

everywomanChangemakers Podcast Transcript

How involved fatherhood can drive gender equality... and why there's no place like home-working

Anna: Progress. It's in the actions we take right now and in daring to think differently. Each one of us can do something to change things for the better right where we are now. And a thousand small things done with intent adds up to real change. For some people, that initial spark becomes a fire. Welcome to the everywoman Changemakers Podcast. I'm Anna, your host. And [00:00:30] every month, I'll be talking to inspiring leaders and activists who are changing outlooks, challenging perceptions, and making a difference in the world of inclusion, business, the environment, sport, travel, and more. We'll be discussing their work, motivations, and vision. And most importantly, how a revolution of one can lead to a positive, powerful change for the many.

Today, we are talking to Adrienne Burgess, joint chief executive and head of research at the Fatherhood Institute, the UK's fatherhood think [00:01:00] tank, whose work for focuses on policy research and practise and looks into the role of fathers in the context within which fatherhood operates in the modern world and also the implications for supported healthy fatherhood on gender equality. So welcome, Adrienne.

Adrienne Burges...: Lovely to speak to you.

Anna: So let's start by talking about the role of the Fatherhood Institute in particular and why research into fatherhood is such an important area?

Adrienne Burges...: Well, when we started off, which was actually two decades ago, we realised, ahead of the trend, I think, that it [00:01:30] was absolutely central to gender equality that fathers be playing an equal role in the care of their young children. We also knew there was a big body of research on child development, even at that stage, which showed the positive impact on children of more time spent with fathers. I mean, it wasn't even quality, it was just time, that that was the big thing. So high levels of father involvement, meaning [00:02:00] father engagement with their children one-on-one.

And then over time, there has been quite a lot of research, not as much, on the impact of involved fatherhood on men. So in terms of their longevity, in terms of their mental health, in terms of developing all kinds of skills that come along with parenting, deferring present pleasure for future gain, all those kind of

things. So we think it's a win-win [00:02:30] and that we needed to bring fathers into the picture.

While there was a huge amount of research on fathers in the academic world, it was very much less well known than research on mothers. And research on mothers was far more prevalent, and that has continued to be the case. So we identify the research and we bring it forward for more public view.

Anna: So, I mean, broadly speaking, how does sort of society and policy support or undermine [00:03:00] this idea of positive fatherhood? Because it does kind of start there, doesn't it? And the expectations are also set up socially. What are the biggest barriers to it at the moment and the expectations that need to change?

Adrienne Burges...: Yes. I mean, culturally, it's absolutely huge. The cultural strictures in a sense against involved fatherhood include the various religions, including of course the Christian religion, which [00:03:30] has designated the Virgin Mary as the primary carer and God as this distant figure who, in the Sistine Chapel, leans across to Adam and doesn't touch his hand. And so that kind of image of the father as this distant and authority figure is there still. But there have been, really since the 18th [00:04:00] century, have been quite strong moves to depict fathers or to publicise the intimate role of fathering.

So there were journalists and people like that who did speak about fathers being close to their children way back in the 18th century. And that has continued. So you have always this kind of cultural battle going on between this kind of public face of fatherhood where fathers were expected [00:04:30] or told that they should be distant. And then if you look at the diaries and the letters, that wasn't the thing. Even in Victorian times, the Victorian father, very sort of distant father, may well have been in the minority. It's hard to tell. But certainly there were fathers who were very involved, changing napkins or nappies, helping wean children. I mean, this has been going on for ages.

Anna: I mean, it's [00:05:00] certainly a narrative that does seem to only really serve the economic status quo, doesn't it? I mean, it has massive implications if you put women as the primary carer and all of these sort of taboos around involved fatherhood. But I wanted to ask you just, even in the modern day, obviously we still have that, that very implicit assumption that women will do the bulk of the childcare, the bulk of the domestic labour. Do you think we've over fetishized the role of the mother and that we still do? And that actually, that's to the detriment [00:05:30] of women. A lot of women kind of buy into this idea as well. And that it's actually a balanced family with equal weighting around who looks after the children that is actually one of the key drivers for gender equality.

Adrienne Burges...:

The fetishization of motherhood is a huge thing. There's a wonderful book by the French journalist and writer, Élisabeth Badinter, who wrote a book called *The Myth of Motherhood*, which was very striking, I found. And she talks [00:06:00] about how the mothers had to be persuaded that this was their primary role. So you'd had children being taken care of by nannies in upper class families. No one thought it was a bad mother if she had that kind of help. You had working class women who were taking their babies around with them. But you wanted them to stay at home. You wanted them, as the industrialization progressed particularly, you wanted to make reproduction [00:06:30] the mother's domain because you wanted to free the men up to go out and do their thing, so that only the mother could do it. And there was health reasons. Babies died. And you did want to encourage breastfeeding.

It wasn't all together a bad thing. It served an economic purpose, and that became more marked during what the great Peter [inaudible 00:06:56] called the process of modernization, by which he means [00:07:00] industrialization. And [inaudible 00:07:03] said that the most dramatic thing that happened to the family during the process of modernization was the removal, and he uses that word, the removal of breadwinners, usually the father, from the household for all of the working day. This whole idea that fathers and mothers and men and women and children all kind of mixed up together gradually start [00:07:30] to separate out. So you've got the father, mainly, as the mothers went back in from the factories into the homes, good health reasons, babies wouldn't die so much. And children, then came the education acts. So children were taken out of the factories too.

And then the trade unions were very much emphasising the role of the breadwinner, the role of the family wage, that one person, the man, could make enough money to support [00:08:00] his family. Now, of course, working class women have always worked. My mother-in-law, in the tenements of Glasgow, they took in washing. These women were never without things to do. They brewed beer inside their own homes. They did all this stuff. So it's not true that sort of women didn't work. Of course they did. But the main breadwinner wage and the one that required the greatest health sacrifices was the man's.

[00:08:30] I was struck by Margaret Mead. I read some of her work, she was writing about the 1930s. And what she said was that no developing society, meaning no society that's on the make, trying to conquer other countries, like the west has been, no developing society ever lets men in to handle [00:09:00] or touch their newborns because if they did, the men wouldn't leave. They wouldn't be prepared to go out and be killed in war. And they wouldn't be prepared to travel the seas and conquer other countries. That keeping men apart from their infants is the first step in their purposeful alienation.

Anna: That's very profound and powerful, isn't it? I mean, I was just going to say that these, [00:09:30] putting it in a historical context, putting most things in a historical context is usually a very, very important thing to do because these are the structures, the stories, the alienations that become normalised, and then they become internalised. And then you don't even really realise what's going on, do you? So you make all these sort of assumptions, you set your lives up in certain ways. Policy follows that, et cetera.

I want just to come to the work of the Fatherhood Institute in terms of would you say that the work that you do is part of the fightback against [00:10:00] that normalisation? That in raising the realities of situations through research, through campaigning, that you can get people, governments, mothers, fathers to think again and to challenge what has been a status quo for, what would we say, sort of maybe a hundred years now?

Adrienne Burges...: Yes, definitely. It has been part of, as you describe, a fightback. But it was already happening in families. So in lots of ways, families have been far in advance of policy. I cannot [00:10:30] think of a study which hasn't shown that variability. So we were part of, if you like, the fightback on behalf of families, I think, who were saying, "This is not really our lives. We're not divided into these very strong gender roles, as much as you think we are."

Anna: There's obviously great positives to engaged fatherhood for both men and women [00:11:00] in terms of family life, women in the workplace, et cetera, et cetera. Yet, of course, for example, the UK's current parental leave system is the most gendered in the world, I think I read on your website. It's obvious that policy isn't really keeping pace with the demand, would you say? And I mean, we'll go on to talk about the lockdown and how that might have possibly acted as an accelerant. But where were we kind of before that happened and why?

Adrienne Burges...: Right. So where we were before [00:11:30] that happened was that even in the UK which, as you say, has had very gendered parenting leave systems, we've seen fathers on the average working day increase their time directly spent engaging with their young children by about 20 minutes a decade. And that's a lot. Over time since the 1970s, when you measure that kind of input, you see that happening. So fathers have been [00:12:00] increasing it. The way they've increased their time with their children has not been through working shorter hours or through shorter commutes, because they don't, not at all. They've done it by trimming time off personal leisure, by trimming time off sleep, and by conducting personal leisure at home. So, I mean, this was, men's leisure, not just fathers, men's leisure during the 20th century moved [00:12:30] into the home.

Homes became more comfortable. You didn't have to go down the pub. You brought the beer home and watched the match at home, in the most extreme

ways. Young men stopped playing golf all day Saturday. So that kind of thing had been narrowing the gender care gap. Mothers had more mechanisation of housework, of course, women and mothers, and that helped them. So they were kind of reducing their input in a strange kind of way, certainly in the home generally. [00:13:00] And men and fathers were increasing theirs. So you had both a gender housework gap diminishing and a gender care gap diminishing.

However, by about 2014, 15, there was an indication from one very influential study, the Multinational Time Use Study, that this gender revolution had stalled. So the gender care gap hadn't reduced much in the five or 10 years since [00:13:30] they'd gathered the data previously. And they were a bit worried about this. "It's clear," they had said, "that we've reached the limit of possibilities in terms of father's nipping time off all their other activities. What has to change is their engagement with the workplace." Because over that period, fathers' engagement with the workplace had barely changed. 90% of them were in employment in paid work, most of [00:14:00] them full-time. The percentages working part-time with reduced hours were not greater. I mean, they were increasing, but they weren't huge, weren't hugely increasing. So they said something has to happen to the workplace or we're not going to get there. We're not going to get any further. And at that stage, fathers of young children were doing about a third of the childcare. In some studies moving more towards half, but mainly a third. Two hours for mom, one hour for dad.

And of course, [00:14:30] largely, this was to do with their engagement with the workplace and the mothers' lack of engagement with the workplace. Everyone sort of says, "Oh, well, mothers would be working more if father..." It's all a fault of the men. But it's not. It's a fault of the whole structures, which don't make it easy for both parents to work full-time or work longer hours. So you've got about a quarter of mothers in any study not in paid work at all. And then another big tranche of them [00:15:00] working part-time.

Anna: You talk about the structures. Give me an idea of some of the most pervasive structures that push men and women into these roles.

Adrienne Burges...: It starts, of course, with the birth of the child, where in this country, the mother has 52 weeks guaranteed leave, nine months that is paid. Six weeks that is very well paid. The rest of it's paid at rubbish levels, but it is still paid. And the father has two weeks, which is the paternity leave, [00:15:30] which is taken at the same time as the mom. So that is, it's really a health and safety leave, paternity leave, just like maternity leave is. Maternity leave in the early first three months is about recovery from the birth more than anything else. And the father being at home for two weeks after the birth is about supporting the mother to recover. Of course, bonding goes along with that. Bonding with the infant can be part of that. [00:16:00] But that's not its fundamental purpose.

What you really need is for fathers to have an independent right to time off from work to care for their children alone, full-time. That's what works. Now, we have this thing called shared parental leave, which is a misnomer. It's transferred maternity leave. The mother owns the leave and she can, in some circumstances, if she and [00:16:30] her partner both fulfil quite stringent employment criteria, she can transfer part of that maternity leave, her first year, to the father. That's really appalling because only about three out of seven couples qualify. So when one asks, "Well, why do not many fathers take it up or not many mothers transfer their leave to their partner?" My first reason is that loads [00:17:00] of them aren't even eligible. Secondly, it's incredibly complicated to do this. People don't know about it. HR departments don't even necessarily give the parents who ask about it the right information. That is really tough.

And then the main reason, apart from its ineligibility, the second main reason is that it is so badly paid. So the mother transfers some of her maternity leave to the dad and he's eligible. And there he is. He could take it. His [00:17:30] employer only has to pay him at £149 a week. So when you look at a country where they've started to make inroads into this very gendered situation, well, obviously everyone talks about Scandinavia. Iceland is the leading country, actually, that's achieved this. They've been very strict. I think they're now five months for mom, five months for dad, and two months for the family to share. [00:18:00] So even if the mother takes the two months for the family to share, she's still at seven months and he's still at five.

Now, that's substantial because what they have is a low differential, if you like, between the leave available to the parents. And when you have that low differential, an employer looks at them and thinks, "Well, he's going to be off work if they have a baby [00:18:30] and so is she," so maternity discrimination is dealt with in one blow. Sweden's hugely successful compared to us, but it hasn't transformed things. And that's because they left the mothers able to take a great deal of well paid leave. And so was potentially a strong differential. So they, I think they have three months, I might be out date, something like three months mom, three months dad, reserved leave. That [00:19:00] if the mom doesn't use it or the father doesn't use his, it's lost to the family. They can't transfer it like in our system, to be transferred from the mother. So it's a non-transferable and that's key.

But there's also still a lot of other leave that the family can share, which is normally taken by mothers. Because when you do that, that's the default. Because of the culture, because of employers, because of women giving birth, all sorts of things. You'll [00:19:30] get this kind of weighting where the mothers take it. As soon as you've got the mothers likely to take 11 months and the father likely to take three, well...

Anna: You set up the imbalance, don't you?

Adrienne Burges...: And of course everyone says, "Oh, but the mothers have to recover from the birth," which they absolutely do. And as I've said, the early leave really is about recovery. So if you look at Iceland again, the mother could take her leave straight after the birth, and mostly will. And there's a recovery [00:20:00] thing going on there. The father will take his later in the year to care for children. That's how you bring equality. And you don't say, "Well, they're not the same, she's giving birth. So we have to give her more." You say, "No, it just has to be timed differently, really."

Anna: Let's talk about COVID lockdowns then. So COVID has, in some ways, redrawn expectations, perhaps not for shared [00:20:30] parental leave but certainly for gender division of labour at home. I mean, in some ways it's reinforced gender division of labour at home and the expectations. So it's been a mixed bag. At this Institute, you did a study called Lockdown Fathers on this. And I'm just interested to find out what your most surprising findings were, and for you, what the most important findings were.

Adrienne Burges...: The way mothers and fathers and men and women, even, engage in home-based work, it did not throw the burden back on mothers, [00:21:00] just like this lockdown has not been about mothers or women losing their jobs. There's a recent thing out from the ONS which is showing this really clearly. I reviewed all the studies. Fundamentally, everyone predicted, and that's what got the headlines, that oh, women and mother, was going to throw everything back, right? And then they would report their findings and say mothers were doing more during lockdown.

Now what those narratives did was [00:21:30] to reinforce the idea that nothing you did could bring about change in terms of gender relation. Very, very damaging. And they twisted their findings to give you that narrative. Some of the researchers, I would say, actively did this. Not the researchers so much as the organisations that used their research, twisted them. Yes, mothers did more during lockdown. Mothers were doing more before lockdown, right? They were far less engaged in the workplace [00:22:00] either in terms of hours spent or whether they were engaged in the workplace at all, before the lockdown. That continued pretty well undiminished. There was a couple of studies showed a slight likelihood in the early lockdown of mothers reducing their hours a bit more than fathers did to cope with childcare. But trust me, it was not much. They made the most of it.

And then, as the ONS has shown over time, that that was not happening. [00:22:30] So what did happen? The story was not told. And that's why we called our study Lockdown Fathers: the untold story. I did review all the other studies because I had to know what was going on. And so we looked at them

and we found that while mothers continue to do more because they had done more beforehand, fathers more than doubled their input into childcare. [00:23:00] They narrowed the gender care gap. Almost all the studies show some narrowing of the gender care gap.

And what they found was that before lockdown, the dads in their samples were doing about 34% of the mother's care. Then they found that during the first lockdown, the fathers' input had shot up to 69% of the mothers' input. So they'd gone up to two thirds, right? They looked again, I think it's later in 2020 or [00:23:30] beginning of 2021, and they found that the fathers' share had dropped back to about 50%. So it had dropped back to half. It had gone up to two thirds. And before lockdown, it had been a third. So that's an interesting pattern. It's going to take a great deal to keep even that 50%.

Anna: Let me just ask you, before we talk about that, do you feel that then the sort of restrictions and limitations [00:24:00] and changes of the pandemic have been a step forward for the experience of fatherhood as a whole?

Adrienne Burges...: Yes. So it has been the most enormous step forward. You remember the researchers that looked at time, said that something had to change in terms of fathers' engagement with the workplace if we were going to continue on the road towards gender equality. And that's of course what happened. So three quarters of the fathers, fundamentally, in our study and its representative and found in other studies, when [00:24:30] the first lockdown hit about three quarters of them were at home full time. So they were furloughed. They'd lost their jobs. Not that many at that stage had lost their jobs, mainly furloughed or working from home. And then you had 27% who were still going out to work, that's of men who'd been in paid work beforehand. That changed everything. There you have in a way, the return to the pre-industrial cottages. The daddies came [00:25:00] home in these huge numbers.

This was extraordinary thing, an extraordinary natural experiment and transformative. So what we did was to ask them, it's a 33 questions in a questionnaire, a survey that went out to a representative sample through a polling organisation of fathers for children under 12. We asked them all about their partners and their own working patterns. We were able to see what had happened. It's [00:25:30] the fathers' report, but they're probably pretty good on working patterns. We asked them about mental health. We asked them about physical health. We asked them about their relationships with their children. We asked them about time spent with their children. We asked them about various activities. What did they do during this time?

And then we had various types of others. We were able to break it down by socioeconomic class. And we were able to break it down by ethnicity. [00:26:00] We also had a very interesting sample, a sort of semi purposeful sampling really,

of gay fathers. Two men raising a child together full time, a baby. We had 156 of those. And what they reported was also very interesting. So we had that overall, I can just say that even some of the fathers who continued to go out to work, a lower percentage of those but still many, emerged from lockdown feeling closer to their children, feeling that they more [00:26:30] confident in helping them with their schoolwork. Interestingly, the ones who'd spent the most time with their children, who of course tended to be the fathers who'd been at home full time, were the most likely.

Anna: You talked earlier that there has been a slight drop, but obviously big gains. How do we keep it going?

Adrienne Burges...: There's evidence, I'm told, of kind of an uptick in fathers asking for more flexible working and home working and stuff. So what was achieved [00:27:00] was achieved only through more time spent. It's nothing else. It was just the children and their fathers were exposed to each other in more hours of the day, even if the fathers were working outside the home, because when they came home, the kids were all there. So this increase in time brought about transformation in relationships. It also brought about transformation in attitudes and beliefs so that the fathers came out of it, very high percentages of them, saying, "I now [00:27:30] know better than I did before why it's important that fathers spend time with their children. I now know better than before what it takes to run a household and look after children." and that was associated with fathers with reporting better relationship with their partners, which of course makes sense.

What it means is we have to somehow maintain gains in time. We're likely to be able to do this for the more advantaged fathers, [00:28:00] because in our sample, only 3% of the fathers in the lower socioeconomic groups were able to work from home, only 3%. And you had 70-odd percent in some of the other groups. So some remote working. Remote working has advantages because it saves time spent on commuting. And also because, in not all jobs but many of the ones that are at-home desk-based [00:28:30] or in the locality desk-based, if they want to move out to a local workplace, what you get there is flexibility.

So some fathers are on calls and mothers are on calls all day. They have barely any flexibility from nine till five. But the vast majority do. They have gaps, they can stop. They can come out and change a nappy, and they do. They can postpone their start time slightly by taking the kids to school once lockdown eased, and they did. [00:29:00] Fathers will be out and about more with their children if a substantial percentage continue to work remotely from home for even part of the time. Fathers already drop kids off at school. What fathers don't do is pick them up. And what we see is more fathers picking them up, having done a lot of work and scheduled the rest of it for the evening. So that could change things if there are enough fathers out and about.

[00:29:30] And then the flexibility, of course, is important and that you'll want some flexibility. Some fathers say, in our study, that they felt they could discuss working shorter hours once we went back, talking with their employer about shorter hours. They could at least have the conversation. A lot of fathers would like to knock four or five hours off their week and feel they could afford it.

Anna:

It'll be interesting to see what happens with the hybrid working transition as well and if that is embraced by businesses. That [00:30:00] could provide, as you say, that space and that time for men, and for women actually, to be in the home and be in the office. So I'm going to just ask you to sort of sum up what the change is that you would like to see in the way that society sort of understands and supports fathers and fatherhood, and perhaps even how men see fatherhood themselves and whether you feel positive for the future?

Adrienne Burges...:

I would like to see a better parental leave system that doesn't alienate fathers from the beginning and send [00:30:30] them off into the wilds. So something more along some of the Swedish models. Just thinking about that is absolutely crucial. But that sets a culture as well. I would like to be aware when children's books are being written that, for example, fathers cuddling and kissing their children are there, but they're far less there and caring for their children are far less there, whether it's a daddy bear or whatever it is, than females are. [00:31:00] So it's being aware of that if we're writing that sort of stuff, not try sort of honing in just on fathers who are at home full-time, this kind of out of date model. Looking really at and exploring and making visible the very complex ways in which mothers and fathers box care. And I'd love to see that more publicised.

I would love to see the narrative that everything's terrible for women and nothing men do will ever good enough, [00:31:30] I'd love to see that knocked out the ballpark. Because the belief that fathers somehow didn't step up and that mothers were doing it all over lockdown is such a downer for families who know they've been doing things differently, but they just kind of then think, "Oh, well, we must have been the odd ones out. Obviously, most dads weren't doing this." But the main changes I think, and the ones that are more possible, because I don't think our government's going [00:32:00] to look at parental leave anytime soon, I think that a lot is going to be done to employers. Some employers now are joining a band of employers who are giving equal substantial paid leave to new fathers and mothers, independent, use it or lose it, but all their people get it. So that's increasing.

And I think in 10 years, that's going to be the norm. In the fight for talent and it is a fight for talent, they need [00:32:30] to be doing that. But it's not just that. Also that will help reduce their gender pay gap. So if we make it clear to employers that this supporting men's fatherhood and care activities is good for their recruiting of talent and the retention of talent, among women as well.

Women love to stay with an organisation where they see care taking is being depicted as for [00:33:00] men and women. So those kind of arguments will help.

And then on top of that, you've got looking at the hybrid working model. If we just see all or mainly women taking that up, taking up home working and more flexible working, then what we see is a nail in the coffin of gender equality. Because if only or mainly women do it, then the stigma that is already there, has been before lockdown, a huge stigma [00:33:30] against shorter hours working, working from home, that will be reinforced. It won't just be there. It'll be reinforced. And the guys will go back to the office. But if substantial numbers of fathers and men use the hybrid working model and it's made clear and the companies promote it to them. Don't just say parents. Say mothers and fathers. We want you to do this. We will support you to do this. What are your needs?

Anna: Adrienne Burgess, thank you for joining us.

Adrienne Burges...: [00:34:00] It's been my pleasure.

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