

Men's Reluctance to Change: Factors Explaining New Gender Divisions of Labour in Western Europe

Teresa Jurado-Guerrero (tjurado@poli.uned.es)

Manuela Naldini (manuela.naldini@unito.it)

Ma. José González (mjose.gonzalez@upf.edu)

Women in western nations are achieving higher educational and occupational positions, and they have more freedom for choosing life goals. The most outstanding socio-demographic question, however, is not so much related to the new role of women but to men's reluctance to change. While women have progressively increased the amount of hours devoted to paid employment, this process has seldom been translated in a more equal share of unpaid caring and domestic activities within couples. This puzzle has inspired a great deal of research in recent years, which provides different explanations at the micro and macro level, such as the persistence of traditional values, women's relative economic disadvantage, women's need to demonstrate her 'motherhood skills' while being in full-time paid work, gender-roles socialisation, lack of state support to dual-career couples or lagged men's adaptation to women's changes (Coltrane 2000, Major 1993).

Research goal

This paper attempts to contribute with a multi-level approach to the study of men's participation in domestic activities placing special emphasis on cross-national differences in the institutional context (i.e. women's options to exit relationships) and women's empowerment (e.g. occupation and earnings conditions) in contrast to gender preference theory. In line with some pioneering research within this perspective (Breen and Cooke 2005, Batalova and Cohen 2002, Gershuny et al. 2005, Crompton et al. 2007, Davis and Greenstein 2004), we advocate for embedding the analysis of the gender division of housework in cultural, demographic and economic contexts.

Working hypotheses

We test three main hypotheses. First, we expect that in countries with a low degree of marital instability and a low diffusion of consensual unions, men will have less incentives to renegotiate traditional 'gender roles' as they still rely on a long-lasting relationship based on mutual support and female economic dependence. Therefore, at the macro-level we expect to find more young couples with a clear-cut gender division of labour in countries with low marital instability (i.e. divorce and separation) and low premarital cohabitation rates. Second, we expect that women's index of empowerment is a better predictor for men's participation in domestic work than national distributions of gender preferences. Third, we also expect that couples' characteristics (income, education, working time

schedules) are robust indicators to predict men's domestic work even controlling for preferences.

Data

The paper is mainly based on the European Social Survey (the ESS). This survey has been designed as a time series data (collection takes place every two years) representative of all persons aged 15 and over resident within private households. The Survey started in 2001, has so far three rounds and its third one covered over 20 nations (26 countries have taken part in round 2). The questionnaire consists of a 'core' module relatively constant from round to round plus 'rotating' modules which focus on specific themes. The second round provides relevant information for our analysis on 'Family, Work, and Well-being'. This module explores in particular atypical work, spouse's employment, and spouse's contribution to household chores. For the construction and validation of the dependent variable and for some relevant macro-level variables, we will also use the International Social Survey Programme data of 2002.

Methodology

We use regression model techniques with a multi-level approach to predict men's participation in domestic work. We include three main analytical levels: individual characteristics (preferences and material constraints), couples characteristics (e.g. earnings homogeneity and employment patterns), and country characteristics (e.g. data on marital instability such as divorce rate, percentage of young cohabiting couples, and data on women's empowerment). Thus, the dependent variable is the relative amount of hours men devote to the household's domestic activities, while controlling for relevant variables at the three above-described levels.

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