

# Does 'women's work' still wash?

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“Housework mostly falls to women in the U.S., but the demands of their employment mean that American husbands must undertake a larger share of housework than in places where women do less paid work,” says UCI sociology professor Judith Treas. Credit: Daniel A. Anderson / University Communications

Determining who cooks and who cleans in a household may feel like a personal decision couples make, but UC Irvine sociologist Judith Treas says culture and societal characteristics have a major influence on how such duties get divvied up in homes around the globe.

In “Dividing the Domestic: Men, Women & Household Work in Cross-National Perspective,” Treas, co-editor Sonja Drobnic and collaborators combine international survey data - funded by a three-year National Science Foundation grant - with sociological analysis to explain why the lion’s share of domestic responsibilities still rests with women, even as more of them are working outside the home.

The co-editors report that while certain countries, such as Sweden, are closing this gender chore gap, others may be reinforcing traditional roles through policies that allow women time off work for housekeeping and childcare. Here, Treas discusses some of their key findings.

**Q: Why do so many couples decide that housework is largely a female responsibility?**

**A:** Housework usually falls to the partner who has fewer competing time commitments. If only because women work fewer paid hours than men, they do more housework. When a wife clocks long hours in the workplace, her husband pitches in more around the house. However, even self-sufficient individuals and egalitarian couples often fall back on more traditional gender arrangements. This happens when they move in together, get married or have a child. Living together, women do – and men eschew – housework. Whether we realize it or not, few of us can resist showing off how “feminine” or “masculine” we really are to a heterosexual audience in the home. Sociologists have a term for this performance: “doing gender.”

**Q: With more dual-income couples, why are household duties not more equally divided?**

**A:** There has been some change, but we’re a long way from full equality. According to the playbook on marital power, the partner who contributes more resources to a marriage should have the clout to bargain out of doing unpleasant chores. But surprisingly, wives who bring home bigger paychecks than their husbands aren’t very successful in leveraging their advantage. In fact, they often wind up doing a bigger share of the housework! These domestic superwomen may be compensating for an awkward violation of the old-fashioned gender norms that assign primary breadwinning responsibilities to men.

**Q:** How do children factor into the global picture?

**A:** Especially when women have young children and heavy household demands, more opt to stay home or work only part time. In some countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany and Great Britain, part-time work is a popular adaptation. Short work hours make it easier for women to balance the house, work and family. In Southern Europe and the formerly socialist states, where most jobs are full time, women don't have the option of working part time, so they're more apt to take an extended break from employment when children are born. Not surprisingly, when women stay home or work fewer hours, they do a bigger share of the housework. American women – even the mothers of preschoolers – have comparatively high rates of full-time labor force participation. They don't receive the government child allowance payments that permit mothers elsewhere to stay home. Many American women have little choice but to work to support their families. Housework mostly falls to women in the U.S., but the demands of their employment mean that American husbands must undertake a larger share of housework than in places where women do less paid work.

**Q: How have public policies kept women shouldering the brunt of household duties?**

**A:** Countries don't set out to craft policies to reinforce women's "special responsibility" for sparkling dishes or hygienic bathrooms. Nonetheless, tax codes, employment regulations, school schedules and welfare rules can have this inadvertent effect. Housewifery gets a boost where there are tax credits for the unemployed spouse or the second earner's income is taxed at a very high rate. The German school system, which sends children home for lunch, simply takes it for granted that there will be a full-time homemaker to greet them. In contrast, where public childcare is widely available, women are more likely to seek paid employment. Although there are policies intended to reduce work-family conflicts,

they can have unforeseen consequences, even promoting a less equal division of household labor. Those designed to make it easier for women to fulfill housekeeping responsibilities, for example, lessen the need for couples to negotiate a more egalitarian domestic arrangement. And they can entrench the cultural notion that such duties are women's responsibility. In some Eastern European countries under socialism, female workers – and only female workers – got a regular day off every so often to catch up on housework. Lengthy maternity leaves may discourage a mother's return to the labor force. Or a long maternity leave may steer her into a marginal, dead-end job. If her pay will never rival her husband's, it makes sense for the husband to spend time breadwinning while the wife handles the housekeeping. Family-friendly policies usually take it for granted that housework and childcare are mainly women's domain. A rare exception is gender egalitarian Sweden. There, "daddy leave" is pressed on all new fathers. The idea is to encourage them to bond with their infants before mothers can become the designated childcare experts in the family.

## **Q: What role does culture play in reinforcing the concept of "women's work"?**

**A:** We like to think of ourselves as choosing how we organize our family lives. The truth is that we don't invent our routines from scratch. Usually, it's more convenient to fall back on one of the off-the-shelf cultural models we see around us. Our household routines are shaped by cultural values consistent with, say, a male-breadwinner-female-homemaker arrangement or a dual-earners-sharing-housework pattern. Cross-national research highlights the extent to which broad norms, values, beliefs and practices dictate who does the household labor. Swedish society, for example, places an exceptionally strong value on gender equality. This provides the ideological underpinning for the idea that partners should share household chores. Societal notions about marital relationships also

influence who mops the floor and who packs the children's lunches. Where the culture holds that the basis for marriage is a need for economic security and children, the men stick to "men's work" and the women to "[women's](#) work." In many countries, however, the reason for marriage is, increasingly, intimacy rather than functional needs. As the product of ongoing negotiation between equals, a good marriage means personal development, communication and reciprocity. In other words, as we move to more intimacy-based marriages, [couples](#) start to share the chores more equally.

**More information:** [www.sup.org/rss/book\\_rss.cgi?id=16339](http://www.sup.org/rss/book_rss.cgi?id=16339)

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