

# MALE DOMESTIC LABOUR AND HOUSEHOLD FERTILITY

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## ABSTRACT

Birth rates are falling, and gender inequity at population level is thought to be one explanation. This paper investigates whether the division of domestic labour at family level is also implicated. It conducts logistic regression analysis of data from the longitudinal survey Household and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey and finds the more equitably mothers and fathers of one child share housework, the more likely they are to have more children. Also, men's relationship satisfaction moderately influences household fertility outcomes. The results imply that policy intended to promote fertility should be directed not only at women but also at men.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Birth rates are falling throughout the western world. There is no definitive answer as to why this is happening, although the recent trend to fertility decline has occurred concurrently with the large-scale movement of women into the paid work force. Also, despite taking up employment, women retain disproportionate responsibility for domestic work. This raises the question of whether the division of domestic labour is implicated in fertility decline. This paper analyses longitudinal data from the Household and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey to investigate the possibility that how mothers and fathers of one child share domestic labour influences whether or not they have more children.

### 1.1 BACKGROUND

Until recently, fertility was negatively associated with female work force participation both at the household and population level (Mincer 1985). However, this is no longer the case. Since the 1980s national fertility rates and female labour force participation have been positively correlated (Hobson et al. 2006). Countries in which relatively high numbers of mothers are in the paid work force have higher fertility rates than countries in which fewer mothers do market work (Engelhardt and Prskawetz 2004; McDonald 2000a). This has been interpreted as suggesting that the more difficult it is for women to combine family responsibilities with paid work, the fewer children they will have. It is argued that this is particularly so when there is a large mismatch between the opportunities of childless women and mothers (McDonald 2000b). That is, in countries where women can access education and market work on relatively equal terms with men, but are not as readily able to participate after motherhood, fewer children will be born. The lesson most widely taken from this is that social policies that facilitate mothers' continued work force participation are those most likely to encourage fertility (de Laat and Sevilla Sanz 2004; McDonald 2006). Increasing women's engagement in paid work would also meet the goal, becoming urgent in many countries, of combating looming labour shortages (OECD 2004).

However, facilitating female work force participation addresses gender equity in the public sphere, but not the private. Households require unpaid domestic labour to be done in addition to market work and changes in the distribution of paid work have been more

radical than changes in the home. Even when both marital partners work full time, women continue to perform over twice as much household unpaid labour as men (Baxter et al. 2005). In many countries the domestic labour gap is exacerbated by the presence of children (Author 2007). Gender-neutral public opportunities for women may co-exist with gendered expectations in the private sphere. This inconsistency between women's opportunity in public institutions, and what is expected in the institution of the family is said to create "institutional incoherence" which inhibits fertility (McDonald 2001).

Fertility decisions are a complicated mix of the personal and the social. A pivotal issue within fertility decline, and one where the interplay of public influence and private decision-making may be particularly salient, is going from no children to one, from one to two and so on. Some studies have compared the likelihood of a second birth in various policy settings. Köppen (2006) found that educated women were more likely to have a second child in France, where policies specifically aim to reconcile work and family, than in Germany, where they do not. Oláh (2003) analysed data from Sweden and Hungary to see if differences between the countries in gender equity policies and institutional supports for female work force participation increase the likelihood of second births. She concluded that institutional support for gender equity encourages more children, and that women were more likely to have a second child if fathers took parental leave with the first (Oláh 2003).

Family-level analyses complement population-level enquiry. Evidence is emerging that the division of domestic labour, not just the division of paid labour, is implicated in intra-household fertility decisions. Cooke (2004) analysed German data to find that husbands' relative domestic contribution increased the likelihood of a second birth, and Torr and Short (2004), using US data, found a relationship between gender equity, fertility and gender ideology, which suggested that both the most modern and the most traditional housework arrangements are positively associated with second births. Torr and Short argue that their findings underscore the need to incorporate family context, including gender equity, into explanations for fertility change. Both men's and women's understandings and wishes are of importance to household fertility decisions (Cannold 2005).

The literature suggests that gender equity at both national and family level may influence fertility. This paper contributes to this emerging body of research by addressing the question: does the way household labour is divided between Australian couples with one child affect the likelihood they will have more children?

## **1.2 DATA AND METHOD**

This paper analyses a sub-sample of Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data, created as follows. Data sets across Waves 1 to 4 were merged firstly using the cross-wave id. Cases where the "number of own children living with you at least 50% of the time" was not equal to one were deleted, leaving a sample of 2065 respondents. Respondents without a matched partner identification code were then removed, leaving a sample of 1318 (or 659 couples). After splitting the data set by sex into two files, cases with missing values and invalid data on the dependent variable for women at Wave 2 were deleted. This was sequentially repeated for the remaining sample at Waves 3 and 4, leaving a sample of 189 women. However, 75 of these were older than 45 years (for whom fertility is unlikely), and so were also excluded. The data from each of the remaining women's corresponding partner was then merged back into the file. Thus, the longitudinal analyses in this report are based on a final sample of 114 heterosexual couples. From Wave 1 to 4, 36.0% (N=41) of the women in this sample had another child.

## 1.3 MEASURES

### 1.3.1 INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

The HILDA questionnaire asks “in a typical week, how many hours would you spend on housework, such as preparing meals, washing dishes, cleaning house, washing clothes, ironing and sewing?” The paper uses this question to calculate women’s *share of housework hours* by deriving the percentage of hours that the female respondent spends on housework from the couple’s total hours spent on housework per week (averaged across Waves 1 and 2).

The questionnaire also asks “in a typical week, how many hours would you spend playing with your children, helping them with personal care, teaching, coaching or actively supervising them, or getting them to child care, school and other activities?” This question is used to calculate women’s *share of childcare hours* by deriving the percentage of hours that the female respondent spends on childcare each week from the couple’s total hours (averaged across Waves 1 and 2).

*Perceived fairness in the share of housework* is a subjective measure of the distribution of domestic labour, scored on a continuum from 1 = I do much more than my fair share, 2 = I do more than my fair share, 3 = I do my fair share, 4 = I do less than my fair share, to 5 = I do much less than my fair share. The relationship between perceived fairness, actual amount of housework and actual share in housework is complex. Preliminary analysis found that in this sample perceptions of fairness among wives were unrelated to the perceptions of fairness of their husbands, and did not correspond to the objective share of housework. Women did 75.6 percent of the housework, but 41 per cent of women and 61 per cent of men described this as fair.

We investigate variables of relationship satisfaction for both men and women. We examine these factors separately by sex, because each member of a couple may have independent views on the quality of their relationships, and also because these views may have a differential impact upon fertility decisions. (Cannold 2005) emphasises the importance of recognising that men’s contribution to fertility decisions, arguing that male reluctance constitutes a significant barrier to the fertility of many women who would like more children. *Relationship satisfaction* with i) partner ii) children and iii) partner’s relationship with their children are assessed on a scale of 0 = completely dissatisfied to 10 = completely satisfied.

Previous research suggests that both decisions about second births and the way they may be affected by household equity will vary with *gender ideology* (Torr and Short 2004). In HILDA, fourteen items assess gender ideology. These include ‘whatever career a woman may have, her most important role in life is still that of being a mother’, and ‘it is better if the man works, and the woman cares’. These items were only assessed at Wave 1 and are scored from 1-7, where 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree. High scores indicate traditional (as opposed to egalitarian) gender ideology.

*Whether women would like to have more children* is scored from 0 = definitely doesn’t want children to 10 = very much like to have children and how likely it is that they will have more children in the future is scored from 0 = very unlikely to 10 = very likely. We expect *Parenting stress* is comprised of four items such as ‘Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be’, and is scored from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

### 1.3.2 DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

The number of children people has been found to vary with demographic circumstance (Parr 2006). There are 10 demographic variables examined in this study – women’s share of household income, educational level, employment status, age, duration of marriage, index of relative socio-economic advantage/disadvantage (SEIFA), age of the first child, and each partner’s country of birth, and their number of siblings. All are assessed at Wave 1.

### **1.3.3 METHOD**

We conduct logistic regression analysis to investigate whether equity in domestic labour is associated with more births, net of other factors. The dependent variable (DV) is categorical, coded as either 0 = no other children or 1 = other children. Values for the item "number of own children living with you at least 50% of the time" were transformed so that cases equal to 1 were coded in the DV as 0 and cases where the value to this item were greater than 1 were coded in the DV as 1.

Four models were tested to see how the predictive power of the independent variables on the chances of women having more than one child by Wave 4, are affected by other predictors of second births. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Logistic regression**

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Odds	SE	Odds	SE	Odds	SE	Odds	SE
Women's share of hours housework	-1.974 *	0.749	-2.443 **	0.913	-2.195 **	0.944	-2.605 **	1.259
Women's share of hours childcare	-0.653	0.992	0.84	1.327	-0.626	1.489	1.863	2.275
Perceived fairness share of housework			0.249	0.379	-0.289	0.394	-0.174	0.497
Satisfaction relationship with partner			0.154	0.162	0.119	0.171	0.512	0.292
Satisfaction relationship with children			0.829	0.574	-0.685	0.600	-0.861	0.735
Satisfaction partner's relationship with			0.631	0.375	0.502	0.398	0.404	0.454
Satisfaction relationship with partner (men)			-0.985 **	0.437	-0.821 *	0.422	-1.743 **	0.655
Satisfaction relationship with children (men)			0.203	0.428	-0.024	0.447	-0.352	0.928
Satisfaction partner's relationship with			1.184 *	0.605	-1.05	0.643	2.364 **	0.928
Working fathers care more about work					-0.113	0.180	-0.255	0.254
Father should be as heavily involved as					0.348	0.180	0.722 *	0.349
Working parents should share equally in					0.268	0.268	0.496	0.424
housework and childcare (men)					0.462	-0.303	-1.364	1.001
Education (women)							-0.534	0.848
SEIFA score (women)							0.730 **	0.258
Number of siblings (women)							2.263	1.135
Employment status (women)							1.112	1.099
Employment status (men)							-2.934 **	1.169
Country of birth (women)							1.112	1.825
Country of birth (men)								

Source: HILDA Notes: \*\*\* p< 0.01 \*\* p<0.05 \* p<0.10

## 2 DISCUSSION

The results of this study tentatively suggest that domestic equity in housework shares does increase the odds that Australian households will have more than one child. For every unit increase toward domestic equity, couples were about twice as likely to have more children. The finding was for housework only, not childcare. We did not find share of childcare to be associated with greater likelihood of second birth. This is possibly because the wording of the HILDA question emphasises the "play" aspects of childcare, which are more likely to be performed by fathers, and so may be biased by gender. However, it also could be because the gender division of childcare is very different from the gender division of housework. Men's domestic contributions are much more likely to be childcare than housework, and much of the childcare men perform is play-related (Author 2006b, 2007). Parents do not use domestic power to bargain out of spending time with children as much as they do housework (Author 2006b). Also, historically, there has been a movement towards both fathers and mothers spending more time with children (Bianchi et al. 2006), but men's time in housework other than childcare has hardly shifted (Baxter 2002). This implies that those men who do perform a greater share of actual housework, not just of childcare, are providing particularly valuable, and more rare, practical input to the running of the home. Our results suggest that this has a direct effect on couples' likelihood of having more children.

The results also show the importance of subjective factors. Some gender ideology items, and men's relationship satisfaction with their partner, and (in Model 4) with their partner's relationships with children, were predictive of whether or not they had another child. This is an important reminder that fertility decisions result from the attitudes and wishes of both partners, not just women. Indeed, it may support the argument that reduced fertility is less a result of women's own choices than of social barriers, including lack of support from others (Cannold 2005). An implication of this is that our finding that Australian families in which housework is more fairly divided between partners are less likely to stall at one child may not apply in all policy environments.

## 3 CONCLUSIONS

This paper used logistic regression analysis of the Australian data set HILDA and found that net of other factors, the more equally housework (but not childcare) is shared between parents of one child, the more likely it is they will have more children. It also found that men's relationship satisfaction is important to household fertility outcomes. The results imply that policy intended to promote fertility should not just be directed at women but also at men. Encouraging women into the paid work force could be usefully supplemented by policy interventions that directly or indirectly facilitate male participation in housework.

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