Different lives

We all have expectations of what a ‘normal’ society looks like: its gender roles, its political systems, its social classes. But society can take an infinite number of different forms, as these unusual examples demonstrate.

Communal living in the USA

A

Imagine a society that needs no police for law enforcement, has no bosses to run the businesses, and rewards everyone’s labour equally, whether they’re washing dishes or writing software. Sounds crazy? Not according to the residents of Twin Oaks Community.

B

For almost fifty years, a group of adults and their children – now about 100 in number – have lived together on two square kilometres of land in rural Virginia, USA, equally sharing their resources. Apart from bedrooms, all the rooms in their seven residential buildings are communal. Seventeen shared cars are at everyone’s disposal, although they mostly rely on the communal bikes at Twin Oaks for local journeys. Even the clothes on their backs are borrowed from the community’s well-stocked clothing library.
C
There’s no room for freeloaders, however. All adults work forty-two hours per week for the community, and persistent failure to do so would lead to expulsion. People are encouraged to choose a variety of tasks to keep boredom at bay, from farming, cooking and teaching the kids, to contributing to the community’s hammock-making and tofu businesses, and a conscious effort to challenge traditional gender roles means that you’ll often come across men on baby duty while women are wielding chainsaws in the woods. In return for their labour, everyone is provided with housing, food, healthcare and a little personal spending money so that they can splash out on treats, such as luxury food items or an occasional night out in town.

D
With such an egalitarian distribution of wealth, there have never been any problems with crime, and decisions about the community are made democratically, for the common good. ‘Our whole focus on equality means that we diversify leadership. Everybody here is a manager of an area and we have a committee that makes overall decisions,’ explains Keenan Dakota, who has been living at Twin Oaks for twenty-six years.

E
This way of life is not utopia. Complaints range from other people’s taste in loud music to the fact that unpopular jobs like cleaning tend to be neglected, and majority rule means that people with views few residents share can feel powerless and isolated. But despite its problems, the Twin Oaks lifestyle is one that many more people would like to embrace. There is a long waiting list of potential new residents, and Twin Oaks members have helped to set up several similar communities elsewhere in the USA. They hope that the Twin Oaks society can serve as a model for the wider world, promoting greater social responsibility and pointing the way to a fairer, more cooperative and more sustainable future for all.
The fight for men’s rights

In the Indian state of Meghalaya, it’s the women who wear the trousers. India is a country of extreme ethnic diversity, and minority rights and traditions are strongly defended by the constitution. This allows Meghalaya to maintain a custom unheard of elsewhere in India: property and family names are matrilineal and so pass, not from father to son, but from mother to daughter. The youngest daughter inherits the family wealth, accepting in return a duty to look after her parents in their old age. Even in situations where there are no daughters, a family has to adopt a girl to act as the guardian of their wealth rather than leaving property to a son.
G
Although civic engagement is mostly a male pursuit—only men are eligible for the role of village elder and they make up 93% of state assembly politicians—they have little say in domestic matters. When they marry, they move into the home of their mother-in-law and submit to her rule. In fact, they have more authority over their sisters’ children than their own, as they have higher status in the home where they grew up. Even in business, men are at a disadvantage, as their lack of property means they have nothing to use as collateral for a loan, whereas women can borrow more easily and often build successful companies. Because of the relative importance of women in society, families tend to prioritize the education of girls over boys, to the extent that female university graduates commonly have brothers who never finished high school. Men often sit around for much of the day, with few responsibilities to give their life purpose.

H
A men’s rights movement emerged about fifty years ago, but lost momentum after hundreds of women turned up at one of their meetings brandishing knives. Recently, activists have renewed the struggle for equal rights and equal opportunities. Sixty-year-old Keith Pariat, leader of the movement, explains that he and his colleagues ‘do not want to bring women down. We just want to bring the men up to where the women are.’ So far, however, the movement has gained little support, despite the superior numbers of men in the political arena. ‘In most of Meghalaya, people only know the old ways,’ says Patricia Mukhim, editor of the local paper, ‘and they like the old ways just fine.’ It appears that, in this hilly corner of India, the women will be wearing the trousers for some time to come.