

Changing Gender Roles

There is an infamous old German expression: “Kinder, Küche, Kirche,” supposedly coined by emperor Wilhelm II and referring to a woman’s place in German society, as he saw it. Humiliating and chauvinistic, this expression reflects the understanding of gender roles that existed in Germany in the 19th century, and nowadays would probably cause a firestorm among all layers of modern society if any politician was brave (or rather stupid) enough to proclaim it in public. However, an unpleasant surprise is that we—modern people living in the 21st century—are still guided by gender stereotypes, expectations, and concepts about appropriate gender roles. This is neither good or bad—it is how things are: for many centuries, women were believed to be more emotional and tender, while men were expected to be aggressive and restrained; women were expected to be housekeepers, and men were the breadwinners, and so on. Such sustained conceptions never change fast; still, what we can observe today is the gradual shifting of gender roles, and the blurring of their boundaries.

Today, it is not uncommon to see a man doing work around the house, looking after children, or cooking, while his wife is in an office busy with corporate wars. Neither it is uncommon to see a man able to shed tears, or a woman who demonstrates typically-masculine traits of character, such as decisiveness and assertiveness. It is perfectly fine if each member of a couple is comfortable with such a distribution of roles, temporary or permanent. However, the shift in gender roles—especially in the United States—is gradually becoming more than a voluntary redistribution of duties, but rather a mass phenomenon, which sociologists are currently looking for explanations for.

One of the reasons why this is happening may originate from education—in particular, in the attitude male and female students have towards it. Whereas girls are usually more diligent about studying, engage in in-school activities more eagerly, and tend to be serious about their academic performance, among boys, the situation is different. According to sociologist Michael Kimmel,

“Boys think that academic disengagement is a sign of masculinity [...] The less you can do in school, the less connected you are, the less interested you are, the more manly you are.” No big deal, someone could say, and they would be wrong, because high academic performance and good grades are not just about becoming a valedictorian and making a speech: it is about employment as well. What many young men seem to not think about is that nowadays, the highest demand is for graduates who have a high level of knowledge: “The economy shifting to a service economy, a knowledge-based economy, a words-based economy rather than an action-based economy has certainly been to the detriment of that traditional ideology of masculinity,” says Kimmel (CBC).

When employing a graduate student, companies usually prefer candidates with high grades—not because they care about how well a future employee knows biology or math, but because it is usually an index of persistence and the ability to work. In this regard, men who did not put enough effort into their academic careers have higher risks of falling off the board.

Gender role changes also have an economic basis underlying it. The recession that hit the United States in the late 2000s mostly hit the jobs usually occupied by men—according to statistics, around 80 percent of workplaces—so the gap that emerged had to be filled: probably for the first time in the history of the United States, the majority of jobs were held by women. With women becoming the main breadwinners, men had to take the role of housekeepers: sitting at home, looking after children, cooking, and doing job hunting has become a rather typical occupation for American men. This process exacerbated several other problems existing in American society: for example, women constantly face the fact that they are paid less than men, and that getting promoted to higher positions in the corporate environment requires them to spend more time and effort than men (HowStuffWorks). This is unfair, but this is also a chance to take a look at existing gender issues from a new perspective, and develop a solution for them.

With men keeping an eye on homes and women working in offices, there might be yet another crisis that is easy to overlook. The traditional outlook implying a man being responsible for the financial condition of a family, and a woman being responsible for how things are at home, is still strong; in many families, it can cause the increase of divorce rates. A man earning less than a woman may lose self-confidence—and this is not about chauvinism, but rather about an innate need to be a breadwinner—and become unable to continue relationships with a woman. On the other hand, a woman earning more than her husband may lose respect for him, and file for divorce; relationships are not only about how much each family member earns, but when a way of things that lasted for centuries changes so dramatically, not everyone can find a constructive approach to new circumstances.

The shift in gender roles that occurred during the recent decade has shed light on a number of problems, to which American society has not probably paid enough attention yet. The unwillingness of male students to engage in studying (because of the belief that detachment from academics has something to do with establishing their masculinity) causes employers to prefer women over men when looking for candidates—even for the positions traditionally occupied by men. The recession that hit the United States hard several years ago has contributed to the process of gender roles shifting as well. As a result, we are currently living in a society where men and women perform functions sometimes directly opposite to those that persisted for centuries; this is neither good or bad—this is new, and American society needs to adapt to these changes as quickly as possible.

Works Cited

News, CBS. “As Gender Roles Change, Are Men Out of Step?” CBS News. CBS Interactive, 17 June 2012. Web. 17 May 2017.

“Are Men and Women’s Roles in Society Changing?” HowStuffWorks. N.p., 05 Oct. 2010. Web. 18 May 2017.