

# **“We Equally Share Tasks, but...” Justifications for the Unequal Gender Distribution of Housework among Highly Educated Spanish Couples**

## **Introduction**

Although the gender gap in the time spent on housework has significantly decreased in recent decades (Altintas and Sullivan, 2016; Bianchi, et al., 2012), women continue to spend more time on domestic work than men. The observed reduction of the gender gap in post-industrial societies is the result of two profound changes in the social position of women: their massive incorporation into the labour market and their greater access to higher education. These changes have been described as a 'gender revolution' that has led to significant variations in gender dynamics in the private and public spheres (Goldscheider et al. 2015). However, the persistent gender-unbalanced distribution of housework, and the fact that its convergence has slowed down in recent years (Altintas and Sullivan, 2016), indicates that the *revolution* is stalled or incomplete as several family theorists have pointed out (England, 2010; Esping Andersen, 2009).

In this context, some of the main theories that have aimed to explain the household division of labour are no longer valid. From the perspective of relative resources –which weights men’s and women’s bargaining power within the couple based on their paid job (Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Lundberg and Pollak, 1996)–, the negotiation elements of both members of the couple have been equalized. In the case of the time availability perspective –which presumes that the partner who spends less time doing paid work does more housework (Aassve, Fuochi and Mencarini, 2014; Davis and Greenstein, 2004)–, the higher participation of women in paid work has reduced their time to be devoted to unpaid work. On the contrary, the perspective of ‘doing gender’ –rooted on the assumption that unpaid work is a field where men and women display assigned gender roles based on traditional gender norms (West & Zimmerman, 1987)–, remains effective. This study is carried out in the context of Spain that is characterized by a certain delay in the different stages of the gender revolution, specially due to the later generalisation of feminine work, and a scarcity of policies to balance work and family that makes members of the extended family a crucial factor in families’ planning of housework and childcare (Domínguez et al, 2022).

## **Data and Methods**

The original data from this study comes from the project ‘Gender Equity and Fertility in Postindustrial Societies’ which interviewed more than 400 individuals in five countries in 2012. A follow-up study using the Spanish subsample of 80 individuals was conducted in 2019 re-interviewing the same sample. In this study, we draw on the 39 men and women who were in the same heterosexual relationship at the time of both interviews. Our respondents are all Spanish native-born, who in the first wave of interviews were aged 24-35 years old, highly educated

(holding university or post-secondary vocational studies) and living in the two main Spanish urban areas (Madrid and Barcelona).

The interview protocol collected interviewees' sociodemographic information and that of their partners, as well as their economic and employment characteristics, fertility intentions, housework and childcare division of labour, and gender-role attitudes. Concerning housework, we asked participants how they and their partners divided the household tasks, which proportion they estimated each of them does, satisfaction with housework distribution, whether they outsource any tasks, and their attitudes toward outsourcing.

The methodological approach involves comparing the interviewees' narratives across the two waves. Structural descriptive codes were developed by theme in both waves. Later, we inductively coded the data and wrote memos related to the interviewees' perceptions regarding fairness and satisfaction with housework. The longitudinal dimension of the data represents a unique opportunity to effectively assess how the participants' housework-related reasoning and decision-making processes have remained or evolved over time and how that might be linked to possible life changes (i.e. employment situation, parity).

### **Preliminary Results**

Preliminary analysis of the interviews suggests that, in general, a significant number of participants perceive that they share domestic tasks equally with their partners, although it is not the result of a formal planification of tasks, but rather to an *on-the-way* accommodation based on daily concurrent circumstances. However, an uneven distribution emerges when both men and women explain in more detail which tasks are done by each partner. This is the case of Alfonso, a 34-years-old married childless man in the first wave. Both partners worked full time and they had external help to resolve the conflict emerging from the distribution of domestic tasks.

*Cooking depends on who arrives first, ... grocery shopping, well, 'we need this, who can go today?' Well, we share it, maybe she goes more to do grocery shopping because, let's say, she is closer to the supermarket from where she moves but... it comes to be shared, and the laundry well, when one puts in the laundry, the other one hangs it out, and as for ironing, we leave it to this woman who comes to help us, because it is more laborious and... [...] Maybe she does a little more, but let's say it's not because, by choice, but because she spends some more time at home.*

After seven years, Alfonso has had three children and his wife works part-time to take care of them and at home they continue to have external service. In the first wave, he justified the imbalances in the distribution of home tasks by his wife's greater time availability. In the second wave, however, he does not try to justify the gap and recognizes that his wife takes the initiative because her standards for cleanliness are different. Furthermore, she is the one who bears the mental load to run the household. Working full time and also be the main responsible of domestic

tasks leads to an increasing mental burden for women. It is not only about who perform the tasks, that sometimes can be egalitarian if we count the number of tasks or the actual time spent in housework, it is also important who plans and organizes the distribution and timing of the tasks.

*We go pretty much at one. It is true that in certain things she takes the initiative, but also because the limits of demands of each person are different [...] The issue of grocery shopping, we always try to go together, because it is some afternoon during the week, and basically we both go, but the one who has in mind what do we need to buy is more she than I. But the physical work of going to do it... thinking about it beforehand is basically hers, thinking about what is going to be needed, whether the children [need something] or I don't know what... All of this family logistics is up to her.*

At this point, it is important to note that life-course transitions, as the entry into parenthood, aggravates the inequalities in the distribution of tasks. The narrative of justifying the inequalities changes. Teresa, a 30-year-old married woman, with one child and full-time employed, argues that with a child the obligations of domestic tasks increase.

*That is when the big change happened! Everything changes because, to begin with, the demands of domestic work also change because, of course, you obviously have a child... Well, if you don't have the child and you don't feel like cleaning on a weekend then you don't clean, and nothing happens, with a child, well, you have to keep it cleaner, to begin with. Things accumulate, you have to prepare food, things, baths, diapers.*

After seven years, Teresa has had another child and both partners still work full time. She argues that the increased demand in domestic tasks means she lacks time, which she has resolved by outsourcing some of the housework tasks:

*Well, we have had it for many years, but in intermittent periods. I started having it [the external service] with my first pregnancy because I had to rest, and it started coming one day a week, [...] And then, we stopped having it for quite a few years, and now we have it again following the second pregnancy, and since then. [...] we really don't find time to do a thorough cleaning. I used to do it [on weekends], but then I didn't have weekends off, which makes it financially worthwhile for me to do it.*

The different standards for doing the tasks and the apprenticeship and conditions in parental home are mentioned very often. In the case of Margarita, a 34-year-old woman, cohabiting with her partner and their daughter, her partner's lack of awareness to recognize domestic tasks causes them a conflict.

*Of course, he had never lived alone, he lived at home with his parents until we moved in together, and of course, he had not come across that in everyday life if you don't do things, they won't get done. So, there are things that if you don't explicitly tell him that you have to do them, well, he doesn't remember, he doesn't realize, and of course, this... ends up pissing me off a little, but hey, you get used to it.*

Margarita also expresses certain resignation in the way she and her partner divide housework, and she even justifies her partner's lack of involvement in the way he was raised. Over the course of seven years, Margarita has found different solutions. For example, she considered that by doing the housework with her husband, she could free herself a little from the

mental load and adjust the difference in cleaning standards. At the moment, they both work full-time and have had their second child.

*I'm telling you, not because he refused to do it or because he wanted me to do it, but because it didn't even cross his mind. Then I got very angry about 'oh, I haven't realized...'; 'But how can you not notice that this is dirty?' [Annoyed tone]. Based on complaints and so on, well... I don't think he really realizes it, but rather he must have the routine written down to do this. So, I'm telling you, since we generally start doing it at the same time, there is no option.*

## References

- Altintas, Evrim y Sullivan, Oriel (2016). “Fifty years of change update: Cross-national gender convergence in housework”. *Demographic Research*, 35(16): 455-470. doi: 10.4054/DemRes.2016.35.16
- Aassve, Arnstein; Fuochi, Giulia and Mencarini, Letizia (2014). “Desperate Housework Relative Resources, Time Availability, Economic Dependency, and Gender Ideology Across Europe”. *Journal of Family Issues*, 35(8): 1000–1022. doi: 10.1177/0192513X14522248
- Bianchi, Suzanne M.; Sayer, Liana C.; Milkie, Melissa A. and Robinson, John P. (2012). “Housework: who Did, Does or Will Do It, and How Much Does It Matter?”. *Social Forces*, 91(1): 55–63. doi: 10.1093/sf/sos120
- Blood, R. and Wolfe, D. (1960). *Husbands and Wife: The Dynamics of Married Living*. New York: Free Press.
- Davis, Shannon y Greenstein, Theodore (2004). “Cross-National Variations in the Division of Household Labor”. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66: 1260-1271. doi: 10.1111/j.0022-2445.2004.00091.x
- Domínguez-Folgueras, Marta, M. José González, and Irene Lapuerta. 2022. “The Motherhood Penalty in Spain: The Effect of Full- and Part-Time Parental Leave on Women’s Earnings”. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 29(1):164-89. doi: 10.1093/sp/jxab046.
- England, Paula. 2010. “The Gender Revolution: Uneven and Stalled”. *Gender & Society* 24(2):149-66. doi: 10.1177/0891243210361475.
- Esping Andersen, Gosta. 2009. *The incomplete revolution*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Goldscheider, Frances, Eva Bernhardt, and Trude Lappegård. 2015. “The Gender Revolution: A Framework for Understanding Changing Family and Demographic Behavior”. *Population and Development Review* 41(2):207-39. doi: 10.1111/j.1728-4457.2015.00045.x.
- Lundberg, S. and Pollak, R. A. (1996). “Bargaining and distribution in marriage”. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 10, 139–158.
- West, C., and Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). “Doing gender”. *Gender & Society* (Vol. 1). SAGE Publications.