

## Negotiating Domestic Labor: Women's Earnings and Housework Time in Australia



Janeen Baxter and Belinda Hewitt

Studies of the domestic division of labor typically argue that the partner who earns more on the job does less in the house – the number of hours spent washing, cleaning, and cooking are dictated by earnings. According to this view, since women usually earn less than men it follows that they will spend more time on housework than their male partners. The underlying concept is that earnings translate into household bargaining power. Hence, with fewer resources than men, women find themselves in a weaker position to bargain their way out of often-undesirable chores.

Recent research has challenged this argument by claiming that women's housework time is determined by their own absolute earnings and not by how much they make relative to their partners. Janeen Baxter and Belinda Hewitt of the University of Queensland, Australia, examine three possible reasons for this finding. First, women may use their earnings to purchase market substitutes (such as cleaning services and frozen dinners) to reduce housework. Second, women with high earnings may do less housework than lower-earning women because time devoted to housework might be more profitably spent in paid work. (lower-earning women save money doing the housework themselves rather than outsourcing it). Finally, high-earning women may feel more committed to paid work than to doing domestic labor and may tolerate (though not love) an untidy house.

Baxter and Hewitt examine these explanations by looking at the outsourcing of domestic work, the purchase of meals outside the home, and whether high-earning women have characteristics that predispose them to spend less time on housework, such as lower domestic standards. Using 2001–2008 data from a longitudinal survey of Australian households, the study, which focuses on partnered women with paid jobs, estimates a series of mathematical models to assess the relationship between the women's absolute and relative earnings and their housework hours. Hours spent doing housework (cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing) are measured in weekly terms. The individual earnings of women and their partners are measured by weekly gross earnings or salaries for all jobs worked, while

relative earnings of women are their weekly earnings as a proportion of joint household earnings. The analysis examines the effects of paying for housework or purchasing meals outside the home. It also gauges the effect of a range of other characteristics that influence women's housework hours, such as marital status, age, paid-work hours, level of education, ethnicity, attitudes toward gender roles, presence and age of children, and home ownership.

The study finds most support for the argument that Australian women's relative earnings, rather than their absolute earnings, are related to the amount of time they spend on housework. The results show that higher relative earnings decrease the time women spend on housework, though only up to the point where women are contributing around 77 percent or more of joint earnings. Beyond this, there is no substantial additional reduction of their housework hours. Rather, women whose earnings approach 100 percent of household earnings actually increase the time they spend doing housework. Interestingly, the researchers find little evidence that women who outsource domestic work by hiring help or dining out spend less time on housework than women who do not.

These findings hold particular importance in Australia, where 44 percent of employed women work part-time (compared to 19 percent in the US). As a result, their absolute earnings are likely to be low – too low to provide an advantage in household bargaining. In the few cases where women's absolute earnings greatly exceed their male partners', their position is seen as gender deviant, and some high-earning women may actually do more housework to dispel that impression. It is only when women's earnings increase relative to their male partners' that their hours of cleaning and cooking decline. Thus, the time women spend on housework depends not on their absolute earnings but on how their paychecks compare to those of male partners.

Under these circumstances, it seems that the gender gap in housework time in Australia is unlikely to shrink unless the country moves away from a male-breadwinner cultural and institutional framework that hinders gender equality in paid and unpaid work.

Read the article in full at

[www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13545701.2012.744138](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13545701.2012.744138)