

THINK TANK NEW IDEAS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Trust a woman to get a man working

The housewife has a more productive role than we may suspect, writes Geoff Dench

A few weeks ago the coalition government proudly unveiled its equal-opportunities credentials. But my research suggests that if it seriously wants to heal broken British society and to rein in the runaway cost of the welfare state, what it should be doing is conducting a thorough and critical audit of the consequences of the existing policies on equal opportunities.

This is not just a matter of recognising that most women do not actually want to strive for parity with men in the job market or that policies to facilitate such competition may cause great harm to family life — these are already widely understood. There are also the effects of these policies on men, as arguments advocating equal pay and positions in the workplace embrace a faulty model of male behaviour and seem about as counterproductive as it is possible to be.

Traditional pre-feminist society saw that men were problematic: most needed to be given specific responsibilities and

roles in families if they were ever to become useful members of the community. This generally entailed a sexual division of labour, whereby men's duties revolved around those tasks which women were least keen or able to carry out. Both sexes benefited from this. Men were brought into more civilised lives and, in the process, became useful to women and helped prevent them from becoming overburdened.

This interdependence was swept away by feminists, who could see only female dependence and male power. They refused to acknowledge differences and insisted that if men and women were playing different roles in society then this must be because men were monopolising the best positions and refusing to do their share of the menial — that is, in families. Hence the equal-opportunities agenda: to achieve identical roles to men's in the workplace.

My research shows that for those men with rewarding jobs, the entry of more women into the workforce simply raises

competition. To keep their jobs, middle-class men are working even longer and harder — and avoiding marriage and family responsibilities more resolutely. So middle-class mothers with careers are heavily overburdened.

Meanwhile, many of those men with access to only boring, low-paid jobs are reacting to the idea that women want to have jobs themselves by opting out and letting them get on with it. Hence the twin surges in male unemployment and single motherhood.

Growing numbers of working-class mothers who want male providers cannot find unattached working men. Many potentially useful male providers have little incentive to work. Thus the net effect of feminist strategy is a serious weakening of family and community life.

It seems that we ignore at our peril the traditional idea that family obligations bring out the best in men. Looking at 2005-8, I have found that just having a wife or girlfriend significantly increases a man's chances of having a job.

Clearly, men with jobs are more likely to find wives or girlfriends; so in my analysis I split the men according to their level of qualifications and likely level of job satisfaction.

For professional men with interesting, well-paid careers that provide motivation, the differential produced by having a girlfriend is relatively small. Thus 98% of male graduates aged 35-49 with female companions had jobs, compared with 85% without: a difference of just 13 points.

For men with no qualifications, who would traditionally have been seen as needing a family incentive to take the sort of low-skilled job available to them, the differential is much greater: 83% of those with a girlfriend have jobs, compared with only 50% of those without.

This is what happens to men when we treat work as something an individual may choose to do, rather than something to be done for the sake of others.

The implication is that traditional housewives are more productive than recent governments appreciate: they

organise and motivate full-time working men who would otherwise quite possibly be state-dependent or drifting into crime.

I would propose that we need to find ways to rekindle interdependence between men and women.

It is easiest done on the men's side, where one of the main obstacles is the comparative ease with which they can now get state support to live on their own. This encourages their development into independent Peter Pans.

It would be good for them, and society, if men were normally eligible for income support and other benefits only if they were part of a family group. Making it harder for them to live alone at state expense would also render them more responsive to the needs of others.

Many single mothers complain they do have a potential male companion but he does not want to give up his comfortable independence. That sort of behaviour should not be subsidised by the state.

The Place of Men by Geoff Dench, a fellow of the Young Foundation, is published next week