

# Working up a sweat

*Ivor Gaber on the division of housework ... and the wage gap between the genders*

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*Who works harder, men or women? In a marriage or partnership, the answer is that it all depends on the employment circumstances of the couple, their ages and the beliefs they have about their appropriate roles within a household.*

Researcher Xavier Ramos, from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, has been looking at the division of work between men and women in British households. What he has found is that when it comes to housework, on average women do almost four times as much as their partners - men averaging five and a half hours a week, compared with women's 19.

Where both partners are in employment, they end up working (paid and unpaid) almost the same amount of time - 50 hours a week - but with men spending more time in paid work and women spending more time working in the home. However, if the woman is in part-time employment, and the man is working full time, she has a much higher total workload than her male partner - 13 hours more, most of it housework.

The findings are based on the British household panel survey - a long-term survey of some 5,500 households and 10,300 individuals. Ramos, who presented his research at a recent conference organised by the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex, suggests that, despite his overall conclusions, the differences between the amount of time men and women spend in domestic and paid work are narrowing. And this is attributable mainly to the changing behaviour of women.

For men, he found, the amount of time spent doing housework and paid work remained fairly constant throughout the 1990s. But for women, total work time decreased, reflecting a reduction in the time they now spend doing household chores - a reduction that has outweighed any increase in the time they spend in paid work.

The way household chores are divided between partners appears to depend also on the beliefs partners have about the role each should play in a partnership - their "gender ideology". Where both held more traditional beliefs, Ramos found, the division was more unequal and woman did the bulk of the domestic chores, namely food shopping, cooking, cleaning, washing and child care. Couples holding more egalitarian beliefs shared the housework load more equally.

In circumstances where the two partners held different gender ideologies, the man tended to do a smaller part of the domestic work. In other words, men do relatively little domestic work unless both they and their partners are relatively egalitarian in their beliefs about gender roles.

The domestic workload is still shared unequally in Britain. But this is not perceived as unfair. About three-quarters of men and women surveyed thought the division of housework time either "somewhat fair" or "very fair". Individuals have such favourable views, Ramos argues, because they take account of not only their own share of domestic labour but how much time they and their partners spend in paid employment.

• Further information at: [www.iser.essex.ac.uk/press/embargoed/pr2003-13.php](http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/press/embargoed/pr2003-13.php)