

WOMEN'S SATISFACTION WITH THE DOMESTIC DIVISION OF LABOUR

JANEEN BAXTER AND MARK WESTERN investigate men's and women's levels of satisfaction with the division of child care and division of housework in the household, using recent Australian data.

The gender division of labour outside the household has undergone fairly rapid changes over the last 20 years. Although women have not achieved equality with men in paid work, as measured by the gender gap in earnings and authority, and by high levels of sex segregation, women's participation in paid employment has increased dramatically, and higher proportions of married women are remaining in employment throughout the child-bearing and child-rearing years.

Despite these changes however, the gender division of labour within the household has not changed a great deal. Most research still shows a clear division of labour along traditional lines, with men participating most in outdoor work and women taking the primary responsibility for child care and indoor activities such as cooking, cleaning and laundry. Moreover, most wives spend more than twice as much time as their husbands on domestic work.

One of the puzzles that emerges in studies of the domestic division of labour is the large percentage of women who seem untroubled by this clearly inequitable division of labour (Benin and Agostinelli 1988; Lennon and Rosenfield 1994). This paper investigates this puzzle using recent Australian data.

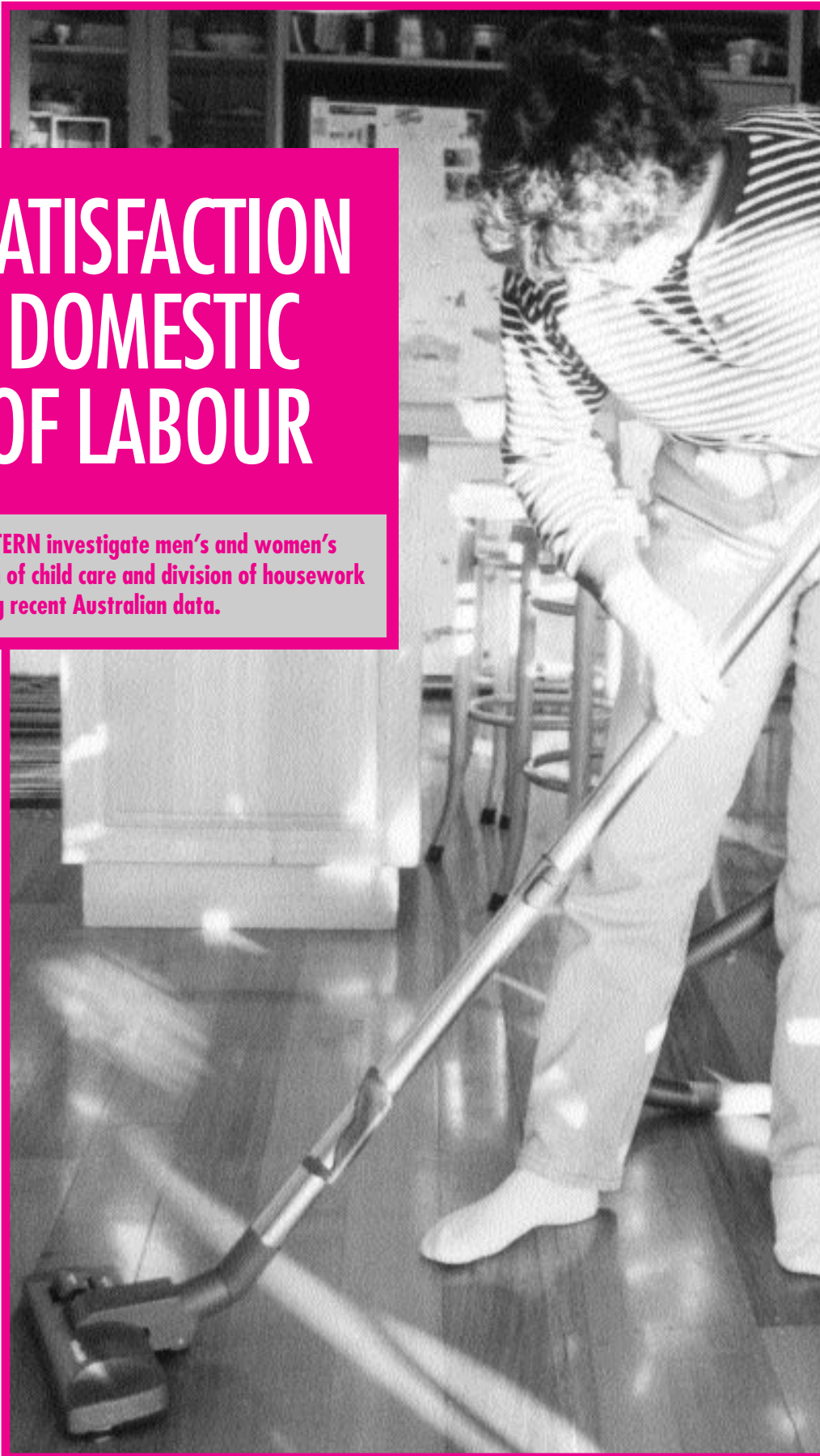
Previous Research

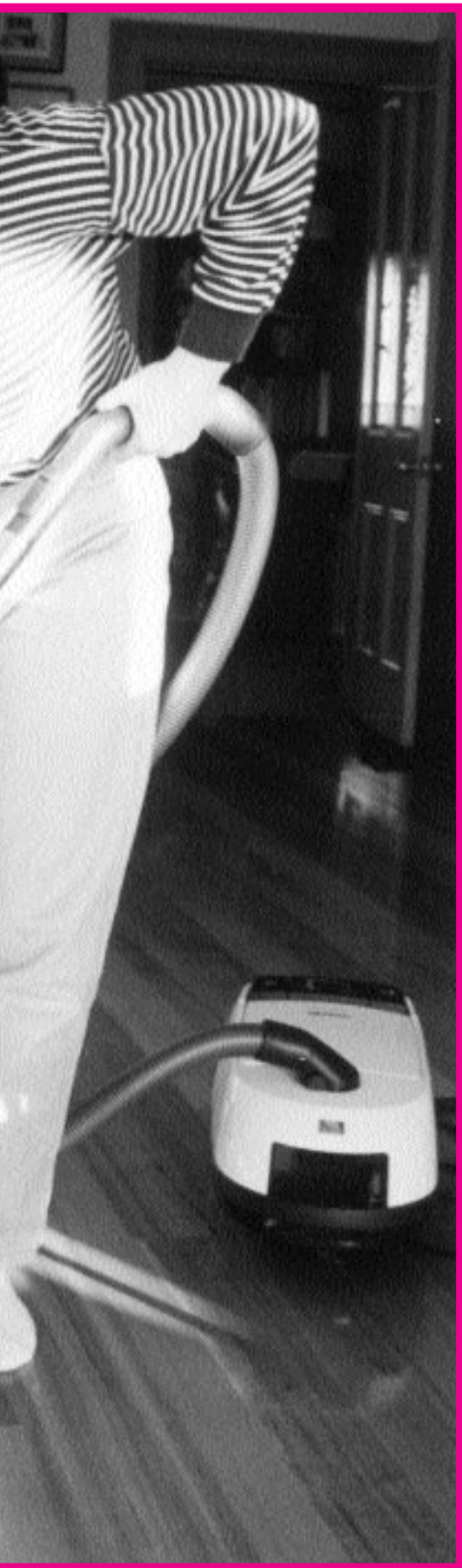
Studies of the domestic division of labour in the United States and the United Kingdom have invariably found that a significant proportion of women and, not so surprisingly, a significant proportion of men believe that the division of domestic

labour is fair, even though women report doing the bulk of the work.

In the United States Lennon and Rosenfield (1994) report that 67 per cent of men and 60 per cent of women in their sample of over 13,000 households feel that the division of housework is fair. At the same

time, about one-third of women compared with only 4 per cent of men see the division of housework as unfair. Other studies report similar findings (Benin and Agostinelli 1988; Warde and Hetherington 1993; Sanchez 1994; Greenstein 1996; DeMaris and Longmore 1996).





Picture: Double Jay Graphic Design



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Three main kinds of explanations have been proposed to account for the apparent acceptance by women of unequal divisions of labour in the home.

First, some studies suggest that women's lack of power and resources in families leads them to accept unequal divisions of

labour (Lennon and Rosenfield 1994; DeMaris and Longmore 1996). Research has shown that having fewer economic resources than husbands is a significant determinant of the domestic division of labour (Ross 1987; Baxter 1993). As women's economic resources increase in comparison to their husband's, women spend less time on domestic labour and men spend more time on domestic labour. This finding suggests that having economic resources gives women greater power to influence the allocation of labour within households.

Taking this argument one step further, some have argued that fewer resources will also influence wives' perceptions and expectations about the division of household labour (Lennon and Rosenfield 1994; DeMaris and Longmore 1996). Women with few resources will have fewer alternatives to marriage and hence more to lose if the relationship were to be disrupted. Fewer resources will therefore be associated with lower expectations since women who are trapped by limited options will be more likely to define their situation as fair and be satisfied with even minimal involvement by husbands in domestic labour, compared with women with greater economic resources and greater options outside marriage.

A second explanation for women's relatively high levels of satisfaction with the domestic division of labour relates to gender role ideology. If most men and women still define child care and housework as women's work, then women are less likely to be critical of inequitable divisions of labour in the household (Thompson 1991). Gender role ideology has been found to be a powerful determinant of the division of household labour with more egalitarian

attitudes being associated with more egalitarian divisions of labour (Pleck 1985; Baxter 1993).

This finding implies that attitudes about appropriate gender roles will also be a significant predictor of levels of satisfaction with domestic labour. Women who see child care and housework as an essential part of being 'good' wives and mothers are more likely to be satisfied with unequal divisions of household labour than women who reject traditional gender role ideology, since the traditional view of gender role responsibilities implies and legitimates an unequal division of domestic labour.

A third explanation concerns the amount of hours that women spend in paid employment. Women who spend longer hours in paid employment are more likely to be dissatisfied with the way domestic labour is organised than women whose paid employment is less, because they have less time to devote to domestic labour. Women who work longer for pay spend more time on paid and unpaid work in total than women who are in part-time employment or no paid employment (Baxter 1993).

One other explanation for women's relative satisfaction with the domestic division of labour which has not received much attention in the literature concerns the kind of work that men do in the household. Most households have a clear gender division of labour with men taking most responsibility for outdoor work, such as mowing the lawn and house maintenance, and women taking most responsibility for indoor work, such as cooking and cleaning (Baxter 1993). Women may be more likely to be satisfied with this kind of division if their husbands participate in some non-traditional areas of domestic work. For example, if men regularly take care of cooking meals, or help with cleaning up after meals, women may be more satisfied than in cases where men do no indoor tasks. In other words, satisfaction may be related to who does what around the household rather than the amount of time spent doing household chores.

Some support for this view has been found by Benin and Agostinelli (1988) who show that wives' levels of satisfaction increase when husbands take on some of wives' traditional tasks, even when the amount of time husbands spend on household chores is much less than the amount of time spent by their wives.

This finding suggests that for many women, the immediate goal may not be to increase the number of tasks that men perform in the household, or to increase the amount of time that men spend on domestic labour, but rather to have a

partner who is prepared to have some input into 'women's work'. In other words, a partner who is prepared to help out, rather than one who spends an equal number of hours on domestic work, may be the main goal for most women.

A further possible explanation for women's high levels of satisfaction with the domestic division of labour is that women are inclined to accept the gender division of labour even if it is objectively inequitable. Gender inequality is a pervasive feature of most modern industrial societies and women are faced with inequitable situations in both paid and unpaid work. In order to deal with this, women may be forced to readjust their expectations and demands. Research has shown that women report higher levels of satisfaction with paid work than men, even though women are typically located in low-paying, low-status positions (Andrisani 1978; Baxter, Lynch-Blosse and Western 1996). This tends to suggest that women experience work differently from men, evaluate their circumstances differently from men, and have different expectations from men.

Women may deal with situations over which they feel they have little control by defining them as satisfactory. On this argument, gender differences in satisfaction with housework between men and women reflect women's greater propensity to define objectively unsatisfactory circumstances as satisfactory. In addition, satisfaction with one sphere of life, like paid work, may spill over to other spheres. In other words, if women are satisfied with their paid work situation they may be less critical of work distributions within the household.

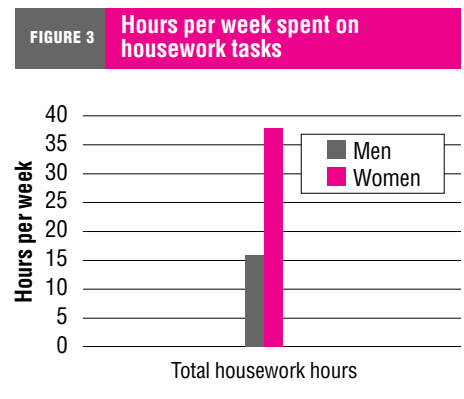
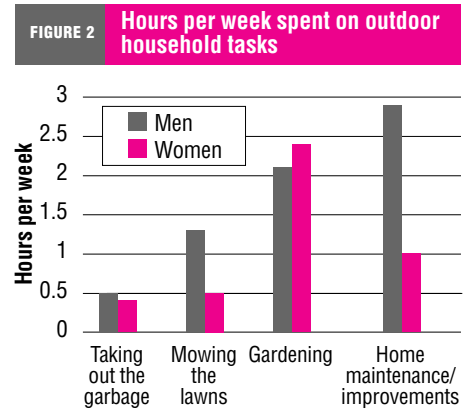
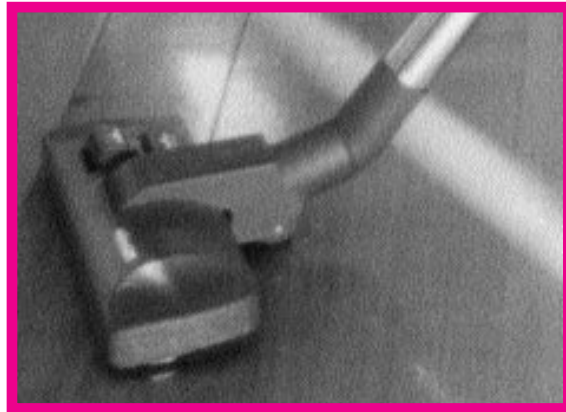
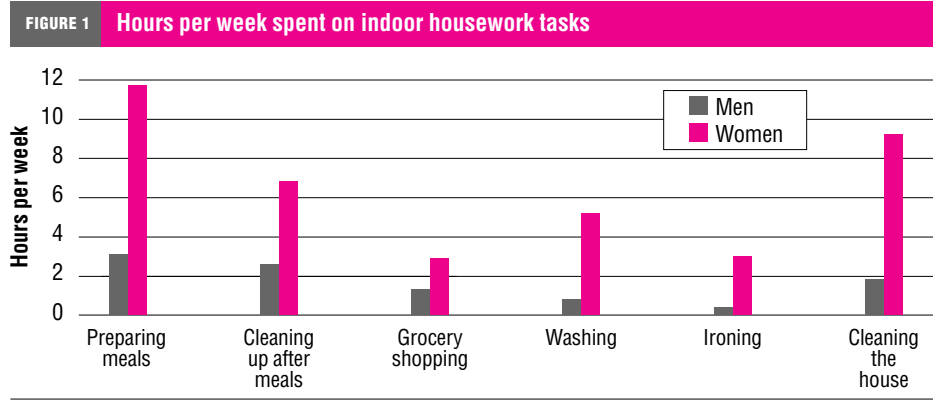
The Study

Data are from a national survey of 2,780 men and women in Australia conducted in 1993 as part of the *Social Structure of Australia* project (Baxter, Western and Western 1993). The data were collected by means of a self-completed questionnaire.

In the current analyses the sample is restricted to men and women aged between 18 and 65 years who are either married or living with a partner. For the analyses of child care patterns, the sample is further restricted to men and women with children under the age of ten years living in the household.

The survey included a range of questions about the domestic division of labour.

Satisfaction with the domestic division of labour was measured by asking respondents the questions: How satisfied are you with the way you and your part-



ner divide child care tasks? How satisfied are you with the way you and your partner divide housework tasks? These items form the dependent variables for the analyses. They range from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 4 (very satisfied).

Hours spent on child care and hours spent on housework were measured by a series of questions that asked respondents to indicate how many hours they spend on selected tasks per week. The child care tasks include feeding children, changing nappies, bathing and dressing children, getting children to bed, and helping children with homework. The housework tasks include preparing meals, cleaning up after meals, shopping for groceries, cleaning the house, putting the garbage out, washing, ironing, mowing the lawns, gardening and home maintenance/improvement.

Satisfaction with Housework

Figures 1–3 show the number of hours married men and women spend on housework tasks in an average week.

Women spend far longer than men on domestic labour – on average, married men do about 16 hours of housework per week, while married women do about 38 hours.

In addition, there is a clear gender division of labour in housework tasks. Women are responsible for most indoor tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing and ironing, while men take major responsibility for outdoor tasks like lawn mowing and home maintenance and improvements. Similar findings have been reported in

many other studies of the domestic division of labour in Australia (Bittman 1992; Goodnow and Bowes 1994), the United Kingdom (Sharpe 1984; Delphy and Leonard 1992; Warde and Hetherington 1993; Gregson and Lowe 1994), and in the United States (Berk 1985; Pleck 1985; Thompson and Walker 1989).

Moreover, these patterns show remarkable consistency over time. In comparison with identical questions in a survey that we conducted in 1986 (Baxter et al. 1986; Baxter et al. 1991), there is no change in the gender division of labour within the household – only a small increase in the amount of time that men are spending on housework – and no decrease in the amount of time that women are spending on housework.

We would expect that women would express high levels of dissatisfaction with this clearly unequal gender division of labour. But as Figures 4 and 6 indicate, about 40 per cent of women are very satisfied with the division of child care and

FIGURE 4 Satisfaction with division of child care tasks: women

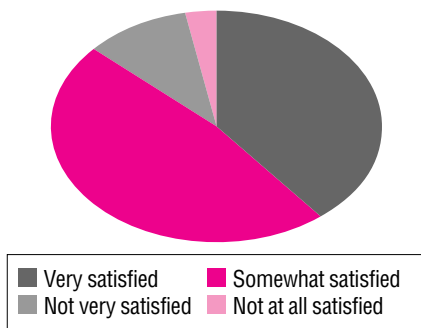


FIGURE 5 Satisfaction with division of child care tasks: men

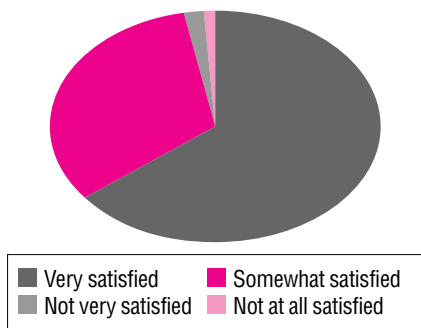


FIGURE 6 Satisfaction with division of housework tasks: women

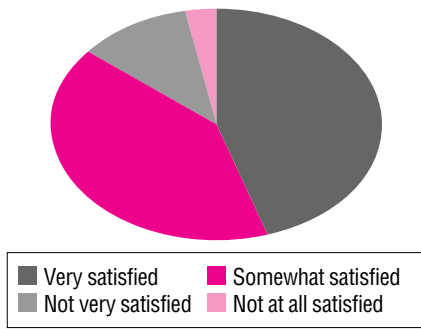


FIGURE 7 Satisfaction with division of housework tasks: men

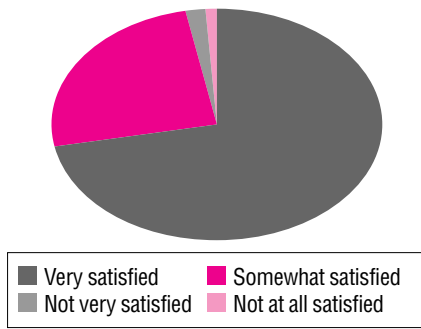
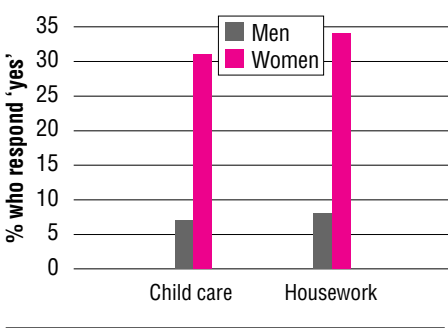


FIGURE 8 Do you think your partner could do more?



about 45 per cent are very satisfied with the division of housework. Similar numbers of women are somewhat satisfied with these arrangements.

Overall then, only about 13 or 14 per cent of women report any dissatisfaction with the way they and their partners organise housework or child care. Among men, satisfaction with the division of housework and child care is almost universal, with only 3 per cent of men indicating any dissatisfaction with either housework or child care arrangements (Figures 5 and 7).

Despite their high levels of satisfaction, Figure 8 shows that about one-third of women clearly recognise that their partners could do more domestic labour, whether housework or child care. Men, on the other hand, indicate that their partners are probably doing as much domestic labour as they are capable of. Only 7 per cent of men think that their partners could do more child care, and only 8 per cent think they are capable of more housework.

In order to explain these results the relationship between a number of factors and levels of satisfaction were examined, using ordinary least squares regression analyses to predict women's level of satisfaction with the division of child care and women's level of satisfaction with the division of housework. The focus was only on women since there is so little variation in men's levels of satisfaction with the domestic division of labour and because the issue for men seems relatively straightforward.

The models included measures of each of the three factors identified by previous research – gender role attitudes, spouse's contribution to the family income, and amount of time spent in paid employment. As discussed earlier, we would expect women with egalitarian sex role attitudes to be less satisfied with the domestic division of labour than women with traditional attitudes. We would also expect that as women's contribution to the household income increases relative to their

partner's contribution that they will express less satisfaction with the domestic division of labour. And we would expect that as women's time spent in paid employment increases women would be less satisfied with unequal divisions of labour in the home.

Also included in each of the models was a measure of women's level of satisfaction with paid work, and measures of men's involvement in non-traditional child care and household tasks.

The results for women's levels of satisfaction with child care show no support for the three factors identified in the literature – gender role attitudes, relative economic resources, and time spent in paid employment, but they do suggest that men's involvement in non-traditional child care tasks increases women's levels of satisfaction with child care. If men participate in feeding children or bathing and dressing children, women's levels of satisfaction increase.

Similarly, the results indicate that men's participation in non-traditional housework tasks increases women's levels of satisfaction with the division of housework. It seems that women's satisfaction increases when husbands are involved in cleaning up after meals, doing the washing and

doing the ironing. This suggests that it may not be the amount of time that men spend on domestic labour, but rather their willingness to help out in some non-traditional areas that contributes to women's levels of satisfaction. Unlike the child care model, the model for housework indicates that gender role attitudes are significant, with more liberal or egalitarian attitudes leading to lower levels of satisfaction with the division of housework.

Interestingly, there is little support in either model for the economic resources hypothesis that women with greater economic power will have lower levels of satisfaction, or for the paid work time hypothesis that women who spend longer periods in paid work will have lower levels of satisfaction.

Similarly, neither model suggests that women's time spent on domestic labour is related to levels of satisfaction with the domestic division of labour.

Conclusion

Women devote a significantly greater proportion of their time to domestic labour than men. But paradoxically, despite spending about an extra 22 hours per week on housework, about 40 to 45 per cent of women are very satisfied with household labour arrangements and another 40 per cent or so are somewhat satisfied.

The key factor influencing women's levels of satisfaction with the domestic



division of labour is husband's involvement in child care and housework. Our data indicate that if husbands participate in some conventional female activities, such as feeding children, preparing meals, cleaning up after meals, cleaning the house or doing the washing, ironing or laundry, then women are more satisfied than if their husbands do not participate in these activities. The relative amount of time husbands spend on housework also matters, but time spent overall by husbands is a less important determinant of women's satisfaction than what men actually do. The more men are involved in non-traditional male activities, the more women report higher levels of satisfaction with their domestic labour arrangements.

This finding implies that for most women the key issue is having 'help' with some specific activities rather than an equal division of time on housework.

The results thus suggest that for most women satisfaction with the way household work is organised does not largely depend on an egalitarian domestic division of labour understood as an equal sharing of time on household work. For most women it seems that the benchmark against which their own household arrangements are judged is not some ideal in which men and women contribute equally to domestic labour (and against which almost all households fall short), but a pragmatic assessment of reality, in which men do much less and in which there is a pronounced gender division of labour.

Against the yardstick of a highly traditional gendered division of domestic labour, any consistent participation by husbands in non-traditional male activities is better than none, and hence is associated with increased satisfaction among women.

This interpretation would suggest that most women are prepared to accommodate an inequitable division of domestic labour as long as husbands help with some of 'women's work'. This work may be tasks that women particularly dislike doing, or tasks that are daily activities and require regular commitment and organisation, such as preparing meals.

A contribution to housework, rather than *equivalence* in housework responsibility, may be women's main goal because the perceivable alternative is not an equal division of labour but a situation in which men do even less.

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