

Book Review

Unfinished revolution: how a new generation is reshaping family, work and gender in America by Kathleen Gerson

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Kathleen Gerson's *Unfinished revolution: how a new generation is reshaping family, work and gender in America*, explains how young adults in the United States, who are more committed to gender justice than any previous generation, configure their work and home responsibilities within a social and economic environment at odds with their goals.

This generation came of age as the traditional family was transforming. Lifelong heterosexual sole earner marriages co-existed with single parent families, two paycheck families, and cohabitating adults. This upcoming generation grew up in an era in which women not only moved into the work force but regarded their careers as vital for their family's financial well-being and their own personal identities. Altered gender expectations, less stable marriages, and diminished single earner paychecks influenced their families of origin and continue to sway them as they envision their own futures.

As children these young adults witnessed changes in the gender attitudes and roles assumed by their parents and other adults. This leaves them positioned to assume paid employment, career development, child rearing, and homemaking tasks unbound by past rigid societal gendered prescriptions. The central question of Gerson's research is whether this generation will succeed in establishing egalitarian relationships. Will new patterns for integrating outside employment and work within the home emerge? The obstacles they face are daunting. Conflicting attitudes towards gender roles still exist; stable well paid career tracks are scarce; and many employers exact more time and effort from employees without commensurate remuneration. Conventional nuclear families were established to best accommodate an industrial capitalistic system, not to support an egalitarian distribution of home and work responsibilities be-

tween men and women.

Gerson interviewed 120 U. S. American men and women between the ages of 18-32. She wished to learn whether they might complete the country's gender revolution with innovative relationships that integrate employment with domesticity. The sample includes 46% from middle and upper middle income families, 38% from working class families, and 16% living in or near poverty. The sample composition also comprised Euro-Americans (55%), African-Americans (22%), Hispanic-Americans (17%), and Asian-Americans (6%). Five percent of the sample identified as lesbian or gay. How she recruited these subjects and how she defined their socio-economic class is not specified.

After an introductory chapter, Gerson's book reports on her findings in two parts. In the first part, she describes her respondents' perceptions of their parents' division of employment and home care tasks. These respondents considered family composition as irrelevant to their family's well-being. Whereas dominant discourse in the U.S. may laud heterosexual marriages and disparage single mothers (especially poor women), Gerson's respondents did not favor two parents/guardians over single parenting. What mattered to these respondents was how their parents made decisions about employment and homecare and the consequences of these decisions for family relationships and resources.

Participant responses showed that parents who developed more flexible and equitable gender relationships in the face of fathers' falling incomes were better able to create more financially and emotionally secure homes. In these families the father was better able to accept financial contributions from his wife and involve himself in child care, if not housekeeping tasks. The mother was able to grow in confidence and autonomy through contributing to the financial resources of the family while receiving the support at home to make her outside employment possible. Developing gender role flexibility in the parental relationship was key for some families suffering distress to become more supportive and secure in the long term. But many of the respondents' families could not make these gender role adjustments, resulting in emotional and financial strain. Though 68% of respondents reported a contented early family life, half of these noted that their family's finances decreased and conflicts arose when parents could not agree on equitable strategies to balance paid and domestic work. When career oriented mothers relin-

quished employment, or fathers felt pressured to over-work, family morale declined. When mothers' investment in careers threatened some fathers' need for control, stress reverberated in family life.

In the second part of her book, Gerson discusses how these respondents envision their own relationships and work life. Uncertainty permeates their world. Having learned from their parents' mistakes, the majority of the respondents desire egalitarian relationships which for them translate into shared parenting and satisfying employment for themselves and their partners. They want balance between work and home; and the changed social context opens up opportunities, obstacles, and perils. Marriage is no longer a necessity but a choice; gender awareness has changed the mindsets of many men and women; and job stability, availability, and remuneration have decreased. Holding rising expectations for prospective marriage partners, both men and women view the odds against them to form a committed egalitarian relationship and establish a balance between home and work.

Most women respondents focused on developing strong ties to the world of work for personal fulfillment and as security against impermanent or unhappy marriages. They want to maintain their personal autonomy and resist it being undermined by an unequal marriage. They seek a partner who will equitably share parenting and homemaking responsibilities with them so that they don't have to do it all. Their view of being a good mother includes being a capable financial provider.

Most men respondents eschew being the sole economic provider and the shrinking number of lucrative jobs makes this position necessary, although for Gerson this position seems to reflect an enlightened choice. These men are facing pressure to work longer hours both at work and at home. Under these conditions, many have reverted, or predict that they will revert to a more traditional stance of prioritizing paid work above shared caretaking. Thus they abandon (or I suspect they may never have had) a commitment to an egalitarian marriage. The anticipated clash between the genders is encouraged by institutions that are unresponsive to these young adults' asserted longing for egalitarian relationships which share domesticity and employment.

Yet even with the institutional forces against them, many respondents persist in aiming to form relationships with flexible gender strategies that permit balance and mutual satisfaction in parenting and earning.

They realize that as their lives unfold, they may transition to different family forms in their desire for balancing commitment with personal freedom. In an effort to create a balanced life and cohesive relationships, some consider earning less in order to have a more flexible schedule; patching together part-time employment with part-time self-employment projects; and bringing work home during regular work hours.

Gerson concludes that dominant discourse concerning the breakdown of traditional nuclear families and the associated moral decline is not born out by her study's findings. Rather, young people value family processes that allow for gender flexibility, child well-being, personal growth and self-reliance along with family cohesion. Economic and social policies that compliment only traditional families need to change to support all types of families, including egalitarian marriages which have lower rates of divorce. For example, Gerson suggests changing the structure and time frame of paid work to allow employees greater flexibility; providing health insurance to part-time workers; and creating respectful work environments that allow for this generation to meet their own family responsibilities. Similarly, there needs to be institutional restructuring to care for children such as universal day care; public pre-school programs; and paid, nontransferable, parental leave for fathers. Rather than promoting traditional marriages, she advocates governmental policies to help parents integrate work and caretaking in an equitable way. Not questioned is whether the personal autonomy and commitment that these couples extend to each other will translate into a more revolutionary outcome for others outside their relationship (e.g., co-workers, friends, and strangers).

The author's findings are much more nuanced than can be communicated in a brief overview. For example, Gerson recognizes that there are those for whom egalitarian coupledness is neither desirable nor socio-economically possible. The author is an adept writer, often employing the insights of her respondents in a poignant manner. This book is written for a popular audience. Thus the methodology is not articulated fully and this is problematic for those interested in more rigorously analyzing her arguments and conclusions. In spite of the diversity of the sample, her conceptualizations appear heavily weighted toward white, heterosexual and solidly middle class experiences. Though the author

recommends significant macro policies changes, she may not go far enough given the lack of living wage jobs even as economic productivity rises and the wealthy consume this growth. Perhaps a work week limited to two or three days, remunerated appropriately by sharing economic growth with employees, would allow workers, coupled or not, more “free time” and better pay. With such radical workplace restructuring, young adults would likely find it easier to establish work- home balance and egalitarian relationships. In summary, this book succeeds in offering a big picture of how young people strive to integrate, share, and balance their work at home and in the workplace within a very changed social climate and harsher economic landscape.

Biographical Note: **Susan Weinger**, Ph. D., is a Professor in the School of Social Work at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan. She has conducted research concerning marginalized populations both in the United States and in Cameroon. Her teaching areas include social work practice with individuals, practice with women, and multicultural awareness. E-mail: susan.weinger@wmich.edu