

Conversations with the Experts

The Unfinished Revolution



Kathleen Gerson

Bio: Kathleen Gerson is Professor of Sociology and Collegiate Professor of Arts and Science at New York University. She has held visiting positions at the Russell Sage Foundation and the Center for the Study of Status Passage in the Life Course and has served as President of the Eastern Sociological Society and Chair of the American Sociological Association Family Section. Her work focuses on the connections among gender, work, and family life in post-industrial societies.

Professor Gerson's most recent book, *The Unfinished Revolution: How a New Generation is Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America* (Oxford University Press, 2010), examines a new generation's experiences growing up amid changing families and blurring gender boundaries. She is also the author or co-author of four other books and more than 50 articles, essays, and opinion pieces. Her first major work, *Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career, and Motherhood* (1985), continues to inform ongoing debates about women's work and family commitments. Her next book, *No Man's Land: Men's Changing Commitments to Family and Work* (1993), analyzed the pervasive but often ignored changes in men's lives and was chosen by The New York Times Book Review as a "new and noteworthy" paperback. More recently, Gerson teamed with Jerry A. Jacobs on *The Time Divide: Family, Work, and Gender Inequality* (2004), which was named a "best business book" by Strategy Business magazine and was based on work that received the Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award for Excellence in Work-Family Research.

An Interview with Kathleen Gerson
by Julie Weber and Mary Curlew

Weber: What do you mean by the title of your book, *The Unfinished Revolution*?

Gerson: The title refers to a number of aspects of the gender revolution. First, we are not going to turn back the clock to an earlier period, whether or not that past looks appealing to some. The revolution is irreversible. Nevertheless, we are at a moment in time when there is both danger and opportunity, and many uncertainties remain about how best to move forward.

Second, *The Unfinished Revolution* refers to the fact that although some aspects of workplaces and families have changed dramatically, much of the way we think about and structure work and family life remains very much the same. Most families now depend on either two earners or a working single parent for financial security. However, we haven't rethought our caretaking and childrearing models to incorporate these massive economic and social changes.

Third, and most fundamental, these changes in both the workplace and at home have created personal dilemmas about how to resolve the tensions and conflicts between earning and caretaking, especially for young adults. Even though most young people, including many men as well as most women, have embraced notions of equality in careers and childrearing, they lack the options to actually live out these ideals. So there is a clash between the growing desire for flexible, egalitarian lives and the institutional obstacles individuals face.

Curlew: Can you talk about the characteristics or traits of "successful families"?

Gerson: I would begin by saying that the word *successful* is a difficult one to define. It has the potential to lead us in the direction of determining, from the outside looking in, what types of families are better and what types are less desirable. I do believe, however, that certain family and institutional dynamics, as distinct from family types, allow families, given the right resources and opportunities, to resolve the dilemmas and crises they encounter. Families today live in an uncertain world, where their current form may not remain viable over the long run. In talking to people who grew up in these changing families, I discovered that the successful families—or the families that were able to provide their members with the financial, social, and emotional resources they needed to thrive—were families who were flexible in the face of unexpected contingencies. These families were able to respond in innovative and less gendered ways to new challenges. In addition, these families were not stuck in older notions of family roles and behaviors. Gender flexibility, I would add, does not mean that there is only one right way to be a successful family. Quite to the contrary, it implies that there are many ways for families to achieve economic stability, emotional security, and social satisfaction. By dissolving rigid gender boundaries, we are better able to give families the tools, resources, and options to figure out what works best for them and to change in the face of new circumstances.

Weber: Would you please describe the three biggest obstacles that deter men and women from achieving an egalitarian partnership in work and life?

Gerson: Well, it's difficult to confine the list to three, but certainly one of the most important obstacles is the continuing notion, embedded in the structure of the workplace, that the ideal worker does not let anything else come before work, even temporarily. It is especially problematic since most people today can look forward to very long working lives, including periods of time when they will be more and less devoted to work. Another obstacle is the continuance of the male breadwinner ethos. Even though we have generally accepted the legitimacy of women holding paid jobs for financial and personal reasons, we have been very reluctant to redefine what it means to be a successful man. We need to incorporate a broader vision of what constitutes success for men, including involvement in caretaking.

Third, the devaluation of care work is a huge obstacle. The gender revolution has pulled women into paid work, but we have not addressed the other side of that equation. Namely, how do we prioritize the critical work of caring for others that deserves to be highly esteemed and yet remains so undervalued? Finally, if I may add a fourth obstacle, is our failure to rethink how we raise children in a society that needs and depends upon the work and employment contributions of all its adults. How do we expand the notion of childrearing beyond the privatized household and the caretaking mother to the wider society?

Curlew: How are children of the gender revolution thinking about their futures regarding work and family, and do men and women have differing views of what is possible or desirable?

Gerson: The perspectives of these young men and women are among the most interesting discoveries of my research. When I asked young people about what they want and how they want to live their lives, I got a jumble of very contradictory and confusing answers. Men and women, perhaps a bit surprisingly, hold a set of ideals that are very similar. They want a long-term and intimate partnership, which sounds traditional, but they want that partnership to be egalitarian. Yet what they mean by egalitarian is not some rigid accounting on a balance sheet that comes out equal in every respect at the bottom. Instead, they want a flexible relationship, where over time each individual gets her and his fair share of opportunity while also making a fair contribution. Over 80% of my sample of women held an egalitarian ideal, while for men it was closer to 70%, but they are all very aware of the obstacles we have discussed. Given their concerns about the difficulty of combining work and family as well as the difficulty of creating a lasting, satisfying long-term partnership, men and women are developing what I call fallback positions. This is where I find a gender gap, but it is not the gender gap that you would expect, especially given the recent media headlines about women opting out. Instead, I found that the majority of women among all classes and ethnic groups want to be able to support themselves and their children no matter what happens. So they say that their highest priority is to be self-reliant, whether or not they marry.

Men, on the other hand, perceive a different set of obstacles. They are concerned that equality means that they will be penalized at work for fulfilling an expectation and desire to be an equal caretaker at home. Most men want to have a lasting relationship with an employed partner, but they also believe their own jobs and careers

must come first. By looking to their partner to take primary responsibility at home, men are falling back on a neo-traditional model that gives women the option to work but still expects the mother to be the foremost caretaker. Obviously, same-sex couples work this out in different ways, and that raises some interesting questions about how similarly or differently those patterns will look in these families. In general, however, I find that men and women share a desire for a flexible and egalitarian partnership, but their fallback positions diverge. This is where a clash of strategies emerges, and it is not clear how this clash will work itself out as their lives proceed.

Weber: What further research might be helpful for men and women who are seeking an egalitarian relationship where they can work for pay and have a family life?

Gerson: Several things come to mind. The first is straightforward. Now that this generation is old enough to be making these choices, we need to know more about what kind of strategies they are pursuing given this clash between shared aspirations and conflicting fallback positions. Another way to look at this issue, as I think more globally about it, is to ask how we can place these strategies in a larger political, policy, and cultural context. My research reflects responses to an American ethos and public policy regime that stresses individualism. We are thus less likely to focus on rearranging institutional structures to help women, men, and families resolve these conflicts. I would compare that with more explicitly egalitarian policy regimes, such as the Scandinavian countries, where more focus is placed on collective approaches. There is a greater recognition that institutions are crucial to giving people options to achieve their ideals. A third comparison can be made with countries such as Italy or Germany, where the focus is on family well-being but not on gender equality. The developments in these countries are very interesting because they are more likely to be experiencing low birthrates. In these contexts, it appears that young women are rebelling against the notion that family well-being means giving up their own individual and personal aspirations. My firm belief, having done this research, is that equality and family well-being are not in conflict. To the contrary, giving individuals the options they need to achieve their egalitarian goals is exactly what families need to succeed and thrive.

Curlew: How might workplaces support efforts to achieve egalitarian relationships?

Gerson: When we think about work in the 21st century, we need to think about how jobs and careers are structured. Modern workers thrive when they have more flexibility and autonomy in doing their work—not just in how much time they work. We see this starting to happen in some of the more cutting-edge workplaces, such as the high-tech industry, but even here, there is a very long way to go. We also need to add more flexibility to the notion of a career. Younger workers do not expect to join an organization and stay there throughout their work life. Instead, they increasingly see themselves as crafting their own careers, not climbing the corporate ladder or counting on a union to provide job security.

As we discuss flexibility, it is crucial to remember that everyone is entitled to take time at specific moments in their life course when family demands are especially high without facing long-term, irrevocable penalties. When I say everyone, I mean men as well as women. Genuine work and career flexibility means that employees can move back and forth between the demands of their work lives and their family responsibilities without sacrificing either financial security or the needs of their children.

Weber: Can you say more about how public policies can benefit the unfinished revolution?

Gerson: In a sense, we need to rethink the founding principles of our public policies to incorporate the acknowledgment that gender equality is a necessary component of a successful work-family policy. Providing workers and parents with resources to make the life choices they deem best is essential to the well-being of future generations.

Second, it is very important to move away from a notion of individual blame in our political discourse, a discourse that all too often suggests that the changes we see today reflect a decline in values or the disintegration of families. This is clearly not the case. When you talk to people about values, it is clear that both hard work and family commitment remain highly valued. If we are going to make progress in helping people achieve those values, we need to focus less on the morality of individuals and far more on the values reflected in our work and caretaking institutions. The best policies will be clearer to us once we reframe the

political discourse around these issues.

Weber: Do you feel optimistic about these policy changes occurring?

Gerson: Good question. I am an optimist by political conviction since I don't think being a pessimist is going to get us very far. The sociologist in me, as opposed to the political actor, sees it this way—change is deep-seated, widespread, and inevitable. The basic demographic, economic, and social forces fueling change are too large and too powerful for any group to prevent. It is a tidal wave, and the challenge for the future is not to prevent that tidal wave from occurring but to ask ourselves how we can prepare for and respond to it in a positive way. In the long run, I believe we will find ways to respond justly, humanely, and effectively, but in the short run it is likely to be a rocky road.

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.



E-mail: wfnetwork@bc.edu - Phone: 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-9202

www.bc.edu

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation