

Why is there unequal division of household labour in most of the society?

[Society](#)



In this article, we address the division of household labour by examining its general situation and exploring different approaches used by different sociologists to account for it. The five approaches are namely exchange theory, resource theory, Marxist feminist theory, radical feminist theory and social construction theory will be discussed. With the evidence of previous researches, the situation of division of household labour is explored and evaluated in terms of its degree of gender inequality as manifested.

In the second part, the situation is being accounted by those five approaches so as to determine whether the situation can be altered. Household labour can be defined in a variety of ways, however, in this article, we acquire those employed by Shelton (1996), that is defined as unpaid work done to maintain family member and/ or a home, which, emotion work and other "invisible" types of work are typically excluded.

Meanwhile, it is a job described as monotonous, fragmented, with low status not being treated as a "real" work, bring no financial remuneration, isolated with inherent time limits, and often received no recognition Oakley (Morris 1990: 81). Since mid 1960s, researches on comparing the division of household labour between men and women has been mounting, it is not only due to the great impact of household labour on the family life of contemporary married couple, but also due to its implication of gender equality in the society to certain extent.

In this article, we address this issue by examining its general situation and exploring different approaches used by different sociologists to account for it. Through this process, it is hoping to find out the most comprehensive

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approach so as to determine whether the situation can be altered. A great amount of researches on the division of household labour have evidenced that women share the majority of the housework with especially the responsibility for regular, routine repetitive and childcare related housework. While for men, they are more likely to perform non-routine tasks.

For instance, from Chu's research on the household distribution between women and men in Hong Kong (1997) revealed that "wife alone" occupies the largest share in taking up the actual responsibility of all the regular housework such as foodstuff buying, meal making, dish washing and house cleaning. etc.. Whereas, husband's involvement is limited on those irregular tasks such as car washing, bill recording and maintaining and repairing household apparatus. He also find that more than one quarter of the 230 interviewed households rely entirely on wives alone to do eight items of housework.

One may doubt the situation in western countries. Would the westernized value system decrease the discrepancy in the household division of labour? This is clarified by numerous researches done in UK and US recently, which suggest that the "traditional allocation of domestic work to the woman hold firm" (Morris, 1990: 86). Martin and Roberts echoed with the above conclusion by reporting that 73 percent of wives and 72 percent of husbands said that most of the wife did most or all of the housework.

Though, the percent decrease when the wife is in employment, yet, majority said that wife did majority of the housework. (Abbott & Wallace, 1997). From all these findings, we can conclude that the most notable characteristic of

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the current division of household labour is that whether employed or not, women continue to do the majority of housework. This pattern should never be ignored since as pointed out by several sociologists that the women's rare continuous full-time careers or small labour-market participation are greatly affected by their family responsibilities especially the existence of dependent children (Abbott & Wallace, 1997).

The family responsibilities born by women despite their employment status create a dual role for them and the effects have been conceptualized by Morris in terms of "role strain". She proposed that "it is manifest as a 'wide', distracting and sometimes conflicting array of role obligations" (1990: 94) where the source of strain comes from the accumulation of roles and their contradictory, incompatible role expectations or from the competing demanding for time and attention.

This result in overload of total demands on time and energy for women in general and may turn employment from a mean of offering positive social and psychological rewards and a major contributing factor to women's increased liberation and independence (Pearson, 1990), to a stressor for women. The tension for women between career and family is therefore due to the unequal household distribution in the family on one hand. The inequality in power, status and wealth between men and women on the other hand is another reflection from the household distribution.

However, what contribute to this pattern of household labour division? In the following, we explore five approaches in accounting this situation and concluding if it is possible for the unequal situation to be altered. The five

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approaches are namely exchange theory, resource theory, Marxist feminist theory, radical feminist theory and social construction theory. " Exchange theory with a view to examining family cohesion from the perspective of reciprocity and the exchange of rights and duties between husband and wife" (Morris, 1990: 82).

It sees marital satisfaction such as companionship, empathy and affection was attained from the instrumental exchange between economic provision and domestic labour from husband and wife respectively. From this approach, we can get inference that men spend more time in paid work while women spend more time in domestic work as they are naturally assigned to. Therefore, it fails to take account of differential power within marriage and of social status outside the marriage. That is it cannot explain why there is such exchange pattern, why man as a breadwinner and women as a housekeeper?

Resource theory, an alternative approach may provide some explanation for it. It is proposed by Blood and Wolfe in 1959 (see Morris 1990) who applied the idea of differential control of valued resources and elaborated its application to the organization of household labour. This approach sees the division of housework as reflecting resources men and women bring to relationships. The possible critical resources proposed are the educational attainment, occupational prestige and the amount of earning from labour market.

It formulated that the more powerful spouses do least household labour and that if the wife does most household labour it is because she wields least

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power. In other words, the individual with most resources can use those resources to negotiate his/her way out of housework (Brines 1993: quoted from Shelton & John 1996: 304). Thus this approach assumes that housework is viewed negatively by both women and men and that they are therefore motivated to reduced their share of it.

So, in this approach, division of household labour is actually an indicator of power and through which, we can understand the specific negotiations and decisions arrived at by individual couples in the organization of domestic life. Blood and Wolfe continue to argue that base on cross-cultural comparison, husband's relatively low contribution to domestic labour is not ideologically based but a result of rational resources distribution. In other words, the man has strength in the labour market and the women have time.

Nonetheless, this approach have not addressed why men has more strength in the work field with higher educational attainment, higher earning and higher occupational prestige. According to above two approaches, division of household labour should be more equally shared with recent growth of married women's employment as well as the release of many men from the rigours the occupational system by unemployment, when, women are provided with chances to gain more resources and independence.

Young and Willmott (1973; Quoted from Morris, 1990) proposed that the middle classes were at the forefront of a move towards symmetry in marriage in which the role of husband and wife will become more identical.

Wong stand in the same line with Young and Willmott stated that

industrialization has substantially increased employment opportunities for

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women and as a result, has significantly advanced their position within the family. He observed that the wife's paid employment has contributed to much greater equality between spouses, in sharing of household duties and in decision-making (Leung, 1996).

However, hitherto tasks of wage and earning and domestic labour are still largely segregated. Many researches can only give little evidence of male unemployment leading to major responsibility for domestic work, nor even to their taking an equal share. It is because most of the researches which asserted male have participated more in domestic labour are actually based on proportional sense but not absolute sense (Morris, 1990; Chu, 1997).

In this sense, the proportion of man's contribution rises with the wife's employment is only due to her own household labour time falls rather than to his rise. This kind of "cutting back" or the kind of "role expansion" as mentioned above is not a real reappointment of household labour. The following three approaches can provide a more in depth explanation to account for such persistent pattern of unequal household division pattern between men and women. The emergence of capitalism with the related rise of mercantilism, industrialization, and a cash-based economy, eroded the position of women by shifting the centre of production from the domestic until to the public workplace. This separation not only devalued women's labour in the home, but it also made women more economically dependent on men" (Tilly and Scott, 1978; quoted from Anderson, 1997). This view of devaluation in women's status is clearly linked to the raise of industrialization and capitalism.

It is claimed that industrialization make the home became separated from the place of work and gradually women became associated with the domestic sphere, while men with public sphere, earning a wage and participating in politics. Then capitalist benefited from this segregation in domestic and earning labour as " women's domestic labour reproduce the relations of production and also contributes to the maintenance of tolerable living standards for men and may reduce political pressure for radical change"(Abbott & Wallace, 1997: 201).

From this approach, the division of domestic labour is related to the sexual division of labour in paid employment and this is why Marxist feminists derived women's oppression from capitalism. It is this benefit for the capitalist help keeping the division of domestic labour in a way that trapped women in the domestic sphere by decreasing women from opportunity of promotion and high earning.

This view set out to analyze the situation not simply the relationship between domestic labour and the capitalist system, but also queries the nature of the relationship between paid worker and the domestic worker. Nonetheless, as Morris pointed out, once we take the feminine nature of the domestic role as our starting point then the focus of analysis need to be directed from an exploration of the relationship between capitalism, waged labour and domestic labour, to a focus on the nature of the male-female relationship (1990: 83).

This change of emphasis leads us to the post hold by radical feminist, which holds that the sources of women's oppression and domination at unpaid

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labourers is not capitalism but patriarchy that is " a system of values that asserts and maintains man's dominant position in society" (Morris, 1990: 83). Abbott and Wallace also proposed that it is men's control over financial resources that gives them power in marriage and makes it difficult for a wife to be independent from her husband. Radical feminist argue that patriarchy in the patriarchal mode of production existed long before the development of capitalism.

Yet, the line between patriarchy and capitalism is ambiguous as they are both historically induced from industrialization, in which separation of paid and unpaid work, and development of the role of " housewife" is evoked. This in turn developed capitalism and patriarchy intertwiningly. The picture provided by capitalism and patriarchy for domestic labour distribution is not complete if we did not take social construction theory into account. It explain why the above two ideologies about the economic structure and men respectively can have a spiral effect in the society.

Sociologists who regard gender as social construction (Fenstermaker et al, 1991, Lorber 1986; quoted from Shelton & John, 1996) argue that housework produces both household goods and services and gender. It is pointed out that women's time spent on housework and men's general avoidance of it produce and transform gender. Therefore, researches find out that women and men may view their housework as expression of their gender and that women's attempt to think of housework as nurturance and love rather than work.

This social construction of gender is a product out of the two ideologies as evidenced from institutional and normative forces and the cultural message about the role of male and female. As mentioned before, capitalism and patriarchy exploited women by depriving them to get as much power and status as men. When this is widespread and progress to become a social norm which in turn rooted into people's mind and constructed an ideology of gender, a vicious cycle may be resulted.

For instance, they employers assume that motherhood is more central to women's lives than in career and the limited job opportunities and the low pay that the women receive may actually push them into marriage and motherhood. Women are then described to be trapped into the domestic sphere in an extreme sense as early socialization in the family, schooling, presentation of women's role in mass media and the structure mode in society all promote the unbalance share of domestic household. This approach can account for findings about the conservative gender role held by most of women even nowadays.

It is found that a few women believed their husband were not doing enough and majority did not expect their husbands to share household responsibilities equally (Yogev, 1981: quoted from Morris, 1990: 101). Undoubtedly, women's right and status are increasing with more voices against gender inequality. Yet, whether the trend of more and more obligation for a married women to became a working wife or working mother can attenuate the role specialization within the conjugal setting, depends

much on the how they perceive housework and how they define fairness in the household.

From the five theories discussed above, we can concluded that household labour division is inevitably a manifestation of gender inequality, while exchange theory and resources theory explain the situation with the most salient phenomenon such as material and resources allocation between men and women, Marxist feminist theory, radical feminist theory and social construction theory use a relatively more thorough approach to account for it.

Therefore, we can speculated that in order to breakthrough the long-drawn practice of unequal division of household labour, women should firstly be conscious that equal share of domestic household with men is a right that is reasonable for them to pursue and secondly she has to undergo the struggle induced from the rooted cultural predisposition on the role as being a women, that is a mother and a wife. Otherwise, the spiral effect caused by capitalism, patriarchy and social construction will resist the division of household labour to change.