

Segregated Domestic Labor and Gender Inequality: A Cross-national Perspective

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Background & Motivation

Cross-national research on gender inequality in domestic labor is flourishing. Research consistently shows that women continue to do more domestic labor than men, especially among couples with children (Kan et al. 2011; Pailhe et al. 2021). Studies also suggest a general slow convergence in time spent in unpaid work by men and women (England, 2010), namely that men have significantly increased their investment in childcare over time with a more modest increase in housework. Nonetheless, studies show that this trend is unequal across countries, wherein some countries continue to be more egalitarian than others (Altintas and Sullivan 2016; Kan et al. 2022). Moreover, housework continues to be segregated, with women investing more time in routine “female-typed” tasks, such as cleaning or cooking. In comparison, men invest more time in non-routine “male-typed” tasks, such as repairs. Childcare tasks are also segregated, wherein men’s participation has increased mainly in more interactive tasks (Sullivan, 2013). Nonetheless, we know less about the segregation of tasks from a cross-national perspective. In this paper, we ask how the sex segregation of domestic labor is associated with overall gender inequality in unpaid work across 15 European countries.

Data and Methods

Our data comes from the Harmonized European Time Use survey (HETUS). It is a dataset created by Eurostat from the national time use surveys conducted in Europe. The reference year of the dataset is 2010, although the surveys were conducted in the period 2008-15. Original national surveys were carried out following the guidelines provided by Eurostat, but a harmonization process was necessary to create the microdata for researchers because not all variables and categories in each country (HETUS, 2008). The scientific use files are available for 17 countries (15 EU countries, Norway and Serbia), but our final sample is based on 15 countries because some variables are not detailed enough for the Netherlands and Luxembourg. The countries included in the study are the following: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Estonia (EE), Finland (FI), France, (FR), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Hungary (HU), Italy (IT), Norway (NO), Poland (PL), Romania (RO), Serbia (RS) Spain (ES), United Kingdom (UK). We focus on couples living with children under age 18 (n=74,630).

Dependent variable

Our dependent variables correspond to the time spent by respondent on several unpaid work activities (in minutes). HETUS recoded the main activities reported in the diaries according to the Activity Coding List developed in 2008 (ACL2008). In the ACL2008, activities are coded in 108 items reported as 3-digit detail. The detailed activities used in the analysis have been computed based on the 3-digit code. We distinguish between housework and childcare as our two main outcomes and also focus on the following detailed tasks:

- Housework (300-371). Also include other activities not specified
 - o Food (311): Food preparation

- Clean (312-329): Dish washing, arranging, preserving food store, cleaning dwelling, etc.
- Laundry (330-339): Laundry, ironing
- Odds-jobs (341-359): Gardening, caring for pets, house construction and reparations, etc.
- Administration (361-371): Shopping, commercial and administrative services, etc.
- Childcare: 381-389
 - Supervision (381 and 384): Physical care and supervision, accompanying child
 - Teach & play (382): Teaching, reading, playing and talking with child

Explanatory variables

The main explanatory variables are gender and country. Gender is a key variable since we are analyzing differences of time spent in the tasks between men and women. Country is introduced in all levels of the analysis too in order to check if gender differences depend on the context and welfare state regime.

Control variables

We carry out multivariate analysis controlling for several socioeconomic characteristics that are known to be associated with differences in the time spent on unpaid work. We control for age, employment status, education, age of youngest child, marital status (cohabiting or married), and the day of the week when the time diary was collected (weekday or weekend).

Analytical approach

First, we present the time spent by men and women in domestic work and in childcare in total and by detailed tasks in each country. Estimates correspond to the weighted means of the individuals in each selected sample and control for the variables mentioned above. We present preliminary results for this part below. Next, we will create scales to quantify gender inequality and levels of task segregation to investigate the relationship between gender inequality and task segregation across countries.

Preliminary results

Preliminary results show that there is great variance in the time investments and task sex-segregation across countries. In all countries, women spend more time than men in all unpaid tasks, except in non-routine tasks (“odd jobs”). Gender inequalities in housework tasks are higher in Mediterranean and Eastern European countries and lower in Nordic countries. By tasks, laundry is the most segregated, followed by food preparation, and cleaning. Regarding childcare, the highest differences are observed in Eastern European countries and in this case the rest of countries show a more similar pattern. Differences are much lower in more interactive tasks.

Multivariate analysis confirms cross-national variance in the levels of task segregation. In Eastern European and Mediterranean countries housework tasks are more segregated, wherein, food preparation and cleaning are the activities where the differences are highest. Non-routine tasks are the only activity in which men spend more time, but with great variance across countries. Differences are lower in household administration duties and teaching and playing with children, that are not statistically significant in a few cases.

In next steps, we will investigate the association between these trends and the pattern of gender inequality cross-nationally.

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