

## Insights: Does education boost gender equality?

with Barbara Okun and Sara Reis

Chris Coates

Hello and welcome to Insights, the podcast from Understanding Society. Understanding Society is a longitudinal survey that captures life in the UK in the 21st century. Every year, we ask each member of thousands of the same households across the UK about different aspects of their life. Each episode of Insights explores how our data gets used and what does it show us and what can we learn from it. I'm your host, Chris Coates, and in this episode we'll explore how education levels affect gender roles in UK households. Joining me are Professor Barbara Okun of the Sociology Department and Demography Division of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Dr. Sara Rees, Deputy Director and Head of Research and Policy at feminist economics think tank, the Women's Budget Group. So, Barbara, if I can start with you, can you tell us what motivated you to study this, this relationship between education and couples, gender roles?

Barbara Okun

Thanks, Chris. I'm happy to be here and share with everybody a little bit of my research, which is jointly done with Dr. Liat Razurovich at the Hebrew University. What motivated us at the beginning of this project is a better understanding of family change and the interaction and dynamics between partners in married couple households. The literature has focused on decades of change that characterises families as less stable as couples are marrying later, as they are having fewer children, as they are breaking up more often, due to the fact that women feel frustrated by the fact that while they have joined the labour force and are working and earning money, the change within the domestic sphere has been much slower, in the sense that women still take on the lion's share of housework and child care, with the change in men's behaviour as being seen as more limited. And some of the literature suggests that perhaps it will be that when men start to take on a bigger role in the domestic sphere, then families will be strengthened, marriage will increase and become more stable and people will have more children. So we wanted to try and see whether we could observe some of that happening in UK couples. And in particular, the literature suggested that a good place to start looking would be among educated couples, because theories suggest that when partners are more educated, they're more likely to have egalitarian gender role attitudes and to behave in ways in the home that are more egalitarian, such as in sharing more equally household tasks. So we really wanted to take a couple level perspective and look at couples, but by educational type, and see whether we could observe that more educated couples are actually more egalitarian and if this could be a signal for future family change.

Chris

So what did you find on gender role attitudes and education levels among couples?

Barbara

Well, what we found was a little surprising because when we looked at couples as opposed to women and men separately, we noticed that what really matters in terms of the partner's gender role attitudes is the female partner's level of education, whereas the male partner's level of education really didn't matter as much. So when we're looking at married couples where the wife is more educated, meaning that she has tertiary level education, it doesn't so much matter what the educational level is of her husband. What matters is that she and her husband are more likely to have egalitarian gender role attitudes than in partners where the wife does not have tertiary education. In other words, the role of women education is much more important than that of men in understanding the gender role attitudes of both partners.

Chris

Okay, how do these attitudes that they have, how do they actually affect the division of housework between the couple?

Barbara

Well, I like your use of the word affect, Chris, because that's a little controversial. We don't really know if attitudes affect behaviour or if behaviours affect attitudes. It could be that. That they affect each other and that they are both related to other causes. So when we look at behaviours as among attitudes, the key factor is looking at whether the wife has tertiary level education. It is true that men who are married to women with tertiary level education do a little bit more housework than men who are married to women who do not have tertiary education. It's a difference of about half an hour to an hour. But what's important, where the big difference is, is that women with tertiary education do a lot less housework. And that's what leads to the smaller gender gaps within couples based on the tertiary level education of the wife. And once again, not so much her husband.

Chris

Right, thank you. That's a really interesting point on. Yeah, my use of the word effect.

Barbara

To get to your question, we do see a difference in patterns when we're looking at attitudes as opposed to behaviours. If we focus on couples where the wife has tertiary education, where she's more educated, and then we compare couples where the husband also has tertiary education or he does not. When we look at attitudes, we see that men with tertiary education do have more egalitarian attitudes than men who do not have tertiary education. But when we look at behaviours, we don't see that actually the men who are more educated do slightly less housework than the men who do not have tertiary education. That's when comparing between couples where in all cases the wife is more highly educated. So there is a gap between attitudes and behaviours when we're looking at couples with more educated wives.

Chris

So why do you think highly educated men, when they have, or say they have these egalitarian attitudes, why aren't, let's be honest, why aren't we doing more housework?

Barbara

Well, as the sociologist Yustanski said, there is often observed to be a gap between spoken and lived experiences. What you're saying is what explains this gap between spoken and lived experiences, particularly among men who are married to more highly educated women and particularly highly educated men who are married to highly educated women, where that gap seems to be even larger. And I think some of the answer may lie with structural constraints, because we still have an expectation in the labour market that men and women will work long hours, will be the ideal worker, will maybe put their work as a higher priority to their family or children, and therefore even men who may have egalitarian gender role attitudes may feel constrained by the demands of the labour market to work longer hours and therefore feel unable to help out with the housework as much as they in theory would like to do. So. That's one possible interpretation. So that there's a lot about talk about work family balance for women with small children, but also maybe we need to expand that a little bit, expand our discussion a little bit to also think about work family balance for men.

Chris

Yeah, that's interesting because there's still that expectation that women are going to be doing the housework and raising the children. I guess, yeah, that's why we're still talking about work life balance for them. But there isn't that assumption there for men, is there?

Barbara

Well, regarding men's roles, some of the recent literature has really put a focus on changes in men's behaviour and the idea being that when men take on these different roles, this will make women also more willing to have larger families. So that's why looking at men's behaviour is critical, because if men, like women, start to feel the pinch of work family conflict, then even if they are interested in

having more egalitarian family lives, they may feel that they have to give up too much to do that unless something changes in terms of our expectations.

Chris

And moving on to the research itself, can you tell me a little bit about how the data from Understanding Society helped you to look at this question?

Barbara

Well, the, the use of the Understanding Society data was really critical to our research and I'll tell you why. Because at the heart of our study is the couple level focus. In other words, we didn't want to look at just what women report feeling their attitudes or what men report feeling, their attitudes. But we wanted to look within married couples to see, see the relationship between the gender role attitudes of both partners and their joint educational levels. And there are very few data sets out there which allow us to take this couple level analysis. Because what's unusual about understanding society data is that it collects information from both partners in the household. In other words, both partners get to report on their own attitudes, their own behaviours, their own characteristics. And we are not reliant upon information from one partner only.

Chris

Sara, moving on to you, the paper obviously talks about this gap between what people believe about equality and what they actually do. What's your perspective on the challenges that we face in closing this gap?

Sara Reis

I think there are two important things that really shape people's behaviours more so than attitudes, perhaps, and we've, we've alluded to, to both in, in this conversation. So there's the gender norms, which as we've seen, are very important in determining how people end up behaving. So the expectations that we have on what women and men are good at, what they are expected to do and all of that. So that's really important. But then we also have the structural constraints or enablers that Barbara already mentioned. So the way that our labour market is organised, the expectations of employers regarding their employees in terms of flexibility of work that is offered or not, long hours that are expected or not to be put in, but also things like maternity leave and paternity leave that is available for parents in particular, the, the way that the child care system is, is organised, is it affordable, is it available? And all of this really shapes as well how couples organise housework, how they organise paid work and also how they organise childcare and child rearing. People don't act, they don't make decisions within a vacuum. It is very much they're people's decisions. People's actions are very much shaped by the environment in which they are in. And this environment is, is made up of these gender norms plus the public policies that, that really shape all of these things. And I think it's really important. I know Barbara's research focuses on housework, but I think it's interesting to, to look also at how a couple divides child rearing and perhaps how the initial expectations or the initial intentions might differ from what actually then happens in practise when the, when the baby arrives. Because it is at the point of a child's arrival that the unequal division of housework and childcare really starts to open up. So for a lot of couples, they may have started with an intention to do these things equally, but then the reality is different. And that is partly to do with the fact that we in the UK still have a poor system of parental leave with one year maternity leave, but then just two weeks of paternity leave really polarises the carer and the breadwinner. So it really encourages usually the mother to focus on caring for a child and then the father to really maximise his earning power to make up for that drop in, in the mother's earnings. And we know that this is really important because these initial patterns of caring and paid work, really, they tend to stick and they tend to set the tone for how then a father is involved, how much a father is involved in child rearing, and by extension then how much time the mother has to engage in paid work and to really progress a career and so on. So it's really important to get this first few months of a child's life right in terms of allowing fathers to be more involved so that they can, I suppose, walk the talk when it comes to egalitarian attitudes and practises. But it's also worth mentioning that gender norms are really important to take into consideration. We know that couples don't always organise care and paid work in the most efficient way to maximise or to protect the family financially. Sometimes it actually runs counter what will be,

what will make most sense financially. But gender norms in terms of who should care for children or who should do most of the housework, really still, I suppose, are very sticky. And I think an interesting example was during COVID there was some, some research conducted on couples, on parents and how they reorganised their housework and paid work in the face of lockdowns, in the face of the fact that many people lost their jobs because of the lockdowns and were furloughed. And so there was this research conducted on different couples and how they behaved when one of them lost their job. If it was the mother who lost her job, she would do twice as much housework and childcare as her partner who continued to be in paid work. But if it was the father who lost the job, then he would do the same amount of childcare and housework as the mother, but the mother would obviously continue doing that and her paid job on top. So I think it's really interesting to see that couples don't always behave as we would expect if there were no sort of gender norm constraints.

Barbara

Thank you. That's so interesting. And I wanted to follow up on Your point before about the child care and the parental leave, because one of the things that we've noticed in our research is in addition to what you said, that the stage at which the first child is born, that could be a real turning point for a couple. I absolutely agree with you there. I think it's also super important to also put into focus the long term impact on housework of parenthood, because we know that housework is actually a major component of domestic labour. It's even much larger than child care when you look at people who have children under the age of 15. So what you're saying is really interesting because you're suggesting that maybe if men are more involved immediately after childbirth and they stay at home longer, maybe they take a longer paternity leave, that might have long lasting implications not only for their connection with the child and how active they are in child care, but, but maybe also in terms of how active they are in terms of contributing to housework, which would be kind of a double win because you'd gain on the childcare and the housework, which is so important in terms of time.

Sara Reis

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. That's. Well, I think that the evidence is a bit mixed because obviously you're absolutely right. There's a big component of housework within child rearing. I suppose it's not just minding a baby or minding a child, but it's all the extra cooking, feeding, changing nappies that it entails. I think what works best, and I think we know this particularly from countries that do more egalitarian parental leave systems, particularly the Scandinavian countries, is that it tends to work better when fathers have their own parental leave entitlements that are non transferable to the mother and that allow them to spend time minding the baby or the small child on their own, which means that they need to do all the fun bits of child care, but also the not so fun bit. And it's about encouraging, designing the policies that allow families who might hold already those egalitarian attitudes and helping them really to make choices that are more egalitarian, to really match those attitudes.

Chris

And there's been some other research using Understanding Society showing that the shared parental leave System introduced in 2015 in the UK, that that isn't being taken up.

Sara Reis

That's right. So we know that it matters very much how the parental leave, paternity leave and maternity leave are designed as a system. So in order to encourage parents, but fathers in particular to take up maternity leave or parental leave, there are two things that need to be designed into the system. One is it needs to be well paid or it needs to be adequately paid to a level that it allows people to take it and not suffer financially too much. And the other is that it needs to be for the father in particular or the second parent, it needs to be non transferable. So they need to have, particularly when it comes to parental leave, they need to have some time or some entitlement that is allocated specifically to them and that will be lost if they do not take it up. Because if we have a system where parental leave can really be shared, however the parents choose, what tends to happen is that the mother stays at home with the child in the first few months and then the other parent, the father, usually really maximises his earning power so that they can make up for that fall in income because of the mothers taking maternity leave. And so those two things need to happen. It needs to be well paid and it needs to be non transferable, allocated to the father. And at the moment, in the uk, while we

have maternity leave, which is up to one year, it is badly paid, I would say, for sort of comparable developed countries or wealthy countries, because it is paid for 39 weeks, but at a flat rate. That is the equivalent of half of the minimum wage on full time. So it is a major issue as well for mothers and for parents in general to really make ends meet during that period. And for fathers, what we have is two weeks of paternity leave. Two weeks is really insufficient to really establish caring patterns and really involve the father into the caring of a new child. And then there's the shared parental leave system. The way that it's designed is that the mother can transfer some of her maternity leave to the other parent. So ineffectively, it has a very, very low take up. I think it's only around 2% of couples who use this shared parental leave, because it is very complicated to administer because you need to have the two employers on board. And effectively what you're asking is for the mother to give up on her entitlement and transfer it to the father. And again, because it is so badly paid, very few couples will be in a position where they can really do this and take up this entitlement. So what we need is really, we also need to understand that maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave serve different functions. So maternity leave is very much about for the mother to establish that first bond with the child, but also to recover from childbirth. And then we have paternity leave, which in UK law is for the father to support the mother right after birth and then we have parental leave, which is about the caring for the child. And that bit really should be more equally shared. So there should be an entitlement to the mother and to the father. There is non transferable again between each other so that they both have their own entitlement to parental leave. So it's also about understanding how these different components serve different functions.

Barbara

Thank you, Sara. That's so interesting. I also wanted to add to that discussion, getting back to the idea of gender norms, because I think part of the problem of why we have seen in, in a lot of different contexts that fathers do not take up the paternity leave or part of the parental leave that they might be able to make use of is on top of the bureaucratic issues that you mentioned. Also, I think that given current gender norms and given the expectations that we have about being at work for long hours and being dedicated to work for fathers, I think that some fathers may be fearful that if they take extra extensive paternity and or parental leave that that's some sort of signal to their employer or to the labour market that they are not really committed to their professional work or to their workplace in the sense that they are willing to leave for extended periods of time. So I think we need also a greater acceptance as society to, to accept men's active participation as something that's positive for their families and which does not necessarily signal that they are not committed to their workplace.

Sara Reis

Absolutely. This is also where gender norms are really important and I think not just in shaping individual behaviours, but also in determining what is acceptable societally for a father to do. And I think this, this can often be a bit of a chicken and egg situation, can't it? Because if we don't have the policies that enable it, fathers can't start taking it. If the fathers don't start taking it, then it's not normal and it's not something that is expected fathers to, to do. There is a case for policies to also shape gender norms and policies can, can also shape public attitudes. So if we have a better parental leave system, more fathers will start taking them. Particularly when fathers have reached a level of seniority that they perhaps feel more comfortable in taking up these leaves that are available. If that happens, then, you know, it becomes more acceptable for other fathers to do the same and then we enter sort of in a virtuous cycle of it becoming more acceptable. So more parent, more fathers taking it up. And then the expectations and the gender norms also start to shift and Then it just becomes acceptable that a father will take up some time after the birth of a child to care for that. I think that has been what has happened in some of the countries that have adopted these more egalitarian parental leave, sister, father started to take it up and it became normalised. It is tricky knowing what comes first. Is it the shift in gender norms or is it the change in policy? But I do believe that there's also a role for policy to shape norms and to shape public attitudes. And I think we've seen that as well in a different context and in a different area of society. But for instance, in the uk it was very interesting that when same sex marriage was introduced, there were still some pretty negative attitudes towards it in wider society. Fast forward to now, more than a decade after those public attitudes have completely shifted.

Barbara

I was really interested about what you mentioned about workplace expectations and I think this is where the education really comes in. Because one could argue that men who are more educated, who have better working conditions, more stable employment, that they should be in a better economic position to be able to make use of parental leave because they don't have to worry so much about proving themselves or keeping their place of employment as men who have less stable working conditions that might be less well educated. So I was wondering if you were familiar with how parental leave is taken up differentially by the educational levels of men and women in the partnerships.

Sara Reis

There's definitely a divide, perhaps a class divide, between who, particularly the fathers who are able to take parental leave and those who feel that they aren't. And in the current system, it operates almost as a demotivator for others to take it. But at the moment, what we know is that the shared parental leave, the types of couples that are able to take it up, tend to be the ones that are in higher paid jobs. And I would imagine that there's a correlation between higher paid jobs and higher education as well. And so it's the. And even, even when it comes to paternity leave, because it is not paid, it's only the fathers who are better off that are really able to take advantage of that. So it, there is a really a class divide in who takes up parental leave, share parental leave and who takes up paternity leave.

Barbara

Sarah, do you know anything about whether or not in the UK there is policy regarding how housework is outsourced? Because I'm familiar with some research where in some contexts, such as Belgium, they have outsourcing housework vouchers, where in a sense the government subsidises to a certain extent, the outsourcing of housework to third parties, which is possibly another route which may affect the balance or the division of housework as well as childcare within the domestic sphere. And that may have implications for gender equality as well.

Sara Reis

There's no comparable policies on housework in the UK that I know of. Actually, one thing that struck me about in your research was that finding that in couples where the woman is highly educated and the man is highly educated, that the gap in housework is narrowest, but it's not necessarily because men do more, it's that women do substantially less. And I think that really points towards the outsourcing that is more likely perhaps to happen in these couples. And, you know, I couldn't help but think, you know, this outsourcing is usually done to other women who will then conduct this sort of work on a. Usually on a. On a paid basis, but it's sort of still perpetuating the unequal division of housework and caring work. Probably governments find it a bit trickier to encourage the equal division of housework, more so even than policies that encourage the equal division of child rearing. But I think things like flexible working can go a long way as well, and not just for parents, but flexible working as the default. And obviously there are a lot of jobs that cannot be done remotely, for instance, or that have set hours. But making it the default that people can work flexibly, unless there is a good reason, can go a long way of making people's lives easier in terms of combining their personal lives and their family lives and their jobs. If that becomes the default for everyone, then that really takes away the stigma of mothers not being requesting special arrangements because they're not as committed to their jobs. And then I think it also empowers other people, and particularly fathers and men, to also make those flexible requests and to then be also able to step in at home a bit more, which is, I think what we need for gender equality to really happen is for men to step in the home more.

Barbara

Yeah, I totally agree with that. And I'd also like just to add one other dimension, which is that I think there are intergenerational effects as well, because when young children observe, observe their fathers actively taking upon themselves housework in particular, that is a very important factor in shaping the children's own gender role attitudes. And it's interesting that what's more impactful on the children's gender role attitudes is their father's participation in housework, even more than in child care.

Sara Reis

I think that makes a lot of sense. We know children really learn from observation and from role modelling, more so than what we may tell them. So it's really. I think it's really powerful for children to be exposed to their fathers and to other men in their lives to really be doing the housework. I can see how that will have a big impact on their own gender roles and gender norms.

Chris

Thank you, Barbara and Sarah. That's all for this episode. You can find out more about how understanding society data is changing practise and informing policy by visiting our website, [understandingsociety.ac.uk](http://understandingsociety.ac.uk) and by following us on social media. Thank you for listening and remember to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.