

Gender equality's final frontier: Who cleans up

January 23 2013, by Susan Kelley

(Phys.org)—Working-class couples who buck convention and live together rather than marry take on traditional roles when it comes to housework, according to a new study by a Cornell sociologist.

Cohabiting women do a disproportionate share of the housework, even when the women work and the men don't—and even when the women want to share the housework more equally, said co-author Sharon Sassler, professor of policy analysis and management.

"When men aren't working, they don't see domestic labor as a means of contributing. In fact, they double down and do less of it, since it challenges their masculinity," Sassler said. "But when men earn more, women—who are almost all working, too—feel obliged to contribute in some way to maintaining the household, generally by cooking and cleaning."

Even where [housework](#) was shared somewhat equally, the women tended to supervise the men's chores; as a result, women retained [accountability](#) for its performance.

But not all gender roles go unquestioned among these couples, the researchers found. Most of the women came to their relationships expecting more equal partnerships. Most men preferred to have a partner who also worked for pay, and about one-third of the couples were actively trying to share equally the burden of making money.

Nonetheless, the men seemed content to reap the benefits of partners who brought in an income without challenging their dominant domestic power positions. In fact, none of the couples equally shared household and financial responsibilities, Sassler said. "The connection between [masculinity](#) and [privileges](#) is maintained for many of these men. Almost none of the women who paid the majority of the [household bills](#) were awarded the privileges that male providers have traditionally received," she said, such as retaining control of household finances.

Sassler wrote the research with Amanda J. Miller of the University of Indianapolis. Their paper, "The Construction of Gender Among Working-Class [Cohabiting Couples](#)," was published in the December issue of *Qualitative Sociology*.

The researchers interviewed 30 working-class cohabiting couples between ages 19 and 35. They found the couples fell into three groups: conventional, in which each partner accepts the traditional gender role; contesting, in which one partner (generally the woman) tries to forge a more balanced arrangement, though often unsuccessfully; and counter-conventional, in which the female partner often provides financially and still must perform most household labor.

The research shows that it's tough to change traditional gender roles even among people living together, who ostensibly might be trying to undo the conventional roles of a male breadwinner and female homemaker, Sassler said.

Given that the majority of marriages are preceded by a period of cohabitation, the study suggests that living together sets the stage for re-creating unequal gender roles. The institutionalization of [gender roles](#) that disadvantage [women](#) is evident even in informal relationships, Sassler said.

"What's the final frontier of gender equality? Who cleans up."

Provided by Cornell University

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