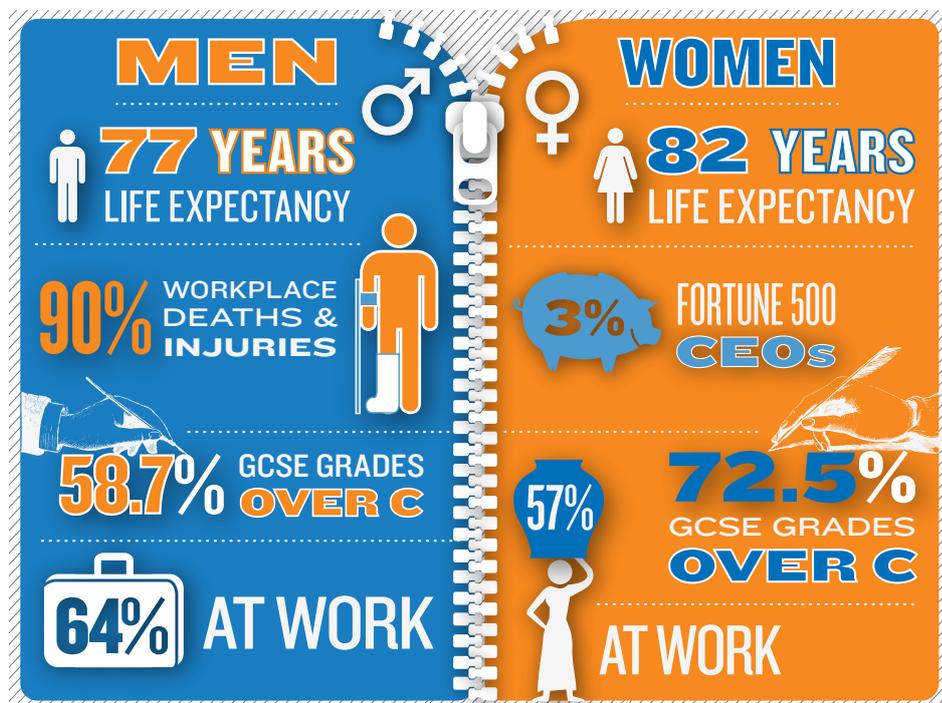


Baby leave for men could close gender divide

The British government is to change the rules on paternity leave so that men and women can better share childcare. Ministers hope this will be a big step towards gender equality at last.



PSHE
CITIZENSHIP



When it comes to gender equality, the Western world has come a long way. In education, girls out-perform boys at nearly every level. They go on to work in almost every kind of industry. Birth control means female lives don't have to be defined by children.

But when family comes into the equation, women are still left holding the baby. Statistics released just this week show that 75% of British men do not take any paternity leave. Until recently, British women had nine paid months off work to raise a child – and men just two weeks.

And that means, for many women, that reproduction puts the brakes on a career. American women make, on average, just 77 cents for every dollar earned by men. As few as 19% of global parliamentary positions are held by women, and only 18 companies in the Fortune 500 have a female CEO.

Now, the UK government is hoping to level the playing field. New rules could

give all couples seven months of joint paternity leave to share between them – a move that will encourage mums and dads to do their fair share of childcare.

For career women who don't want to get stuck changing nappies, this is great news. And according to some, men with high-flying careers could benefit just as much as their female partners from a spell on the home front.

Why? Evidence suggests that although they earn more, men pay a physical price for working too much. Men suffer more stress-related diseases than women, and die – on average – five years earlier. They make up 75% of suicides, and more than 90% of workplace deaths and injuries. Many of those are in society's lowest-ranking jobs – roofers, rubbish collectors, sewer workers – which are overwhelmingly dominated by men.

Men are also less likely to come off well in child custody settlements in divorce. And studies suggest fathers would love

to stay at home with their children – were it not for workplace pressure to do otherwise. In fact, one 'masculinist' writer, Warren Farrell, has compared the man who wants to be a stay-at-home dad to an aspiring female surgeon fifty years ago.

SAVE THE MALES?

Does this show that women have it better? Some argue that, men today are pressured to work in punishing jobs, while women are encouraged to balance work with family. Countless schemes and organisations focus on helping girls, but men have no one to rely on. Women have won the battle of the sexes.

Rubbish, others reply. Men still dominate the highest positions in all societies. They are not expected to bring up children and look beautiful while they pursue a career, and do not have to deal with the sexist legacy of thousands of years of gender oppression. Women's struggle is still very real.

Q & A

Q How do we know parenthood has a big impact on gender equality?

A Today, girls do better than boys at school in almost every subject. In the USA, 60 female students graduate college for every 40 men. By many counts, women in their twenties actually earn more than their male

peers. It all changes at the age of thirty – when many professionals start having kids.

Q What happens then?

A Often, mothers want to stay at home to look after children, even if they have a clear choice. But in many countries it also makes financial sense for the male partner to stay at work. Many women in their late twenties, especially those who are married, also say

that employers hold back from giving them a job or promotion, because they assume they are going to get pregnant.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'The battle of the sexes is over.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Baby leave for men could close gender divide

WORD WATCH

Fortune 500 – The Fortune 500 is an annual list compiled by *Fortune* – a global business magazine. It ranks the 500 most profitable companies in the USA. Most recently, companies headed by female CEOs included PepsiCo, Xerox and IBM.

Paternity Leave – Women have the right to maternity leave: a period of up to 39 weeks off work during the later stages of pregnancy and after the birth of their baby. For most of that time, they must be paid a minimum amount, although many employers offer more money. Now, policy makers are working to give dads the right to some of that leave, too.

Masculinist – Though Masculinists fight for men's rights, they hold a wide range of different opinions: some are opposed to feminism and argue for male dominance, while others advocate gender equality. Warren Farrell began his career as a feminist, but later became convinced that men faced unique struggles, that were not being addressed by the women's movement.

YOU DECIDE

1. Who has it better: men or women?
2. Would you rather stay at home and care for a family, or pursue a high-flying career?

ACTIVITIES

1. In groups, discuss how you think gender has affected your chances in life. Think of five ways that being male or female has shaped who you are.

2. What do you think is the most important moment in the history of women's rights? Choose a moment and write a short article explaining why it matters.

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 NOTES

