

# Beyond Traditional Gender Roles: Exploring the Division of Paid and Unpaid Labour in Italian Same-sex Couples

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## Topic and theoretical focus

The sociological and demographic literature on the division of labour has mainly been focusing on different-sex couples and on the traditional heterosexual nuclear family. Nevertheless, one of the characteristics of the Second Demographic Transition is the upsurge of non-traditional families, namely single parenthood, step-families, and same-sex couples. In order to better understand the role of gender and of heterosexuality in the division of labour, same-sex couples<sup>1</sup> (SSC hereafter) have captured the attention of researchers. Everyday actions are mediated by sexual orientation and sexual identity, and these might have consequences even in the division of household tasks among partners, given that in SSC the decision on how to arrange paid and unpaid labour cannot be strictly based on gender and alternatives need to be found (Dunne, 2000).

Mostly focused on the USA, the existing research has unequivocally found that both female and male SSC share domestic labour equally (Kurdek, 1993, 2007). Furthermore, participation in the labour market is distributed more evenly among partners in SSC than in different-sex couples and the *breadwinner/homemaker* model is less likely to be encountered (Patterson et al., 2004). To explain these patterns, scholars argued that SSC are more likely to enact egalitarian practices since gender role constraints are less pressing (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). At the same time, despite few exceptions, childcare is once again balanced between the two partners (Dunne, 2000; Tornello et al., 2015). In this framework, different theories have been used to explain how SSC divide paid and unpaid labour; here we rely mostly on *specialization theory* by Becker (1985) and on the *doing gender* approach by West & Zimmerman (1987), although we recognize these theories were conceived around heterosexual couples and they are not easily adaptable to SSC.

In this paper we explore how the division of paid (working hours) and unpaid (housework and childcare) labour is carried out in cohabiting SSC living in Italy. The choice of the country was dictated by two fundamental contextual elements. On the one hand, the few available studies on the division of labour focused on the Italian context are qualitative and only marginally concerned with this topic (e.g., Saraceno & Bertone, 2003; Barbagli & Colombo, 2007). On the other hand, the scarcity of quantitative data available which allows for a punctual identification of same-sex couples prevented the diffusion of studies related to sexual and gender diversity. In addition, the peculiarity of the Italian context, where heteronormativity is pervasive and deeply rooted in the society and institutions, gender roles are pronounced and the acceptance and recognition of LGBTQ+ couples was delayed compared to other Western countries, offers an interesting case study yet to be explored. Collocating our analysis in Italy allows us to further explore the impact of a traditional setting – for what concerns the division of labour – on non-heteronormative families: do SSC revert to unequal division of labour in these contexts or

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<sup>1</sup> Same-gender couple would be a more appropriate terminology, since most times these are identified through gender rather than sex. Nevertheless, to conform to the existing literature, in this paper we refer to same-sex couples.

they push even more for equality within the relationship? Finally, by exploring the division of labour and giving relevance to SSC we want to give our contribution to closing the gap of this topic in the Italian context, which does not have a systematic and extended quantitative demographic and sociological literature on sexual diversity.

To explore this topic, we collected the necessary data through an online survey, which allowed us to answer our research question “*How do same-sex couples living in Italy divide paid unpaid labour?*”, as well as get a broader understanding of the egalitarian practices put in place by SSC. Moreover, developing a survey allowed us to put particular attention on the distinction between household chores and childcare tasks, and between more or less desirable domestic tasks.

### Data and methods

As stated above, we collected the necessary data through an online survey distributed via mailing lists and websites of Italian associations concerned with LGBTQ+ experiences<sup>2</sup>. The collection resulted in 251 final responses although only 190 of these were valid observations for the analysis. The means of distribution of the survey, as well as the associations that helped the diffusion, represent two important elements to account for. First, we worked on a convenience sample which might be deeply committed to the idea of equality within the couple, since the respondents were recruited through associations concerned with LGBTQ+ issues and previous research conducted in Italy shows how LGB persons are committed to the idea of equality within the couple also through the division of tasks (Barbagli & Colombo, 2007). Moreover, most of these associations are actively helping SSC in the parenthood process, thus restricting the recruitment mostly to those LGBTQ+ persons who are in a couple and want to have children or already have children.

Regarding the survey, we posed two mandatory filter questions to consider only respondents who are in a cohabiting same-sex relationship<sup>3</sup>. Other information collected concerns the marital status (married, civil union, cohabiting, other), the length of the relationship, hours worked of respondents and of their partners, division between partners of eight household chores (grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, ironing, billing, maintenance work, laundry, organize common social activities), division of four and five childcare tasks, respectively for children aged 0-2 and children aged 3-12<sup>4</sup>, age of respondents and their partners in classes (18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50 and over), highest level of education of respondents and partners (middle school, high school, bachelor’s degree or higher), area of residence (North Italy, Centre Italy, South Italy, Abroad). Some additional questions were asked in order to understand the tie of the respondents and of their partners with the children living in their households which allowed us to distinguish between birth/biological and social parent.

The main outcome variables of this paper are the distribution of housework tasks within the couple, *work hours ratio* and the division of childcare between partners. The starting point for obtaining the first outcome variable was creating a categorical variable where 1 indicates that the respondents does more housework, 2 is when the partner does more housework and 3 is an equal division of tasks. By equal division of tasks, we considered also those cases where the chores were outsourced since if no one of the partners does the task it is not possible to state an unbalance. We then created a mean scale based on the eight housework tasks. The respondents were asked to indicate who in their

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<sup>2</sup> Agedo, Arcigay, Famiglie Arcobaleno, Osservatorio LGBT Università Federico II Napoli, Rete Genitori Rainbow.

<sup>3</sup> Respondents could choose between different answer options in the couple’s composition question: man-man, woman-woman, man-woman/woman-man where at least one of the partner’s is a trans\* person; man-woman/woman-man where both partners are cis people, other (please specify).

<sup>4</sup> Both housework tasks and childcare had similar answer options which allowed us whether each task is unbalanced towards the respondent (Always me/Mainly me), towards the partner (Always my partner/Mainly my partner), or neither (Both equally).

household does the eight domestic chores. Then, we grouped the mean scores scale in two different categories: 0 as unequal division of labour – with mean scores from 1 to 1.375 and from 2.5 to 3 – and 1 as equal division – with mean scores from 1.5 to 2.375. *Work hours ratio* was obtained by dividing the working hours of the partner who works less by the working hours of the partner who works more hours. The closer this ratio is to 1, the more egalitarian the couple in the division of paid labour. Finally, the two outcome variables regarding childcare (for children aged 0-2 and 3-12) were built following the same process as the one illustrated for domestic labour. In this case we did not include those respondents who indicated even just once that the childcare task is not applicable to their situation.

Given the non-representative nature of the data, the number of responses and the exploratory angle of the research, descriptive methods were preferred. Nevertheless, a logistic regression to understand how equal the division of household chores is and a linear regression to understand how working hours are divided within the couples were performed. Moreover, chi-squared tests were performed to understand which of the partners performs more housework and, in the case of couples with children, which parent is more involved in childcare. For the sake of this extended abstract, we will report only the main findings, therefore excluding the regression analysis and the chi-squared tests.

### Main findings

Out of the 190 final observations, 72.63% ( $n=138$ ) of respondents is part of a female SSC. The majority of respondents (50.53%) is relatively young and falls into the age class 30-39. Moreover, the majority of respondents has at least a Bachelors's Degree (75.79%,  $n=144$ ), is full-time employed (76.32%,  $n=145$ ) and has at least a child living with the couple (71.59%,  $n=136$ ). The high number of parents, the high level of education, as well as the high number of full-time employed respondents are intertwined: since the most proficient channels of distribution of the survey are related to LGBTQ+ families and parents (see Famiglie Arcobaleno, AGEDO), a selection bias occurred and we end up collecting data primarily on LGBTQ+ parents. Moreover, the method of arrival of the children can provide a possible explanation for the highly educated and full-time employed sample: in the majority of cases couples have had children via ARTs and surrogacy, which are not admitted, or even illegal, practices in Italy for SSC. Since adoption is an even more complicated route to follow, SSC must go abroad to have access to these techniques, which are expensive, thus explaining the majority of respondents (and partners) with a high level of education and mostly full-time employed. Although socio-economic status was not directly accounted for, it is possible to deduce that the couples in the sample are high-income ones.

Regarding specifically domestic labour, the analysis portrayed an overall equal division of tasks across both couple types. In the majority of cases the eight tasks are equally shared between partners (see Table 1), although a slight difference is encountered between male and female SSC. This might be due to the fact that a high number of respondents in male SSC answered that they outsource some chores (especially *cleaning the house* and *ironing*) or they do not do them altogether, while this pattern was less encountered in female SSC.

Table 1. *Division of domestic chores in male and female SSC (n=190). Absolute numbers in parentheses.*

	Division of domestic labour		
	Unequal	Equal	Total
Male SSC	7.69% (4)	92.31% (48)	100% (52)
Female SSC	9.42% (13)	90.58% (125)	100% (138)
Total	8.95% (17)	91.05% (173)	100% (190)

Shifting the attention to paid labour, the results of the linear regression with outcome variable *work hours ratio* (here not reported) highlight how male SSC appears to be once again more equal in

the division of working hours than female SSC, although the coefficients were not statistically significant. A simple cross tabulation with division of paid labour and couple composition reports that 25% ( $n=13$ ) of the respondents in a male SSC share equal working hours with their partners while it is the same only for 22.46% ( $n=31$ ) of the respondents in a female SSC. In this analysis, even a difference of one hour of work between partners was considered. Additionally, going against what is typically found in heterosexual couples, in both male and female SSC, even though the working hours are not equally shared and one of the partners spends more time in the labour market, the division of household tasks is equally shared in the majority of cases, as it is shown in Table 2. The commitment to the idea of equality might emerge from these results.

Table 2. *Division of working hours and domestic chores between partners in SSC ( $n=190$ ). Absolute numbers in parentheses.*

Division of paid work	Division of household labour			
	More Respondent	Both equally	More partner	Total
More Respondent	4.41% (3)	91.18% (62)	4.41% (3)	100% (68)
Equal hours	2.27% (1)	93.18% (41)	4.55% (2)	100% (44)
More Partner	17.39% (7)	82.61% (3)	0	100% (78)
Total	8.97% (7)	89.74% (70)	1.28% (1)	100% (190)

Finally, given the previous research, we were expecting to find different patterns for male and female SSC regarding how childcare is shared. In particular, we were expecting the birth/biological mother in female SSC to perform the bulk of childcare, while we were expecting to find no difference between biological and social parent in male SSC. Nonetheless, as Table 3 and 4 show, on average childcare tasks are equally divided between partners in the majority of cases in both male and female SSC. There is evidence of some patterns of specialization, although rather than supporting the hypothesis of the birth/biological parent being in charge of the bulk of childcare, it highlights an unbalance towards the respondents when they are the birth/biological parents but this does not happen with the partner. These results have to be read considering that most of the respondents with children who answered the childcare questions (84%,  $n=63$  out of 75 observations) use at least one childcare service (between kindergarten, grandparents, babysitters, friends/neighbours), which might be a partial cause of the overall equal division of childcare tasks within couples.

Table 3. *Division of childcare tasks of children aged 0-2 between partners in male ( $n=11$ ) and female ( $n=50$ ) SSC. Absolute numbers in parentheses.*

Respondent's tie with children	Division of Childcare 0-2							
	Male SSC				Female SSC			
	More respondent	Both equally	More partner	Total	More respondent	Both equally	More partner	Total
Birth/Biological Parent	33.33% (2)	66.67% (4)	0	100% (6)	28.12% (9)	71.88% (23)	0	100% (32)
Social Parent	20% (1)	80% (4)	0	100% (5)	5.56% (1)	88.89% (16)	5.56% (1)	100% (18)
Total	27.27% (3)	72.73% (8)	0	100% (11)	20% (10)	78% (39)	2% (1)	100% (50)

Table 4. *Division of childcare tasks of children aged 3-12 between partners in male ( $n=8$ ) and female ( $n=52$ ) SSC. Absolute numbers in parentheses.*

Respondent's tie with children	Division of Childcare 3-12							
	Male SSC				Female SSC			
	More respondent	Both equally	More partner	Total	More respondent	Both equally	More partner	Total
Birth/Biological Parent	0	100% (4)	0	100% (4)	12.50% (3)	83.33% (20)	4.17% (1)	100% (24)
Social Parent	0	100% (4)	0	100% (4)	3.57% (1)	82.14% (23)	14.29% (4)	100% (28)
Total	0	100% (8)	0	100% (8)	7.69% (4)	82.69% (43)	9.62% (5)	100% (52)

A framework of overall equality between partners in SSC emerged from the data collected. The balance highlighted between partners is not only found in the division of household and childcare work, but also in the management of paid work, putting the pattern found in this sample on a par with those found by previous research. The sample analysed is deeply committed to the idea of equality within the couple, as it is highlighted by the results of Table 2, although we have to underline once again that this is a convenience sample. Through this research we want to emphasize the importance of including sexual diversity in the current demographic and sociological debate on the division of labour as a key element to account for, especially in contexts where it has lagged behind, as the Italian one. To the knowledge of the authors, this study is the first to assess the division of labour in non-heterosexual couples in the Italian context using a quantitative approach.

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