

Electricity: The spark behind women's lib

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I have often wondered as a feminist -- yes, men can be feminists too -- what sparked female empowerment in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Why, after millennia of being household drudges, do women now occupy the top ranks of politics and business in many countries?

Some libbers claim that women rebelled against oppressive men and won. Too simplistic. Had men been fundamentally oppressive, they would not so quickly have accepted female empowerment. Universal male suffrage arrived in Britain only in the late 19th century, and within half a century a legislature composed entirely of men gave women the vote too.

India's constitution, framed by an overwhelming male majority, gave women equal rights without any major debate.

This has by no means ended gender discrimination, but the historical trend is unmistakable. Women increasingly come out of the house, join the economic mainstream, increasingly head businesses and ministries. What propelled this revolution? Education and human rights, of course. But a compelling new explanation comes from Greenwood, Seshadri and Yorukoglu of Rochester University.

They say women's rights were sparked by electricity.

They quote Thomas Edison, inventor of the electric bulb, as predicting this. "The housewife of the future will give less attention to the home because the house will need less. She will be rather a domestic engineer than a domestic labourer, with the greatest of all handmaidens, electricity, at her service. This and other mechanical forces will so revolutionise the woman's world that a large portion of woman's energy will be conserved for use in broader, more constructive fields."

In 1890, only a quarter of American homes had running water, very few had electricity and none had central heating. The average household manually lugged 7 tonnes of coal and 9,000 gallons of water round the house annually. A 1945-46 survey of farm wives demonstrated the revolution caused by electric appliances. Without electric washing machines or irons, a woman took four hours to wash and 4.5 hours to iron a standard 38 pound load of clothes. But with electric appliances, laundry took only 41 minutes and ironing 1.75 hours. The study attached a pedometer to the feet of one woman.

When washing manually, she moved of 3,122 ft, but this dropped to 332 ft with electrical equipment. For ironing too, the distance walked dropped from 3,122 ft to 333 ft. Thus did mechanisation and electrification transform a thousand tasks. One study (Lebergott 1993) estimates that time spent on housework fell from 58 hours per week in 1900 to just 18 hours by 1975.

Many rural Indian households still perform household chores manually. This discourages socio-economic conditions where women can move out of the house. Male chauvinism is a social hurdle, but owes something to the need for a division of labour that gets household chores done and brings in income. In middle class households, both men and women can join universities and the work force. Earlier, this was possible only for elite households with several servants. It's now possible for all households with electric appliances. I don't think it a coincidence that women's rights and the use of electricity rose together in the 20th century.

Now, some sociologists say that women remain chained to the house because, under the influence of wicked multinationals, they do more things. Earlier, people bathed only occasionally, used dirty clothes and linen for days on end, had few dishes and pots to wash, and lived in tiny hovels. But today American women are supposedly enslaved by advertising making them feel guilty if their children have old-fashioned or unironed clothes, if every germ in the bathroom has not been vanquished with endless sprays, if they have facial hair or body odour.

I disagree. People have not been enslaved, they have been liberated and are exercising more options. Marketing

history shows that 80 per cent of all new product launches fail, notwithstanding billions spent in advertising campaigns. Electricity is not the sole reason for women's empowerment. I think birth control devices have been just as important. In earlier decades, women were pregnant and/or breast-feeding throughout their short lives.

But while birth control devices may be necessary conditions for female empowerment, they are not sufficient conditions. Men agreed to birth control not out of enlightenment alone but selfish economic reasons. As long as women worked mainly in household farming, men cared little what a huge burden they placed on wives. A pregnant wife with one baby slung to her back could still do household farm work.

Everything changed with the arrival of the modern economy with cash wages. Husbands showed scant respect for unpaid female work in the household, but valued the cash their wives earned. Every additional child meant a loss of cash income when the wife withdrew from the labour market. Suddenly men recognised the value of birth control, and so opted for smaller families. This trend has been established by serious research. Thus did electricity, birth control and the cash economy create economic and social conditions that facilitated female empowerment. It is a fascinating story.

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