

Married mothers who earn more than their husbands take on an even greater share of the housework

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While new mothers frequently take on a greater share of housework than their spouses, this effect is even more pronounced in mothers who earn

more than fathers, new research from the University of Bath shows.

Rational [economic theory](#) suggests parenthood and the resulting income and [time pressure](#) should lead to a more efficient sharing of household chores. However, the study of more than 6,000 heterosexual North American married households revealed this is not the case.

"Of course, we understand why specialized division of labor exists, but there is no reason for this specialization to be gender-specific. Traditional division has been conventionally explained by men earning more and working longer hours and has a certain logical appeal," said Dr. Joanna Syrda of the University's School of Management.

"However, I found that the gender housework gap actually gets bigger for mothers who earned more than their spouses—the more they earned over their partner, the more housework they did," she said.

Syrda said the findings might indicate that traditional gender identity norms—the notion of the 'male breadwinner' and its association with masculinity—are so entrenched that couples may try to compensate for a situation where wives earn more than their husbands. She said she was interested to find the effect was stronger in married couples than in unmarried cohabiting parents.

"Married couples that fail to replicate the traditional division of income may be perceived—both by themselves and others—to be deviating from the norm. What may be happening is that, when men earn less than women, couples neutralize this by increasing traditionality through housework—in other words, wives do more and husbands do less as they try to offset this 'abnormal' situation by leaning into other conventional gender norms," she said.

Syrda noted that the economic argument for mothers taking on a greater

share of household chores was to free their higher-earning (male) partner up to focus on work and maximize the household's standards of living.

"We would therefore expect the balance of domestic labor to shift as more women enter the workforce, work longer hours and gain [higher salaries](#)—but that has not been the case! So, we need to look beyond economic theory to this traditionalising effect and couples following traditional gender norms," Syrda said.

Syrda said it was important to recognize that there are some childcare tasks where women have an obvious advantage. However, she noted that the research is about housework defined as 'time spent cooking, cleaning, and doing other work around the house'.

"Therefore, it doesn't necessarily follow that this should lead to gender-specific housework division—if the wife is the relatively higher earner, transition to parenthood shouldn't result in a more traditional division of domestic labor as this wouldn't improve the household's overall quality of life. But this study suggests this is not the case."

Syrda said the study is important for the understanding of a prime source of conflict for many married couples. She pointed to research from the U.S. Institute of Family Studies that found the most common area of contention among spouses with children to be chores and responsibilities, highlighting the clash between the traditional division of labor and the modern reality of high-earning, working mothers.

Syrda said that previous research showed that the transition to parenthood brought more of a change to the division of labor in couples than any other event, like getting married or having more children. At the same time, her research showed that this appears to strengthen norms regarding gender-typical behavior or even shift individual gender role attitudes.

"This is important, because how couples divide the increased domestic workload after becoming parents will be an important determinant of earnings inequalities between women and men over the course of their lives—a pattern once settled upon is often difficult to renegotiate. And these norms may be passed to their children," she said.

Syrda reflected that one expectation of the 'gender revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s was that women's increased level of employment and earnings would be accompanied by men's greater participation in domestic activities.

"Sadly, however, it looks like married men and women—especially married parents—have still not equalized the level of housework they perform, leading many of us to wonder how to restart this 'stalled revolution'?" she said.

More information: Joanna Syrda, *Gendered Housework: Spousal Relative Income, Parenthood and Traditional Gender Identity Norms, Work, Employment and Society* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/09500170211069780](https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170211069780)

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