

Early men and women were equal, say scientists

Study shows that modern hunter-gatherer tribes operate on egalitarian basis, suggesting inequality was an aberration that came with the advent of agriculture

Hannah Devlin Science correspondent



The authors of the study argue that sexual equality may have proved an evolutionary advantage for early human societies, as it would have fostered wider-ranging social network (probably not including gardening).
Photograph: Everett Collection / Rex Features

Our prehistoric forebears are often portrayed as spear-wielding savages, but the earliest human societies are likely to have been founded on enlightened egalitarian principles, according to scientists.

A study has shown that in contemporary hunter-gatherer tribes, men and women tend to have equal influence on where their group lives and who they live with. The findings challenge the idea that sexual equality is a recent invention, suggesting that it has been the norm for humans for most of our evolutionary history.

Mark Dyble, an anthropologist who led the study at University College London, said: “There is still this wider perception that hunter-gatherers are more macho or male-dominated. We’d argue it was only with the emergence of agriculture, when people could start to accumulate resources, that inequality emerged.”

Dyble says the latest findings suggest that equality between the sexes may have been a survival advantage and played an important role in shaping human society and evolution. “Sexual equality is one of a important suite of changes to social organisation, including things like pair-bonding, our big, social brains, and language, that distinguishes humans,” he said. “It’s an important one that hasn’t really been highlighted before.”

The study, published in the journal [Science](#), set out to investigate the apparent paradox that while people in hunter-gatherer societies show strong preferences for living with family members, in practice the groups they live in tend to comprise few closely related individuals.

The scientists collected genealogical data from two hunter-gatherer populations, one in the Congo and one in the Philippines, including kinship relations, movement between camps and residence patterns, through hundreds of interviews. In both cases, people tend to live in groups of around 20, moving roughly every 10 days and subsisting on hunted game, fish and gathered fruit, vegetables and honey.

The scientists constructed a computer model to simulate the process of camp assortment, based on the assumption that people would choose to populate an empty camp with their close kin: siblings, parents and children.

