

WGS.S10

Mindy Fried

### **The Division of Household Labor in Traditional Families**

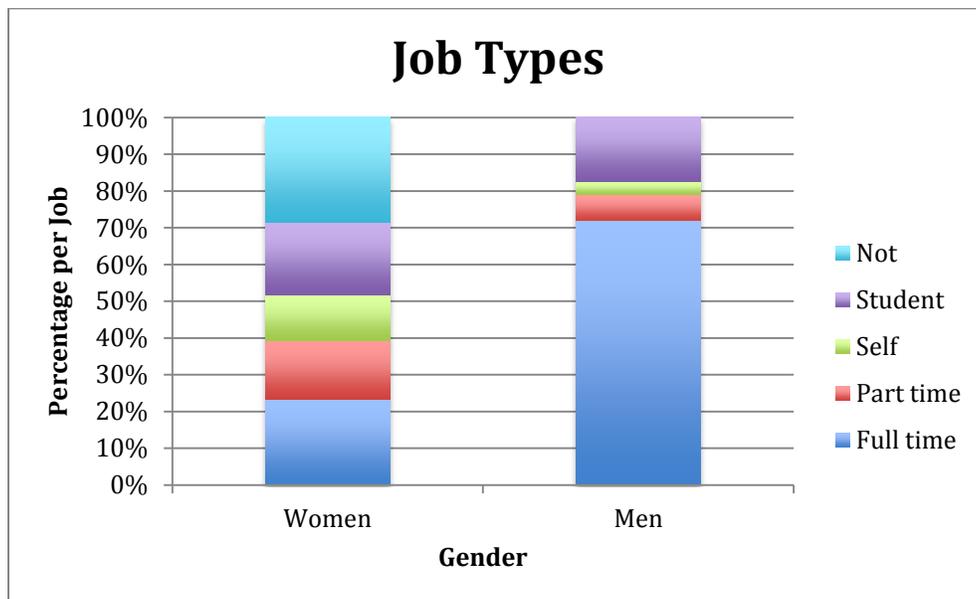
In our modern world, women and men are moving towards equal representation in many areas, from working outside the home to childcare. There is certainly more room for things to truly become 50/50, but progress is being made. However, in the realm of housework, it appears that little progress has been made. While it is true that men are working more in the home, their increased contributions tend to be of the more ‘fun’ nature, from playing with children to cooking, whereas the women are still scrubbing the toilets and sweeping (Grose). Additionally, men are continuing to mainly contribute in the ‘outside’ housework chores, such as yardwork and car care. These chores tend to be more flexible in how often they are done and when they are completed. This division of labor in the household is generally seen as a result of gender stereotypes.

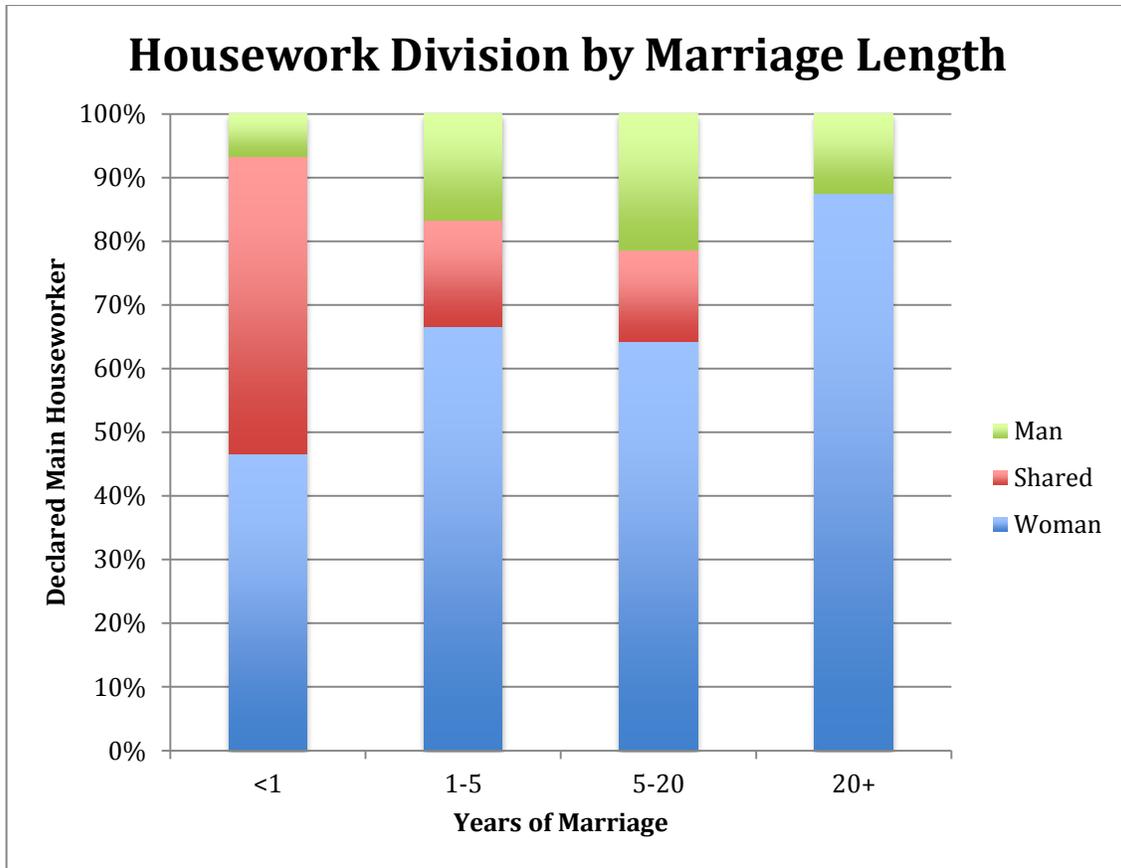
Gender stereotypes typically are implicit – only stated outright by comedians and jerks. Would this uneven division of labor be increased in situations where it is outwardly stated and encouraged? A place where this occurs is in the Mormon community.

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are taught that men are to preside over their families, and are charged with providing for them. On the other hand, women are responsible for nurturing their children. However, this viewpoint doesn’t work for all families, as two wages are often required to support the modern family. In response to this, church leadership has asked members “as parents, work together to keep Mother in the home” (Scott, 1996). In a culture that puts so much emphasis on women staying home and taking care of children, how do they navigate balancing of housework?

Do Mormon women strive for a 50/50 split of the sweeping, or are they happy with having different roles within the home, focusing on reproductive labor?

In order to get a sense of how work is currently distributed in Mormon families and how women feel about it, 57 women were surveyed about how the housework was distributed within their home. These women represented a wide range of perspectives, being semi-equally divided between those with full time work, part-time, self employed, students, and not employed. Additionally, these women represented a large distribution in the length of their marriages, with a fairly equal distribution in the categories of <1 year, 1-5 years, 5-20 years and >20 years of marriage, with the longest marriage amounting to 45 years, and the shortest at 2 months. However, most of the women had a husband who was working full-time or was a student. As such, these women represent a full dynamic range of options for Mormon women, while the full-time male worker/student is generally a constant.

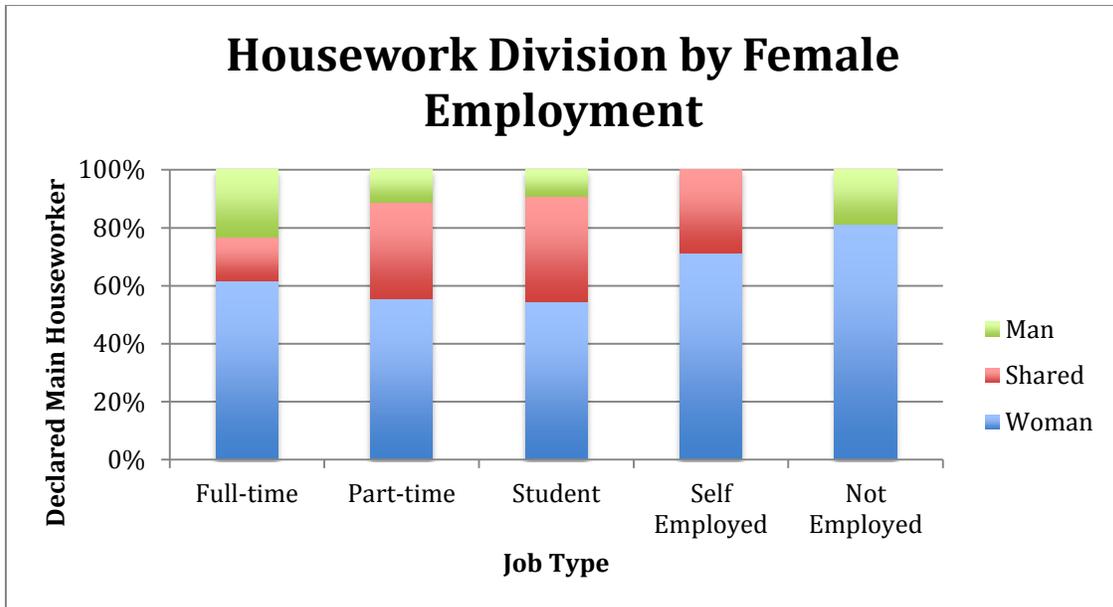




According to Marche and Thompson, the amount of housework that men did grew between the 1960's and 1980's, but has remained rather constant since then. While survey respondents were not asked how the division of labor evolved over time in their household, it is possible to compare the division of labor between those with different marriage lengths. When this is done, as shown in the above graph, it can be seen that women in longer marriages tend to be doing a larger share of the work. This could reflect different ideals going into marriage – those of the younger generation may have been exposed to feminist ideals for longer and pushed for more help in the home. Additionally, they are more likely to be working full-time than those who have been married longer, and therefore may have less time to do housework. The more interesting trend in this graph is the amount of people who declared the housework as being shared. In marriages

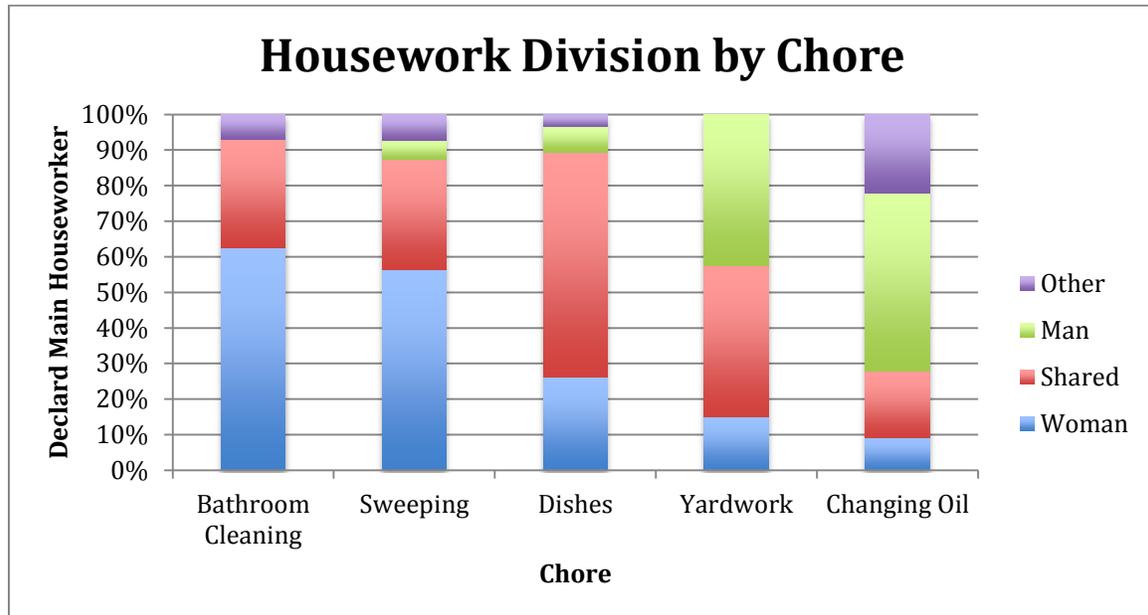
that had lasted less than a year, nearly 50% of women said that they shared housework evenly. However, less than 20% of those who had been married for 1-5 years thought they shared the housework equally. This could result from the introduction of children to the family unit, or could be simply a result of leaving the 'honeymoon' period where women believe that their marriage will be perfect and everything will be shared equally. No women who have been married for 20 years or more believe that their housework is shared equally. Whether this reflects a difference of ideals between the generations or the nature of how housework is shared over time in a marriage is beyond the scope of this survey.

Another factor that is interesting to consider when looking at the distribution of housework is the nature of the work of the female. As women begin to share in the work to provide for their family, do the men step forward and share in the labor around the home? In this survey sample, it appears that there is a limited relationship between the amount of time the woman works and how much the man helps out. In homes where the woman is working full time, it is more likely that the man is the primary houseworker than when the woman is only working part-time or not at all. However, in 60% of the homes where both the woman and man are full-time, the woman is doing the majority of the housework. Women who are students are the most likely to share their work with their husbands. However, this may reflect the overabundance of shared work seen in the first year of marriage, as most of the students have been married for less than a year. Part time workers also see a similar level of shared housework, and are distributed in the age of their marriage. Generally speaking though, Mormon women are just as likely to do the housework when they are working as when they are not.



Even in homes where housework is split 50/50, Hoschild found that women tended to do more of the daily work – the laundry, the dishes – while the men tend to do fix things and work outside. Men have more say over when they do their housework, and can put it off till the next day if needed. Within the survey, women were asked to designate who did certain chores within their house between the woman, man, shared, other family member, or someone was paid to do it. Instead of a trend between daily work and free-time work, this survey found a correlation between outside and inside work, with men doing the work outside. Within the free response questions, there were often quotes like this: “We generally agreed years ago that outside the house was his job with my help (including car repairs and garage) and inside the house was my job. Has worked great.” Or “Mans job is to do the trash and repairs.” These quotes reveal a general sentiment that is seen in the results of the chores. In the graph on the next page, five of the more representative chores and how they are shared is shown. Here it can be seen that the man does significantly more of the yardwork and changing the oil, whereas the women cleans the bathroom and does the sweeping. Most surprising is the sharing of the

dishes. Over 50% of women said that they shared the dishes with their husband. This chore is both daily and within the home. Maybe the high visibility and necessity of dishes contributes to this chore being shared more often than other chores of a similar nature.



In Mormon households, regardless of the working status of the woman, it has been shown that the woman is generally doing more of the housework, especially inside of the home. This is not very different from women outside of the church. However, where things may be different is whether women think this is a problem. The results on this were mixed. The women in this survey were not specifically asked if they were happy with the way the housework was currently divided, however, several of them did bring up this point in their answers to the free response questions, which were not required to complete the survey. There were comments on both sides, some expressing general happiness with doing more work in the home, while others stressed that they tried to convince their husbands to do more to no avail. Generally, women who had been married for shorter periods of time were more likely to express dissatisfaction, like this woman, who works full-time and has been married 2.5 years. “We agreed that while we

are both working full time they should be split evenly, but that never happens. We are still working through issues and I am pretty tired of him not contributing a whole lot, even when I ask him to do one specific chore like taking out the garbage. I usually end up doing it.” Here the agreement has been made, and the ideal is set up, but the woman ends up doing more of the work anyways, and is frustrated. On the other hand, women who had been married for longer tended to express more satisfaction, or complacency with their role doing most of the housework, like this woman who stayed at home and had been married for 17.5 years. “We did not have a formal agreement. When we were both working we pretty much shared everything. After kids came into the picture I stopped working and became a full time mom & homemaker. I appreciate him working so hard, so I don't have to. I don't mind doing house chores. We both work hard and share the benefits.” This woman is happy with the division of labor inside and outside the home, and sees it as beneficial.

Does this tendency for younger women to be more upset come from a difference in ideals between the generations, or because the longer a marriage lasts, the more likely it is that women and men work out the kinks of housework such that everyone is happy with the amount they put in? Regardless of the cause, there was no solid consensus between the women over the proper way to split housework. While many of these women believe that a woman is primarily responsible for the nurturing of children, they may not think that this mandate includes housework. As one respondee stated “As a young Mormon woman, I believe in the importance of motherhood and homemaking and see that as my primary occupation. While I believe I am in no way expendable in these roles, I also in no way believe that housework is entirely my responsibility. Housework/

homemaking/ mothering are not synonymous.” For those women who don’t feel that the work is their responsibility, how do they strike a balance with their husbands? One of the free response questions asked if women specifically made agreements with their husbands on who did what work, and if they had examples of issues they had worked through in the past. These responses, and many people in the literature, have proposed solutions for balancing the housework properly.

One of the more recently proposed and widely debated solutions was proposed by Stephen Marche in “The Case for Filth” and by Jonathan Chait in “A Really Easy Answer to the Feminist Housework Problem.” They argue that our houses are generally cleaner than they need to be, and that women are usually the side of the equation that wants the house cleaner. They propose that we just become more comfortable with dirty homes, like bachelor pads, then women would have to do less work in general. The data from the survey agrees with this. Across all marriage lengths and types of employment for the females, there were comments of women feeling like their husbands were more comfortable in a dirty home than they were, and therefore were less likely to help. As one woman stated, “The biggest issue is that I am tidier than he is by preference, so we had to go over what tasks I would like him to do.” Another woman mentions that her husband doesn’t notice when the dishes pile up in the sink. Clearly there is some truth to the statement that men are generally more comfortable with dirty than women, as Marche argues. However, Derek Thompson argues that few people would actually find dirtier homes the correct solution, although he doesn’t propose an alternate solution. Many of the woman in the survey suggested laying out specific tasks or agreements for their

husbands so they put in as much time as their wives without having to ‘notice’ that the room is dirty.

However, this is not a good solution for all couples. Consider the statement of the woman earlier, who stated that she and her husband agreed to split the work 50/50, but she had to remind him constantly and often found herself frustrated. Many of the women in this survey suggested that everyone should just pitch in where they can. Or to split up the chores based on who likes what. This was actually a surprisingly common answer amongst respondents, with sentences like this: “we each have specific chores we like or dislike, and it worked out that we liked/disliked different jobs.” However, this natural splitting on the housework would appear to follow the typical gender roles that were seen in the 12 example chores that women were questioned about in this survey.

One interesting study showed that women who earned more than their husbands often were more unhappy with their marriages, and were more likely to put more hours into housework than their husbands (Thompson). This is a trend that can be seen with the Mormon women. Those who are working full time seem to be putting more time into housework as those who are working part-time or are students, and almost as much time as those who are working or not working at home. With the current economy and trends, more Mormon women will need to work outside the home in order to support their families. As such, this may be a real barrier for them to overcome, as they will feel extra pressure to be primary caregivers due to their belief that it is their role in the family.

Regardless of the belief of whether women should be responsible for housework just as they are responsible for the nurturing of their children, women of the church should be aware of the stresses that come from bearing the brunt of the housework in

addition to their wage-earning job, and have a plan with their husbands, whether that plan is to split the work along gender roles, or to split all work 50/50. Mormons often describe themselves as living “in the world, but not of the world.” Mormon women will have to find a way to maintain their standards for the role of women within the family unit while living in a world where they may be required to spend more time outside the home than they would like. Likewise, Mormon men will have to find ways to support women and share in the work where it works for that couple.

### Works Cited

- Chait, Jonathan. "[A Really Easy Answer to the Housework Problem.](#)" *Daily Intelligencer*. New York, 21 Mar. 2013. Web. 17 May 2014.
- Grose, Jessica. "[Cleaning: The Final Feminist Frontier.](#)" *New Republic*. New Republic, 19 Mar. 2013. Web. 17 May 2014.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell, and Anne Machung. *The second shift*. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Print.
- Marche, Stephen. "[The Case for Filth.](#)" *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 7 Dec. 2013. Web. 17 May 2014.
- Scott, Richard G. "[The Joy of Living the Great Plan of Happiness.](#)" *The Joy of Living the Great Plan of Happiness - general-conference*. LDS.org, 1 Jan. 1996. Web. 17 May 2014.
- Thompson, Derek. "[Yes, Men Should Do More Housework.](#)" *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 10 Dec. 2013. Web. 17 May 2014.

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

WGS.S10 Gender, Power, Leadership, and the Workplace  
Spring 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.