The "Smooth" Trap and the "Difficult" Concession: A Study on the Gender Disparity Dilemma in Full-time Parenting

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Abstract. This paper examines the gendered experiences and social perceptions of men and women who choose to become full-time parents. While the concept of shared childcare is increasingly promoted, the reality of leaving the workforce to assume this role remains deeply stratified by gender. The research investigates the divergent attitudes, challenges, and societal positions faced by stay-at-home mothers (SAHMs) and stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs). The analysis reveals a critical paradox. For women, the path to full-time parenting is socially accepted, often viewed as a natural extension of maternal duty, yet it leads to a "smooth trap" of career penalties, economic dependency, and a loss of individual identity. Conversely, for men, the choice is often seen as a from traditional masculinity, facing social stigma and isolation. However, beneath this "difficult path," SAHFs often experience a "concealed privilege," including a more lenient career penalty and potential for praise, preserving their long-term socioeconomic advantage. The study concludes that true gender equality in parenting is not achieved by merely increasing the number of full-time fathers, but by dismantling the structural and cultural norms that make full-time Parenting a gendered and penalized choice. Policy recommendations include promoting egalitarian, non-transferable parental leave and challenging rigid gender stereotypes.

Keywords: Full-time parenting, Gender division of labor, Maternal wall, Gender equality.

1. Introduction

The family is the basic cell of society, and family education is the initial field that shapes individual values, behavioral patterns, and social roles. Among the many dimensions of family education, the division of roles of parents, especially who leads the daily upbringing of children, profoundly reflects and reproduces the cultural script of society regarding gender. For a long time, the gender division of labor pattern of "men outside and women inside" has naturally and primarily assigned parenting responsibilities to women, resulting in a high degree of overlap between the identities of "mother" and "caregiver" [1]. However, with the rise of the second wave of feminist movement, the general increase in women's educational attainment and labor participation rate, and changes in social perception, the traditional family gender division of laboris being challenged as never before. This study aims to systematically explore and answer the core question: In the contemporary social context, what are the differences in the internal attitudes and external motivations of men and women when considering or practicing "full-time child-rearing"? What unique problems and challenges do they respectively encounter in this process? More crucially, in the context of society as a whole, is it easier for stay-at-home dads to be accepted and have fewer problems, or is it easier for stay-at-home moms to have a smoother path? By dissecting these questions, this paper attempts to reveal the deep-rooted gender power structure and social cultural norms hidden behind the seemingly equal choice of "full-time child-rearing", and to reflect on possible paths to build a more equal division of gender roles within the family [2].

2. The Gender Gap in Attitudes and Motivations - The Spectrum from 'Responsibility' to 'Choice'

There are significant differences in starting points and psychological motivations between men and women when considering "full-time child-rearing", which form the starting point of all subsequent differences in their experiences [3].

For women, being a "full-time mom" is often placed within a framework woven by both biological determinism and social expectations. Social culture has long built parenting as a "vocation" and core value for women. This "intensive motherhood" ideology demands that mothers devote a great deal of time, energy and emotion to their children, and holds that presence is crucial to children's development. As a result, many women (and their families) view full-time child-rearing as a matter of course, gender-compliant choice, or even an embodiment of a "good mother". There is a strong, internalized cultural pressure behind this attitude [4]. Also, at the real level, women's choice of full-time jobs is often not an active preference but a "passive sacrifice" based on family economic rationality. When there is a disparity in income between spouses, or when childcare costs are high, it becomes the most "economical" option for the lower-income partner (usually a woman) to exit the labor market. In addition, issues such as gender discrimination and the glass ceiling in the workplace have also prompted some women to use the family as an alternative field for realizing their value [5]. As a result, women's attitudes are often mixed with love for children, a sense of responsibility for the family, and a sense of helplessness and sacrifice [6].

The motivations for men to become stay-at-home dadsvery different picture compared to women. The choice of being a full-time male is rarely taken for granted [7]. It often stems from some unconventional, sudden or problem-oriented situations, such as: the wife's career prospects and income are much higher than her husband's; The husband suffers a career setback or is unemployed; Children have special care needs (such as disability, serious illness), etc. In other words, male full-time jobs often require a "strong reason" to justify their deviation from traditional gender roles. Despite the passive element, a considerable number of men who choose to be full-time show greater initiative and reflection. They may actively identify with "egalitarian" partnerships, hoping to break away from the traditional father role and pursue a deeper emotional connection with their children, playing the role of a "new type of father."

When they try to return to work, they face age discrimination, skill disconnection and the preconceived notion of "lack of energy," known as "motherhood punishment," which causes their career paths to sink and their income levels to be difficult to recover [8-10].

Finally, the economic dependence of full-time mothers may translate into a weakening of their say within the family. Full-time mothers may gradually be marginalized in major family decisions, and their labor may be seen as "uncontributing" by their partners or family members, thereby increasing psychological stress and a sense of inequality.

First, in a patriarchal culture, the value of men is closely tied to the ability to support the family. A man who chooses to stay at home and engage in "feminine" parenting is first faced with questioning of his masculinity. They may be labeled as "loafers", "good-for-nothing", "spineless", and subject to strange looks and negative comments from friends and family, neighbors and even strangers. This stigmatizationis their most distinctive source of psychological stress.

Secondly, stacker dads find themselves isolated and lacking a sense of belonging in their social circles, often in an awkward social position. They have difficulty integrating into playgrounds or parent-child communities mainly composed of moms and are seen as "outliers"; At the same time, they are also out of the male social circle centered around colleague relationships, feeling alienated because of the lack of common topics (work, career). This double exclusion leads to a deep sense of loneliness.

Finally, because of the "anomalous" nature of their choices themselves, society's expectations and scrutiny of their ability to raise children are also more stringent. If they don't do well enough, they will be reinforced with the stereotype that men are indeed not fit to take care of children; If they do an excellent job, they will be regarded as "exceptional cases". At the same time, men generally lack

parenting skills as they grow up and have to start learning from scratch, which brings additional anxiety.

In short, the dilemma of stay-at-home moms points more towards "individual development" and "economic security", which is a structural "punishment"; The dilemma of stay-at-home dads, on the other hand, is more about "identity" and "social belonging", a cultural "exclusion".

3. Comparative Analysis of Social Situations - Whose Path Is "Smoother"?

Is it that women who work full-time are having a smoother time in society, or that men who work full-time are facing fewer problems in society? The answer is not an either-or one, but a paradox: the path for women is "smooth" access to adversity, while the path for men is "difficult" access to the privilege of possibility [11,12].

3.1. The "Smooth Trap" of Female Full-time

On the surface of social acceptance, the path for women to become full-time mothers is indeed "smooth". This smoothness is reflected in the "green light" of institutions and culture, as well as the relative availability of community support. For instance, social norms, family expectations, and even certain policies (such as short maternity leave) are tacitly allowing and even encouraging women to return to their families. There is no cultural resistance throughout the process, as if it were on a pre-set track. Also, most full-time moms have mature "mom circle" communities that offer emotional support and experience sharing, reducing the sense of isolation during the process [13].

However, this "smooth" nature is a trap. It smoothly guides women to give up their social capital and economic independence in the public domain and smoothly pushes them into a private domain whose value is underestimated and whose future development is blocked. It is a "blessed downward mobility". Society's attitude towards stay-mother is "understanding and forgetting" - understanding your choices and then forgetting your social presence as an independent individual.

3.2. "Difficult Privileges" for Male Full-time Workers

Instead, the path for men to become stay-at-home dads is full of thorns and "difficulties". This hardship is reflected in cultural "red lights" and the lack of support systems. They have to constantly fight against deep-rooted gender stereotypes, explain and defend their choices, and bear immense social pressure. Also, the lack of parenting guidance communities for fathers in society makes stay-at-home dads feel out of place in parent-child Settings.

However, beneath this "difficult" facade lies a kind of structural "preferential treatment". Society has higher expectations of men's careers, so when they decide to return to work, the career gap may be interpreted as "a special life experience" or "responsibility to the family", and their abilities are relatively less questioned. They tend to reintegrate more quickly and even use the experience to shape the image of a "new family-oriented goodman," which can be a plus in some industries. At the same time, stay-at-home dads often attract extra attention from the media and society and are portrayed as paragons of "enlightened" and "progressive". This "rarity makes things valuable" effect gives them a certain symbolic capital and psychological compensation. Finally, because their choices are seen as a kind of "sacrifice" or "support for their wives", they may still have a significant say in family decisions and even receive more respect and gratitude from their wives for their "unconventional efforts".

Therefore, in comparison, although it is difficult for men to start full-time, society reserves out and potential honorific compensation for them; While women have a smooth start, the cost is often permanent damage to their careers and long-term obscuration of their individual value. In the long term, the "problems" faced by male full-time jobs are more temporary and cultural, while those faced by female full-timejobs are more structural and economically devastating.

4. Systemic Breakdowns: Building a Culture, Institution, and Individual Path for Equal Parenting

4.1. Cultural level: Deconstructing Stereotypical Narratives and Rebuilding Consensus on Parenting Values

Culture is the incubator of gender norms and the primary battlefield of change. Launching a profound cultural narrative revolution to undermine the social legitimacy of the rigid division of labor pattern of "men outside and women inside" [14].

Critical essentialist discourse, advocating parenting as a human responsibility: First, a systematic critique of the biological deterministic narrative of "maternal nature" is necessary. This narrative essentially and naturally attributes the responsibility of parenting to women, forming the ideological basis of the unequal division of labor. People need to emphasize through public discourse, media propaganda and gender education that while parenting requires love and emotion, its specific skills and practices are acquired social behaviors rather than innate instincts of women. Likewise, it is necessary to deconstruct the single template of the "breadman" as the core of masculinity and promote that emotional provision and care are also indispensable components of the fatherhood identity, a "human responsibility" to shape the sound personality of the next generation, rather than a gendered "vocation" [15].

Reinventing public discourse and enhancing the social prestige of care: Society must reevaluate the great value of unpaid care within the family. The complex skills, emotional labor and strategic management capabilities required by full-time parents (both male and female) in child development, family management and emotional maintenance should be vividly demonstrated through documentary, public service advertisements, news reports and other forms, and elevated to the same level of importance as market labor. At the same time, the media should abandon thesensationalist or satirical framework of "stay-dad" and instead normalize it as a positive and responsible family choice, breaking down the public's cognitive barriers.

4.2. Institutional Level: Build Support Networks and Pave the Way for Equal Participation

The transformation of cultural concepts requires solid institutional support to translate the idea of equality into practical paths. Governments and businesses should be co-builders of a "family-friendly" society.

One of the most effective policy tools is the design of equal, non-transferable paid parental leave. For example, setting up a "father quota," which is a paid leave specifically designed for fathers and not transferable to mothers. This would enable fathers to be deeply involved in parenting in the early stages of their babies' lives, both economically and temporally, rather than merely as "helpers". Practices in Nordic countries have shown that such policies can significantly increase fathers' engagement in parenting and gradually change the stereotypes of employers and society.

Build a full-cycle support system to safeguard the right to development: Policy care should run through parents throughout their careers. On the one hand, Developing a public childcare service system that is inclusive and of high quality, so that "full-time" is no longer a forced choice for families under the pressure of raising children, and create real possibilities for all parents to balance career and family. On the other hand, it is necessary to establish a sound support mechanism for parents' return to work, including free skills training and career planning counseling for career breaks, as well as legislation to guarantee and promote flexible arrangements such as flexible working hours and remote work. This will not only reduce the intensity of the "motherhood penalty", but also eliminate the concerns of men choosing to work full-time.

4.3. At the Individual Level: Practice Family Democracy and Bring about a Revolution at the Micro Level

Engage in consultation within the family based on will rather than normative division of labor: Encourage partners to have candid and democratic family meetings before and after childbearing.

The division of labor should be based on the actual income potential, career development stage, personal interests and strengths of both parties, rather than the default gender script. This requires both parties to view the family as a "project" that needs to be jointly managed, and through continuous communication, dynamically adjust the distribution of responsibilities to ensure a balance of power and responsibility.

Men's Breakthrough and Women's Vigilance: Men need to take the initiative to break out of their emotional and skill comfort zones, not only to undertake "fun" companionship tasks, but also to take the initiative to learn and take on "invisible" emotional labor and daily chores such as child health care, emotional management, and home-school communication. For women, always be on guard against the "smooth trap", consciously maintain their financial independence and career continuity, and even if they choose to work full-time for a period, they should remain connected to the workplace, share the family's financial burden with their partners, and position themselves as "potential co-breadwinner" rather than a permanent "caregiver".

5. Conclusions

This study, through a systematic analysis of the attitudes, predicaments and social situations of men and women regarding the issue of "full-time child-rearing", has drawn the following conclusions:

First, the gender order shapes and differentiates the entire life cycle of men and women becoming full-time parents in a powerful and covert way. From the initial motives (for women, responsibility and sacrifice; for men, choice and transgression), to the core challenges in the process (for women, value annihilation and career punishment; for men, identity questioning and social isolation), to the final social positioning and way out, all are deeply imprinted with the inequality of gender power.

Secondly, the answer to the question "Whose path is smoother," reveals a profound paradox in the contemporary process of gender equality. What appears to be "smooth" (the female path) may lead to systemic predicaments, while what appears to be "difficult" (the male path) may contain structural privileges and fallbacks. This fully demonstrates that true equality does not lie in an equal number of men and women choosing to go home and take care of children, but in the fact that individuals are not unjustly punished or distorted rewards for their gender, no matter what choice is made.

Ultimately, an ideal society is not one with more stay-at-home moms or stay-at-home dads, but one where "stay-at-home parenting" can truly strip away gender labels and become a free and equally respected individual choice based purely on family needs and personal will. Only when the pressure, cost and opportunity perceived by men and women in the face of this choice can say that gender equality has truly taken a big step forward in the field of family education.

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