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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 widerranging 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 <u>Science</u>, 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 chose to populate an empty camp with their close kin: siblings, parents and children.

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"When only men have influence over who they are living with of closely related men with the spouses on the periphery," sai get groups of four or five brothers living together."	, the core of any commun d Dyble. "If men and won	ity is a dense network nen decide, you don't
The authors argue that sexual equality may have proved an exsocieties, as it would have fostered wider-ranging social netwindividuals. "It gives you a far more expansive social network would be less of an issue," said Dyble. "And you come into continuous tions, which is something that humans do par excellent	orks and closer cooperation with a wider choice of mannact with more people an	on between unrelated ates, so inbreeding
Dr Tamas David-Barrett, a behavioural scientist at the Universult," he said. "If you're able to track your kin further away, All you'd need to do is get together every now and then for so	you'd be able to have a m	
The study suggests that it was only with the dawn of agriculturesources for the first time, that an imbalance emerged. "Mer have more children than women," said Dyble. "It pays more f becomes favourable to form alliances with male kin."	can start to have several	wives and they can
Dyble said that egalitarianism may even have been one of the ancestors from our primate cousins. "Chimpanzees live in qui clear hierarchies," he said. "As a result, they just don't see end be sustained."	ite aggressive, male-domi	nated societies with
The findings appear to be supported by qualitative observation. In the Philippines population, women are involved in hunting division of labour, overall men and women contribute a simil groups, monogamy is the norm and men are active in childca	g and honey collecting and ar number of calories to the	d while there is still a
Andrea Migliano, of University College London and the paper scenario where unique human traits, such as cooperation with our evolutionary past."		
Task: Summarize the information presented in the article. C	ite two (2) examples to su	pport your ideas.