

## FOR THE AVERAGE BRITISH WOMAN, LIFE IN A COUPLE MEANS MORE HOUSEWORK AND LESS WELLBEING

Single women in Britain spend an average of 10 hours a week on housework whereas single men only spend 7 hours a week. But as soon as men and women form a union, women tend to spend more time on housework – an average of 15 hours a week – whereas men react in the opposite direction, falling to 5 hours a week.

Differences like this in spouses' spending of time and money mean that on average, women obtain only 40% of a couple's wellbeing.

These are among the findings of new research by **Hélène Couprie**, published in the January 2007 *Economic Journal*. Her research, which draws on data from the British Household Panel Survey, also finds that such gender inequalities within the household have a significant influence on gender inequalities in the workplace – and vice versa.

British women made substantial advances in terms of gender equality during the twentieth century. The right to vote, to use birth control, to have equal access to education and to the workplace are all established. As a consequence, observable economic indicators such as the falling gender pay gap suggest that gender inequality has declined and could disappear by the end of this century.

But should we be so optimistic? Maybe not. Gender relations in the private sphere are still based on a persistent segregation of gender roles in the family. This leads to a less visible gender inequality in terms of sharing the burden of housework and childcare, which has indirect consequences for inequality in the workplace.

Moreover, both types of inequalities are strongly related: the persistence of gender inequality in the public sphere may explain the persistence of gender inequality in the private sphere – and vice versa.

What is the level of gender inequality in the average British family? This study develops a tool to measure the level of gender inequalities in the private sphere of family life. The principle is to evaluate and compare the wellbeing of spouses, which consists of time and money. The evaluation is based on observation of the 'division of labour' mechanism of couples and takes into account the fact that individuals may place different values on free time, housework and consumption.

The research finds, for example, that women have more taste for housework than men: single women spend on average 10 hours a week on housework whereas single men only spend 7 hours a week.

But as soon as men and women form a union, there is a specialisation of labour: women tend to spend more time on housework (15 hours a week) whereas men react in the opposite direction (5 hours a week).

Controlling for the difference in tastes, the study calculates that the share of housework and paid work among British couples leads to household inequality. Women obtain on average only 40% of the couple's wellbeing.

The research also explores the links between gender inequalities in the public and private spheres. On one hand, the division of labour within families may explain the influence of household inequalities on gender inequalities in the workplace. The specialisation of women into housework may explain why women accumulate fewer skills on the labour

market and tend to be less productive or choose to lower their hours of labour market work. This has a direct consequence for the wage gap.

On the other hand, gender inequalities in the labour market tend to worsen household inequalities. It appears that 80% of household inequalities are driven by differences in the labour market wage rates between spouses. Clearly, the links between household inequalities and gender inequalities in the workplace are really tight.

ENDS

**Notes for editors:** 'Time Allocation within the Family: Welfare Implications of Life in a Couple' by Hélène Couprie is published in the January 2007 issue of the *Economic Journal*.

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