Millennial men aren't the dads they expected [1]

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EXCERPTS

Young men today have aspirations of being hands-on fathers as well as breadwinners — supportive husbands who also change diapers. But as they enter that more responsibility-filled stage of life, something changes: Their roles often become much more traditional.

Millennial men — ages 18 to early 30s — have significantly more egalitarian attitudes about family, career and gender roles inside marriage than generations before them, according to a new wave of research from social scientists. Yet they struggle to achieve their goals once they start families. Some researchers think that's because workplace policies have not caught up to changing expectations at home.

"The majority of young men and women say they would ideally like to equally share earning and caregiving with their spouse," said Sarah Thébaud, a sociologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "But it's pretty clear that we don't have the kinds of policies and flexible work options that really facilitate egalitarian relationships."

Surveys of young people that compare those who are childless with those who are parents show a striking difference. Millennial men have the least traditional notions about gender roles of any generation, according to a new analysis from the Families and Work Institute. Only 35 percent of employed millennial men without children said they thought men should be breadwinners and women should be caregivers.

Yet those who had children had different attitudes. Of millennial men who were already fathers, 53 percent said it was better for mothers and fathers to take on traditional roles.

Young college-educated professionals showed the same split. In previously unpublished data from the Center for Talent Innovation, a research group, 24 percent of millennial men without children said they expected to shoulder most of the child care responsibilities. Of those with children, only 8 percent did.

"They say, 'I didn't realize how much of a ding it would be on my career,'" said Laura Sherbin, the center's director of research. "It's what women have been saying for years and years."

Jon Sajdak, 35, an engineer who lives in the New York area, had expected to split caregiving equally with his wife when his daughter was born 19 months ago. "I was raised with expectations that gender roles are old-fashioned," he said.

But that plan fell apart almost immediately. His wife, who had worked full time in finance, was breastfeeding and had a six-month maternity leave, while he had three weeks and said he got "grudging looks" at work for taking it. When he asked for flexible hours, his employer said no. "That was a huge blow for our family," he said. When his wife decided that she wanted to return to work only part time, meanwhile, her employer agreed.

"Hers would because she was a mother who works for a woman who's a mother, so that was understood," Sajdak said. "Mine wouldn't consider it because employers don't see men as caretakers."

Workplace policies seem to play a crucial role. Thébaud was co-author of a study, published in February in the American Sociological Review, that was the first major examination of the effect workplace policies have on the relationship preferences of young men and women. It found that men and women 18 to 32 have egalitarian attitudes about gender roles, across education and income levels. But when faced with a lack of family-friendly policies, most fell back on traditional roles.

Women, Thébaud noted, are more likely to use benefits such as paid leave or flexible schedules in part because they are expected to be caregivers, while men are stigmatized for using them. In the absence of those policies, women cut back on work. Men work more.

"With millennial men and women, too, life hasn't hit the fan, so we're still seeing more idealized expectations," said Pamela Stone, a sociologist at Hunter College in New York. "These are couples that are negotiating a work and family world grounded on an old model that really called for men to step up to the breadwinning role big time and women to step back from employment and into more traditional roles.

"It's not that they've thrown over their ideals; it's just enacting those are much harder, given the workplace and cultural structures they're

encountering," she said.

Kunal Modi, 30, and Anita Gupta, 28, a San Francisco couple who don't yet have children, are hopeful that they can live up to their ideal of an equal partnership when they do. Married for a year, he is a consultant and she works at a startup.

"It's something we constantly talk about," Gupta said. Modi said it was important for men to talk about their goals at work and not just at home, such as by asking for paternity leave. "As much as our worldview has become much more egalitarian, we run into these institutions that still don't reflect that shift in our expectations," he said.

The American Sociological Review study tried to measure how workplace policies influenced people's relationship preferences by surveying a representative sample of unmarried people 18 to 34 and giving them different policy and relationship scenarios.

When offered supportive policies, 95 percent of college-educated women chose an egalitarian relationship, 30 percentage points more than when they were not offered such policies. Seventy-five percent of college-educated men did. Of those who did not go to college, 82 percent of women and 68 percent of men chose an equal partnership.

Yet in the face of constraints that made equality difficult, their choices aligned with traditional gender roles. Most opted for a so-called neotraditional arrangement: The man is the primary breadwinner and the woman is the primary caregiver, though they share some of those tasks. Less-educated women were more likely to choose self-reliance or becoming the sole breadwinner.

Kathleen Gerson, a sociologist at New York University, has found that young men want equal relationships but find them hard to pull off in the real world. It becomes especially difficult as work has become more demanding with round-the-clock hours and unpredictable on-call availability — even as pressures on parents increase.

"Rather than creating more flexible notions about what a career means, there's increasing pressure to have to put in more time at work," Gerson said. "Another paradox of the 21st century is that even as the caretakers of the past, women, have gone to work, the standards we apply to parents are greater than ever."

Thébaud and study co-author David Pedulla, a sociologist at the University of Texas at Austin, suggested that workplace policies might have a greater effect on men if they were specifically aimed at them, such as paternity leave policies that reward men for using them. Another approach might be to create policies that change work for both sexes, such as reining in long hours.

Changes in the way Americans work come more slowly than shifts in personal expectations. But now that millennials are the largest generation in the workforce, they might shape policies that more fully reflect the way they want to balance their lives.

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