

# Men are more likely to take advantage of family friendly policies if they think that other men want to do that too.

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*With the advent of more family-friendly workplace policies, more men are taking a greater role in caregiving and child-rearing. But what influences whether or not such policies impact men? In new research which examines how young men's cultural beliefs about gender are relevant for their responses to more family-friendly policies, [Sarah Thébaud](#) and [David S. Pedulla](#) find that such policies are likely to spark men's interest in having a gender-egalitarian relationship if they believe that most other men want that type of relationship as well.*



Young Americans are [more egalitarian than](#) ever. Millennials—more than those of earlier generations—aspire to create relationships in which they and their spouse equally share earning and domestic responsibilities, including the care of young children. Attaining these egalitarian ideals, however, can be difficult given the long and often unpredictable hours demanded by today's workplaces.



Policymakers and academics alike often point to work-family policies as a possible solution to this problem. Policies like paid parental and family leave, flexible workplace practices, and subsidized childcare provide workers with the time and resources needed to achieve a reasonable balance between the demands of employment and the demands of family, thereby making egalitarian relationships—relationships in which each partner contributes significantly to both earning and caregiving—more feasible. In practice however, even when they are available, these policies tend to be underutilized, and this is especially true for men.

## Differential Responses to Work-Family Policies

Why do men and women respond differently to supportive work-family policies? One underlying reason is largely about economics: men tend to have higher paying and higher status jobs than women. On average, men have more to lose by significantly modifying their work schedule to assist in housework and caregiving. A second reason is largely cultural, rather than economic: although the majority of young men today espouse egalitarian ideals, many of them are likely to avoid using these policies if they share the traditionally gendered cultural belief that women, not men, should take responsibility for a larger share of housework and childcare.

However, the story doesn't end there. Scholars have also found that men's preferences and behaviors are often driven by the degree to which they feel a sense of social approval from other men. This suggests that some men may not utilize or may not support work-family policies simply because they sense that other men would judge them negatively if they were to take advantage of these policies. Insofar as men believe that their male peers value paid work as a distinctively masculine responsibility, taking on a nontrivial amount of responsibility for housework and childcare may raise concerns about how they would be perceived within their social circle.

## Measuring Men's Responsiveness to Work-Family Policies

We designed a study that addresses these issues by identifying and measuring the extent to which young men's cultural beliefs about gender conditions their responses to supportive work-family policies. Specifically, we conducted a survey experiment to investigate whether there is a direct, causal effect of having access to supportive work-family policies on young men's preferences for progressive relationships, and whether the strength of this relationship is dependent upon on a man's cultural beliefs about gender.

With this in mind, we focused our study on two types of beliefs: 1) gender ideology and 2) masculinity norms. The first was measured by whether respondents believe that other men *should* have gender-egalitarian relationships. The second was captured by whether respondents believe that other men *actually do* aspire to have gender-egalitarian relationships.

We conducted our survey with a nationally representative sample of unmarried, childless, American men between the ages of 18 and 32. We asked each respondent to express how he would ideally prefer to divide work and domestic responsibilities with his future partner. However, we randomly assigned participants to one of two groups. The first set of participants was told to state how they would ideally organize their future work and family responsibilities under the assumption that supportive work-family policies were in place. Specifically, they were told to imagine that they had access to paid family leave, subsidized childcare, and flexible workplace practices. For the second set of participants, we again asked the men about how they would ideally like to balance work and family life in the future. However, we did not mention anything about supportive work-family policies. We then asked all participants a series of questions about how they believe most men should organize work and family obligations, and how most men their age actually do prefer to organize these obligations.

## What Did We Find?

If there is one key finding from our research, it is this: men's responses to the supportive work-family policy prime are contingent on their personal beliefs about what the majority of other young men want. For men who believe that the majority of their male peers in fact want to take on equal or primary responsibility for housework and/or childcare, supportive work-family policies are associated with nearly 26 percent higher odds of stating a preference for a progressive relationship (that is, being in an egalitarian relationship or being in a relationship where they would be primarily responsible for housework and childcare).

By contrast, we find that men's responses to the supportive work-family policy prime are not contingent on their gender ideologies: their value-laden beliefs about whether men ought to share equally in earning and caregiving. Whereas gender ideology affects many things, our findings suggest that deep changes to men's ideological beliefs are not a prerequisite for increasing men's responsiveness to supportive work-family policies.

## Where Does This Leave Us?

A few key insights emerge from this research with regards to work and family life, masculinity, and the determinants of men's responses to supportive work-family policies. Previous research has shown that men's overall resistance to interventions aimed at supporting dual-earner, dual-caregiver relationships has proven to be a stumbling block to attaining greater gender equality. Our findings add nuance to existing work by demonstrating that men's resistance is far from ubiquitous and is in fact contingent on a man's perceptions of how their male peers are acting. Our findings, therefore, identify a key factor that contributes to persistent patterns of gender inequality in the workplace and at home and, in turn, offer insights that are useful to generating solutions. By designing work-family policies that consider and account for masculinity norms, we may be able to dismantle a key source of persistent gender inequalities in modern society.

*This article is based on the paper, 'Masculinity and the Stalled Revolution', in Gender & Society.*

Featured [image credit: Thomas \(Flickr, CC-BY-2.0\)](#)

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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Sarah Thébaud is assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara and a faculty research associate of the Broom Center for Demography. Her work investigates social psychological and macro-institutional sources of gender inequality in the new economy. In addition to studies on the relationship between gendered cultural beliefs and inequality in workplaces and families, her research examines patterns of gender inequality in entrepreneurial activity, investment markets, and academic science and engineering.



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David Pedulla is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Stanford University. His research interests include race and gender stratification, labor markets, economic and organizational sociology, and experimental methods. His research has appeared in *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, and other academic journals. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology and Social Policy from Princeton University.



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