

New generations of men and women, inching us ever closer to gender equality



Whenever I watch Marilyn Monroe movies, I'm struck by how childish her voice sounds. There's such a contrast to how adult women speak today. These movies remind me of the huge leap we've made in gender expectations and norms over the past decades. I often wonder what people 70 years from now will say when they look at men and women in the early 2000s.

Things will certainly be different then. We can see how each new generation of university students is a little different from the previous one. This is an idea I heard from LSE's Director, Minouche Shafik, in an [interview](#) she gave when she was Deputy Managing Director at the IMF. I agree.

People my age grew up in an era when, despite many advances in women's rights, men still expected to spend less time with their own children than their wives. I run into many younger men today who expect to work hard, but not all the time, and they expect their partners to do the same. They want to have a multidimensional life, and [expect to share in the housework](#) and child-rearing obligations.

Men can have a big impact in gender expectations and norms. Once they understand the value of equality, they can have significant influence on friends, family and employers. "As the dominant group, they are in a prime position to influence cultural and organisational change", writes [Allyson Zimmermann](#).

The importance of this new mind-set cannot be overstated. As [Shani Orgad](#) has shown, the amount of time husbands spend with their families has a tremendous impact on the ability of women who are mothers to participate in the labour force. This was made evident also in the LSE Commission on Gender, Inequality and Power [report](#), which found that "*the unequal distribution of responsibility for the care of children and of the elderly creates dilemmas of work-life balance which are detrimental to women's quality of life, and to women's life chances, across social spheres*".

As we celebrate International Women's Day around the world, this generational change of guard that brings more men and women closer in their work-life expectations gives me optimism, and reinforces my belief that child-rearing is central for equality to happen. There's no escaping the biological fact that women bear children. But beyond breastfeeding, who cares for the offspring is not written in our chromosomes.

I'm not under any illusion that a more balanced distribution of child-rearing duties by couples will by itself bring about gender equality. Reproduction is something that we do as a species. Society, including government and businesses, needs [to step up and do its part](#) to ensure that workers of all genders are able to raise a family. Shared child-rearing obligations are part of a much needed new workplace mentality that will make it harder to justify some of the big gender discrepancies we still find today. Case in point: why exactly did the BBC's former China editor Carrie Gracie [earn less](#) than her male peers?

The recent spotlight on sexual harassment is a sobering reminder of how much we still need to change in the workplace. Unchecked power can be exercised to humiliate and hurt women across all income brackets, industries and countries, as [Sarah Ashwin and Naila Kabeer](#) make evident in their report. While sobering, this moment also highlights a turning point, in which women's accounts of violence and humiliation are no longer dismissed, ridiculed or punished. 2017 may enter the history books as the year when sexual harassment became not ok, not normal, not guaranteed to be hidden from sight.

Regardless of the generational change of guard, we must keep working to eliminate the persistent discrepancies that segregate men and women in different levels of empowerment and opportunity. I don't mind being called a dreamer. I don't know any way to start building a different future, other than visualising what could be different. In my idea of the future, our grandchildren will be looking back in horror at a time when [only 27](#) of the firms included in the Fortune 500 were led by female CEOs.



Notes:

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