

The work-family-childcare-life balance ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

How to best manage paid work, domestic work and quality childcare is a dilemma for couples worldwide. The last half-century has witnessed a gender revolution that has brought about more egalitarian beliefs and major changes in family structure. So how are couples around the world actually achieving – or not achieving – the balance? This year's World Family Map Project essay set out to examine this question.

The data, which surveyed thousands of individuals and couples worldwide, revealed that there is no longer one dominant pattern for dividing paid and domestic work in any world region. Nor was any particular approach consistently linked to higher levels of happiness among parents; those families with a mother working full time in the home were found to be just as happy as those that work. In fact the only dominant findings with regard to happiness were that parents who have a partner with whom to divide the labour report more happiness than parents who do not have a partner, and religious parents are happier than those who are not.

Interestingly, in higher-income countries couples with children are more likely to divide work along traditional gender lines (that is, a husband working full-time while his wife manages the home and children). This could be the case because couples with enough financial freedom to make a choice are more likely to choose to have a mother at home for their children. For many families two incomes are increasingly necessary to support a family so a traditional division of labour has become less practical.

At the same time, having a mother at home may have become less desirable where women as well as men are educated and socialized for market work. Rightly or wrongly women may feel that having an identity beyond the home gives more meaning to their lives and adds to their feelings of self-worth regardless of financial necessity.

The neo-traditional model, in which the woman works part-time and the man works full-time, while the woman takes the lead in domestic work, may represent a happy medium in terms of couples' non-work time, income, and similarity vs. complementarity. On the other hand, professional women who still take on more housework may be less happy, and some part-time jobs offer poor pay, less meaningful careers and poor promotion prospects.

In summary, the four categories utilised by the study were: traditional (he works for pay, she doesn't), neo-traditional (both do paid work, but he works at least seven hours a week more than she does), egalitarian (the gap between their weekly paid work hours is less than seven hours), and reverse traditional (she works at least seven hours a week more than he does). The division of domestic work among couples with children was summarised using similar categories.

It found that a traditional division of paid work is more common in the United States, Australia, Asia, Central and South America, and South Africa (30 to 39 percent of partnered parents) than in any region of Europe (7 to 27 percent). Could this help explain Europe's lower fertility rates? The neo-traditional pattern with mothers working, but substantially less than fathers, is the most common arrangement in Australia and Western Europe. Interestingly, despite its relatively high proportion of traditional couples, the United States is also home to the world's greatest proportion of couples where the woman works substantially more hours than the man (14 percent of couples).

The age of a family's children made a difference to the amount of hours women worked. For instance, women in Eastern Europe with school-aged children actually work 2.2 more paid hours per week than those without children, but 15.0 hours fewer if they have younger children. The following graph summarises the division of paid work among couples with children in regions around the world:

The most common division of domestic work in every region is neo-traditional, meaning men pitch in, but women do significantly more. Egalitarian arrangements are only common in Northern Europe, where almost half of couples with children share domestic work equally. Generally the regions where fewer mothers are in the paid labour force are the regions where men are the most likely to do no domestic work at all: South Africa, Asia, and Central and South America. The United States is the exception to this rule; 32 percent of partnered mothers do no paid work, but all fathers still did at least some domestic work (congratulations to them!).

Taking into account both paid work and domestic work, in Northern Europe (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) the largest

majority of couples with children reported an egalitarian division of labour (36 percent) and the least number a traditional one (5 percent); thus this region displays the greatest institutionalised gender role change. In Southern and Eastern Europe women's movement into paid work has progressed more quickly than men's integration into domestic work; almost half of women in these regions do as much paid work as their partners, but most of them still do more domestic work as well, a situation which surely makes family life very busy for those women. Australia and Western Europe have large numbers of neo-traditional couples (41 and 38 percent, respectively) where the woman does more domestic work and less paid work than her male partner.

Overall, how couples with children divide labour was found to be less closely related to happiness than was expected. In the midst of profound pluralism, most parents appear to find an arrangement that suits them well enough. At least when it comes to parents' happiness, these results suggest that how you divide paid and domestic work matters less than having a partner with whom to share the load and attending a religious service regularly in terms of overall happiness.

It also appears that wealth affects the choices parents make, indicating that given the financial choice more mothers would stay at home and men may spend more time with their children (men were found to spend more time doing domestic tasks in higher income countries). The outcome for children and their future happiness could potentially be a different story and remains to be seen amid such profound social change.

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