between the educated professional women who have been helping to make family policy and the average British mother. Netmums conducted a survey of 1,300 women to find out what modern feminism meant to them. They found that:

...more than two thirds (69 per cent) believed feminism's biggest fight was now to reinstate the value of motherhood, compared to under a third (32 per cent) who were concerned about the number of female politicians and 34 per cent who want to see more women in top boardroom jobs.

Business in the Community carried out a survey based on a sample of 25,199 women and found that even in an unrepresentative sample (nearly 60 per cent were mid-level management, professional or technical and only 16 per cent of respondents worked part-time) 57 per cent felt it was very important to have the time to take the lead role in their children's upbringing and/or caring for other family members. A British Social Attitudes Survey found that nearly half of women chose a

kinship role as their primary identity with 49 per cent of respondents giving priority to ‘mother’, ‘wife’ or ‘partner’—rather than choosing a more public role. Finally another more recent analysis of British Social Attitudes data shows that young women are more likely to have traditional social attitudes, valuing home and children, in keeping with their grandmothers rather than the baby boomer generation in-between.

The point about these examples is that for a significant proportion of women, probably a majority, family, caring and kinship is the organising principle, the main source of motivation and identity, and this receives inadequate recognition in the public realm. It is, of course, important that the women who want to can derive all the status and esteem they want from the public realm. The problem lies in their tendency to assume that the rest of us want all of that as well. And those of us who attach a higher value to homes, husbands and children are far less visible than those of us who don't. Worse than that, women in the public realm feel they have a mandate to speak for us on account of their gender. And men with political power believe them because what feminists say chimes with the male world-view. Feminists have silenced the voice of women more effectively than men ever could.

MOVING AWAY FROM A PROFESSIONAL WOMEN AGENDA

Most of us, men and women, achieve a sense of intrinsic worth through relationships of mutual dependence, sometimes embellished by achievement in the public sphere. This is not primarily grown by equality policies but by a thriving, financially resilient and independent private realm. If our sense of worth really depended on the size of our salary and position in the pecking order at work we would live in an extremely unpleasant hierarchical society – the nightmare of Michael Young's ‘meritocracy’.

If public policy actually allowed for female difference, so that it was accepted that women developed their careers later, it would work out far better for everyone. Currently women delay having children because of fears of jeopardising their career with the result that maximum penalties are incurred. Not only does this make reproduction more difficult but it means women take maternity leave just as their careers are peaking, making it more expensive to take time out of work. Women, however, not only live longer than men but have extra years in better health. Instead of compressing reproduction and employment into a few stressful years, women could enjoy their children, carry on working for longer and peak in their careers later.

Feminists understandably focus on the inequalities women suffer, but male inequalities are arguably just as harsh. Men are more likely to be unemployed for longer and from a younger age and less likely to have the soft skills that an increasing number of service sector jobs require. They are more likely to be affected by recession, have less access to public sector employment, work longer hours and die before retirement. And while female inequalities can partly be explained by their priorities and choice this is less true for men.

If female employment was no longer such a central political priority the spotlight could shift onto male employment and this could suit women's interests very well. The recent British Social Attitudes survey found that 68 per cent of women preferred men to have the main breadwinner role with the number higher when respondents had children themselves. No respondents thought that fathers should take more parental leave than mothers when a child was born. If the majority of women still want men to be the main breadwinner it is male problems in education and employment, even more than female, which need to be addressed.

The modern era has seen food production, then goods, and finally services move beyond the control of the family. Men moved out of the home to work and then women too. This has left the family a significantly weakened social institution no longer able to support all its members and with many of its functions taken over by the state. However the family remains central to most peoples' lives, determining the choices of women and even motivating men to work, especially low skilled men.

The state needs to recognise this centrality of the family, and help to develop, rather than undermine the support which the family currently provides to individuals. This would reduce state

dependency and reduce the burden of care which the state currently has to provide. One reason for the huge increase in the size of the state in recent decades is because less care for the old, the sick and the young now takes place within the family—greater individualism paradoxically leads to a bigger state. As women clearly want to maintain their lead role in the family, they are well placed to ensure that family is at the centre of political reform.

Where once women followed men into the world of work and politics they can now lead society in a different direction promoting a broader sense of women's and society's interests. By prioritising and strengthening the family, women need not sacrifice the equality that has been achieved in recent generations but they can ensure that families and their needs—the private realm—are at the heart of the public political sphere.



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