



The NEW

battle for EQUALITY

There have been many casualties of Covid, and one of them is equality, as women shoulder most of the domestic load and have been more adversely affected economically. Mary Ann Sieghart looks at why, and what needs to happen next

We're well into the second decade of the 21st century, so why did it feel as if someone pressed a time-shift button when the Covid-19 pandemic struck? Within a matter of weeks of the first lockdown in 2020, we seemed to lurch back about 70 years. Lots of women lamented that it felt like being a 1950s housewife, except worse, if you had the added responsibility of holding down a job, too. Suddenly, many women were expected to produce three meals a day, as well as bearing most of the burden of home-schooling. While male partners were often working from home almost undisturbed, women were doing the vast majority of the unpaid work.

According to a *Guardian* survey earlier this year, more than half of British women believed that women's equality was in danger of going back decades, at work, at home and in society.

And this sense of inequality was being reinforced at the highest levels. A government advert released in January 2021, exhorting us (once again) to 'Stay home. Save lives', was pulled after an outcry that it was sexist. It featured illustrations of women cleaning, teaching, ironing and looking after children, while dad lounged on the sofa. It's as if the stress of the pandemic dragged us back to ancient stereotypes that were still lurking in our unconscious brains. The only surprise was she wasn't making him a martini and bringing him his slippers!

When the UK was first locked down in March 2020, I naïvely assumed that fathers would step up. Forced to share a home with their children all day, they would see for themselves the myriad tasks of childcare, home-schooling and domestic work that needed to be done, and would split them equally with their partners, particularly if those partners were also working from home. Silly me.



anxious or depressed, according to a huge national survey conducted by University College London, and during the lockdowns, they were much more likely to be suffering major stress. All these factors were worse if they had children.

Felicia Willow is interim chief executive of the Fawcett Society, which campaigns for gender equality. She says: 'All of the inequalities that were there beforehand have been made worse by the pandemic and by the policy response. What we're expecting to see when the furlough scheme comes to an end is that the redundancy rates of women will be considerably higher than men, because they are in the sectors that aren't going to be able to just bounce back. The impact of the pandemic has been this massive step backwards.'

So why has the pandemic taken us so far back? Why did most couples assume the man's job was more important than the woman's; that he could work undisturbed

while she had to take on most of the home-schooling, childcare and domestic chores? Well, however far we've moved superficially towards equality between men and women, there is still a huge authority gap between the sexes. What this means is that we still instinctively take men more seriously than women. And if we do that, we're going to think their careers are more important and that they must come first when a choice has to be made.

Most men still think their jobs are more important than their partners', because they think they are more important than their partners. Most men still believe they are more intelligent than women, that their views should carry greater weight and that men's interests are more significant than women's. Football versus embroidery? No contest! Often men don't realise they're behaving this way because their bias is so ingrained. But until we acknowledge the existence of the authority gap, we're not going to make much progress in narrowing it.

The trouble is, it starts so young. Ask British parents to estimate their children's IQ and they put their sons', on average, at 115 (which, in itself, is hilarious, as the average is 100) and their daughters' at only 107, even though girls develop faster, have a bigger vocabulary and do better at school. No wonder, then, that adult men estimate their own IQ, on average, to be 110, while adult women put theirs at 105. Yet, as we know, men's and women's IQs are, overall, identical.

Another reason for the authority gap is that men are more likely to be over-confident and women under-confident. That not only comes from the attitude of parents, but also from peer pressure that encourages boys to boast and compete

In fact, the *Guardian* poll found 70% of mothers did all or most of the home-schooling, 73% did all or most of the laundry and more than 60% did all or most of the life admin, food shopping, cleaning, tidying up, childcare and cooking. What did the men do? Generally speaking, they took the bins out.

As a result, many women, particularly mothers, were pushed perilously close to the edge. When the charity Pregnant Then Screwed set up an SOS (Scream or Shout) line to support mothers during the lockdowns, they recorded much of the desperation. The messages they received included:

'I have hit my mummy limit!'

'Please, please, please, make this stop! I just can't keep going.'

'We told him he couldn't go to school that day. He ran away from us and buried himself in bed, sobbing, just as he'd seen me do on the kitchen floor.'

ADDED STRESS

At the same time, women have suffered more at work than men as a result of the pandemic: some people have called it a 'shcession'. Working mothers were nearly 50% more likely than fathers to have either lost their job or quit during the first lockdown, according to the Institute For Fiscal Studies. And the Fawcett Society found that 35% of working mothers lost work or hours due to a lack of childcare support. Many more women work in sectors badly hit by the pandemic, such as retail, hospitality, beauty and tourism. The closure of Debenhams and Arcadia alone led to 20,000 women losing their jobs.

No wonder women's mental health has suffered so much more than men's. They have been more likely than men to feel

Most men still think their jobs are more important than their partners



Talking point

with each other, but punishes girls for doing the same. Women and girls are rewarded for being modest, self-deprecating and admitting vulnerability. Confident women are often disliked, by other women as well as men. Look at the adjectives we often use about them: 'abrasive', 'strident', 'bossy', 'shrill'; words we hardly ever apply to men.

SPARK OF HOPE

It's time that we changed the way we see and treat each other. As Felicia Willow says: 'I've often been the most senior person in the room, with another woman who's also senior, but we've still been spoken over, we've still been talked down to, we've still had our authority questioned. It's everywhere. And it's really insidious. I think we have a culture that is blind to it, but it's behind so many things.'

We need to talk about this and examine our behaviour. But first people need to notice they're doing it. 'I have seen men, who haven't been aware of it, have their eyes opened and then see it

everywhere,' says Felicia.

So let's help men see this authority gap for what it is: an outdated product of social conditioning.

Then, if we could only establish a genuinely equal team spirit between working couples, we could

see a spark of hope coming out of the pandemic. For if the past 18 months have shown us anything, it's that, in many jobs, we can work just as productively at home and during the hours that suit us.

An increase in flexible working could be a real boon for women, particularly those who have caring responsibilities. And it suits men rather well, too. Research shows that fathers who work flexibly are more satisfied with their work-life balance and are less likely to leave their jobs. And their

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Let's shake off old stereotypes and see ourselves as equal partners
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partners are nearly twice as likely to advance in their careers compared with the partners of men who don't work flexibly.

So, once this is all over, let's press that time-shift button again, in the opposite direction. Let's shake off those dusty old stereotypes and start to see ourselves as equal partners, with equal worth and deserving of equal respect. Let's have those difficult conversations and try to open the eyes of the men in our lives. And let's work in a more modern way, where we can. Who knows? If we manage to lessen the authority gap at home, we might even be able to build back better after this ghastly time.

• *The Authority Gap* by Mary Ann Sieghart (Doubleday) is out now

6 WAYS TO NARROW THE AUTHORITY GAP

Your partner should share household chores and childcare equally. Research shows that fathers who do this bring up girls who are more ambitious about their careers.

Bring up your sons and grandsons to respect girls and women equally. Encourage them to read books about girls (just as girls read books about boys), and avoid bias creeping into the chores they do and the activities/games they play. Why not teach boys to cook and girls to mend cars, as well as the other way round?

Tell your daughters/granddaughters that you believe in them. It's amazing how much difference it makes to their confidence in later life.

Affirm what female colleagues say at meetings. If women make up only 20% or 40% of a group, they are less than half as likely as men to win approval from the other members, and are much more likely to be interrupted. No wonder they feel less inclined to speak up.

Make sure that both parents have equal authority at home, so children are less likely to grow up believing men are more important.

Be careful of the adjectives that come to mind with a female colleague. Do you think she is 'abrasive' or 'unlikeable'? If so, this may tell you more about the stereotypes that lurk deep in your unconscious brain, than about the woman herself. If you wouldn't use those words about a confident or assertive man, it's probably unfair to use them about her. □

