

Sharing the parenting duties could be key to marital bliss, study suggests

October 3 2017, by Leah Ruppanner, Melissa Milkie And Scott Schieman



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The quality of women's relationships with their partner is diminished if they view their parenting division as unfair or want to spend more time working, [our new study](#) of employed parents in Canada has found.

Emerging research shows women's larger housework share deteriorates

[relationship](#) satisfaction and leads to divorce. Our study shows inequality across the domestic sphere – housework and parenting – jeopardises [relationship quality](#).

Housework and parenting: equally damaging?

Women consistently do more housework, even when [employed full-time](#). They do more when they are married and after the [birth of a child](#). Women also [perform more](#) of the least-pleasurable household tasks, like cleaning the bathroom.

Although men have increased their housework time since the 1970s, they [more typically perform](#) the least-urgent chores, like changing lightbulbs or car maintenance.

Our study found working mothers assumed a larger parenting share, and this inequality deteriorated relationship [quality](#) – but only under certain conditions. It deteriorated when mothers perceived their parenting division as unfair, or when they felt trapped in their primary carer role.

Specifically, mothers who performed a larger parenting share and worked part-time had the lowest relationship quality. This pattern was also evident for mothers who preferred more time at work.

These paradoxical findings – mothers with part-time employment and preferences for more time at work reporting worse relations with their partners due to their larger parenting burden – suggests feeling trapped in the role of mother.

Mothers are expected to be fully available to the demands and whims of children around the clock. They are expected not only to provide primary care, but also to [carry the mental load](#) for the household. The mental load captures all of the planning work that is required to keep the

household functioning, from organising after-school care to ensuring there is enough milk for breakfast.

The demands of this role are intense. It leads many mothers to [reduce to part-time employment](#) when children are young. Yet many women may be dissatisfied with the pressure to assume the bulk of the parenting at the expense of their employment and, as a consequence, relationship quality suffers.

So, mothers can be trapped between gender role expectations of a "good" mother and their desires to be more engaged in the [labour market](#). This dissatisfaction bleeds into the marriage.

Relationship quality is better among some couples, such as those who equally share the parenting even when mothers work part-time, full-time or overtime hours. Simply, men's equal parenting participation, regardless of mothers' employment status, appears to be the linchpin for relationship quality.

Implications for Australia

Australian mothers have some of the [highest part-time employment rates](#) in the world. The government offers little in terms of parenting or parental leave, meaning Australian families must find individual rather than government solutions for the care of young children.

Faced with expensive childcare, many mothers reduce to part-time work or drop out of the labour market altogether to look after children. These employment decisions make mothers economically vulnerable if couples divorce and in older age: one-in-three women retire [with no superannuation](#).

[OECD Chart: Part-time employment rate, Total, % of employment,](#)

[Annual, 2016](#)

For many Australian families, the solution is mothers' reduced time in employment. Moreover, Australian parents [become more traditional](#) in their gender role attitudes after having a child, meaning more couples view mothers as the ideal carer for children once becoming parents.

Our study suggests this combination of factors – preferences for mother-provided childcare and reductions in mothers' [employment](#) – may deteriorate relationship quality among Australian couples. Close to half (47%) of all divorces in Australia are [among couples with children](#), and women are more likely to file for divorce than men.

The results from our Canadian sample suggest one reason women may experience lower relationship quality in their marriages is the unequal division of the domestic work – parenting and housework.

Men's more active participation in the home and family-responsive policies, including the availability of universal government-subsidised child care, may have a two-fold benefit: increasing [mothers'](#) labour market attachment, and improving relationship quality.

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