

Gap and Convergence in the Gendered Division of Labour

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Abstract

When using comparative glasses for women and men, the life-courses of the two genders are frequently defined and described by “gaps”, “inequality” or “discrimination”. Gender mainstreaming is obvious in most European strategies, programs or directives and national governments and stakeholders from across the civilized world decide, act and legislate preoccupied by the “gender issue”. For many years the roles of women and men were clearly delimited, until the last decades, when the boundaries between what should be assigned to the two genders started to become blurrier and questionable, due to scientific, technological, economic, demographic and alert social transformations. For Romania, the period after the revolution of 1989 was marked by roles` reconfigurations, because economic and political instability, lower state control concerning both work and family, the opened boundaries, followed by European integration, influenced all life sectors.

Considering such trends, this article aims to describe the actual context regarding the gendered housework and care distribution, in the broader framework of labour division, using both previous empirical findings and data issued at European level. The analysis will also involve the summarization of existing theoretical perspectives regarding the subject, together with European policies concerning gender strategies. Although the general trend is towards convergence, especially when looking at paid-work, housework and children upbringing are still defined by gender imparities, even if the gap diminished slightly in this domain also, with various patterns among individuals, cohorts and countries.

Key words: gender, housework, employment, labour division

1. The context

Labour division can be understood in terms of paid versus unpaid work. While the first type was deployed outside the house by men, unpaid work, consisting of housework and care, was generally and for many years unquestionably assigned to women (Sullivan in Risman et al 2018: 377-378). The demographic, technological, economic and social accelerated transformations of the last 30 years reshaped distinctions between what was generally attributed to men and women, while family roles, structure and functioning also undergone through some changes that made the need of paid care a first page research topic, for both academia and general public (Williams and Brennan, 2012). Such reconfigurations are the matter-of-course consequence of demographic trends toward greater life expectancy, especially in rich countries and population aging, migration and depopulation for poorer areas, low fertility rates (Armenia in Risman et al 2018, 475-476). Furthermore, scientific and technological development foster the provision of adequate medical treatment for large categories of health issues, together with other up-to date equipment contributing to longer lives for elderly people, although the need for care, especially emotional one hasn't yet find a replacement. There are also other demographic trends that tend to impact the labour division landscape, such as migration, which can "bring along significant and highly remarkable contribution to the welfare of the European Union's Member States, both in the years to come and on the longer term, offering viable solutions to the lack of workforce, providing high-skilled professionals for the European developing economies, and ensuring aid in solving the issue of aging population throughout the European continent" (Porumbescu 2019: 38). Nevertheless, poorer origin countries of those immigrants lack workforce, contributing to extra-burden on the shoulders of the ones left at home (Williams and Brennan, 2012).

All above mentioned factors, predominantly met in occidental cultures, reoriented entire states' economy, making services, an area where women are predominant, a key sector in their functioning (Eurostat 2019). Although computers technology and artificial intelligence tend to replace human work in many domains, from factories, production and supplying chains to online commerce or financial services (Pouliakas, 2019), care work, even if we refer to children, old generations or other categories in need is still human-based and mostly performed by females (idem). The work done inside the extended family decades ago, for free, is now replaced in some cases by paid work of someone from outside the family.

Considering these trends, European stakeholders and nation-states try to adapt to the changes they entail through different strategies and policies which many times involve public sphere but fail to adequately regulate the private domain (Laperrière & Orloff in Risman et al 2018). Furthermore, research shows that women continue to accomplish the majority of household activities, even if they share the breadwinner position with the partner, meaning that housework divides between the two partners to a lesser extent, but variable among European countries (Voicu, et al 2008). Family has also been seen as an institution fundamentally described by gender inequality (Armenia in Risman et al 2018), but these inequalities change over time, in a different rhythm.

Different patterns of housework and labour distribution between the two partners are sometimes associated with variations in gender attitudes toward gender equality, which can be observed at both individual level and country level and scholars link changes in gender beliefs to modernization. Here, the structural perspective of Wilensky (2002) is better explaining the change in gender attitudes and beliefs at individual level, while Inglehart's value-orientated explanation is more suitable in describing national-level variations, according to Bergh (2006). Inglehart and his colleagues see modernization, economic development and democracy as the prerequisites for more egalitarian gender beliefs being part of the general shift toward tolerance (Inglehart et al 2002). Their perspective can be understood in the broader idea of considering technological development as a key factor in reducing inequality (Bell 1973). Empirical research showed that gender ideology proved to be less affected by women's participation in the labour market, compared to attitudes towards women employment in Romania (Voicu & Tufiş 2012). The results of the same study reported that between 1993 and 2008 an ascending trend towards sharing egalitarian beliefs characterized Romanian population.

Religious background was also among the formulated and tested hypothesis regarding gender inequalities, different patterns in gender beliefs and the division of housework (Lesthaeghe 1983; Voicu et al 2008). A European level analysis based on the data from the second wave of the European Social Survey investigated the influence of religion and technological development on the sharing of domestic work (Voicu, et al 2008). Aimed here were the country's level of technological development together with religious orientation and behavior, while controlling for the other factors that research and theory address when explaining housework division. According to cross-national comparisons, post-communist countries proved to be characterized by a more

equalitarian sharing of domestic activities, while Catholic societies are less egalitarian in housework sharing (*ibidem*).

Nevertheless, research found a decreasing trend regarding women`s housework, together with a much lower increase of men`s implication in this kind of activities, doubled by an increased trend of men`s implication in childcare, at global level. Those trends, together with cross-national variation, especially regarding women, can be easily observed in the following figure:

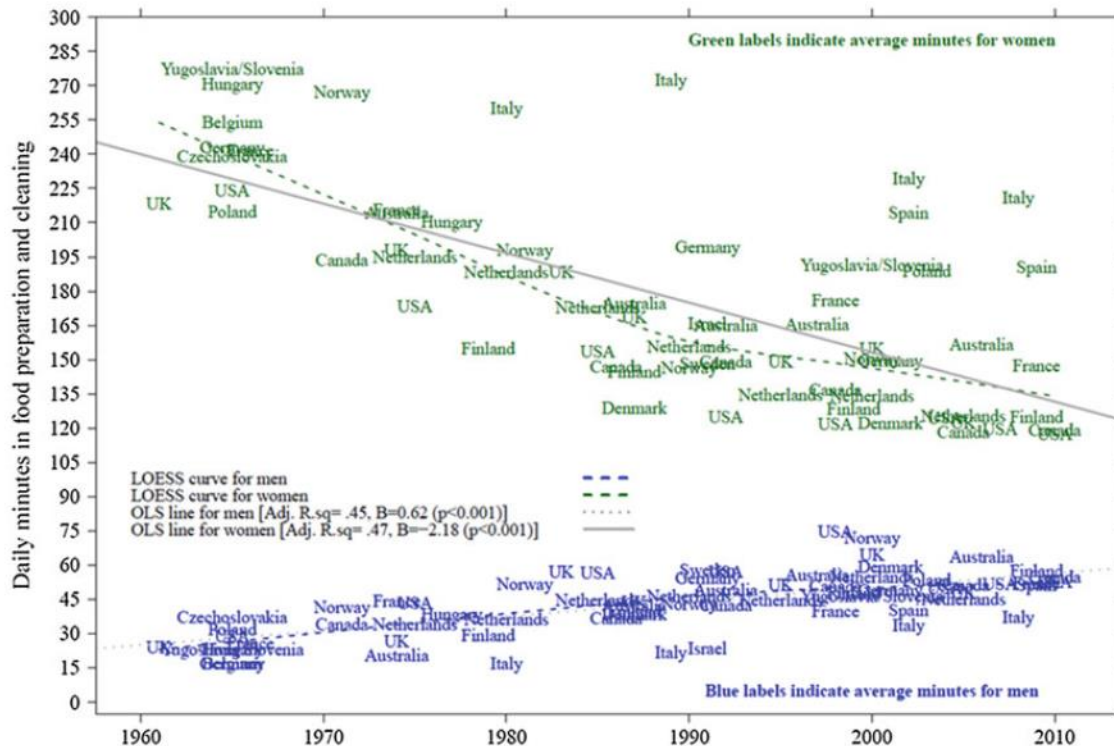


Figure 1: Average minutes in core housework for women and men (1961-2011), (Altintas and Sullivan 2016)

Considering the actual context and trends regarding housework, in the following section we will focus our attention on the theoretical models that aim to explain the division of household activities.

2. Theoretical models regarding the division of housework

Ann Oakley (1974) is among the first scholars who addressed the routine, boring and unwanted tasks of household labour, usually assigned to women, bringing the division of housework in the sociological arena. Previous research saw the two domains, of family care and paid work outside the house, as two separate spheres, classically differently assigned to men and

women. Such a biologically conditioned segregation was both functionally efficient and economically advantageous, according to Becker's trade model based on the assumption of economic rationality (Becker 1981). This model was appropriate for the middle-class society of the 1960's, where modernization and industrialization brought jobs for men in factories, mines and sometimes public sector. For agrarian societies, as is the case of Romania and lower classes, the first years of the previous century were characterized by a greater similarity between the two genders concerning their work, as the activity of both women and men was mainly orientated toward economic survival and agriculture was the main provider.

The publication of Hochschild and Machung (1989), "The Second Shift", referring to the work that has to be done at home, after the "first shift" on the labour market, revealed that even if women entered the workforce, having jobs "outside the home", domestic duties still remained mainly their responsibility. Nowadays, different patterns, spread around the globe, influenced by individual level and country level causalities can describe the distribution of housework, still mainly defined as unequal. Various theoretical perspectives try to explain the division of household work and care, being frequently grouped in two main categories of approaches - the ones that use individual-level explanations and the ones that employ country-level factors.

Housework division was seen as a result of an economic negotiation between the two partners, determined by the market income (seen as a result of paid employment) of the spouses, from the partners' relative resources perspective. Thus, according to this rational path, the partner with the highest wage will be less involved in house chores, and women's employment will lead to fewer domestic tasks for them (Becker 1981). Continuing and developing the partners' relative resources theory, the marital bargaining perspective brings additional understanding, introducing new instances beyond economic negotiation in the division of housework (Blood & Wolfe 1960). The market income of the partners' is not the only resource under discussion according to this theory, because other individual resources can also add to it and influence negotiations of paid-unpaid work. The two spouses are seen in a dependency relation which is firstly defined by a housekeeper wife and a breadwinner husband. The female partner's enrolment in paid work, outside the house, is expected, according to the dependency theory, to generate for her greater bargaining power inside the family, which will be translated into less housework.

Another approach that addresses individual-level characteristics in explaining the division of domestic duties is considering time availability as the main key in this equation. According to

the time availability perspective, the two partners rationally distribute their house chores depending on the free time each of them has, without considering the gender (Voicu, et al 2008: 366).

Moving the emphasize from rational economic models to rather subtle aspects as values and attitudes, the gender ideology perspective assumes that domestic duties are shared between the two partners differently, according to their traditional or egalitarian gender ideology. Worth mentioning here is the doing gender perspective of West and Zimmerman (1987), seen as a derivate from the “gender displays” concept of Gofman (Sullivan in Risman et al 2018: 379). “Doing gender” refers to the continuous process that builds gender through everyday interactions and behaviors, the intimate couple relations being a fertile terrain for “doing gender” while the routine housework contributes to the consolidation of the gender beliefs and attitudes, which will impact future interactions.

Although presented separately, the above-mentioned perspectives can be used as complementary lenses in addressing and understanding the gendered division of housework. Even if gender may seem a rather private issue, scholars have early understood that this territory of personal and couple negotiations and interactions is also molded by external determinants, united under the umbrella of country-level factors. Frequently discussed in this context are culture and structure, translated into cultural norms and institutional factors that shape the gendered division of work, both paid and unpaid, in the house or outside the house. Furthermore, the disciplinary and redistributive functions of the state, manifested through social provision or legislative regulation were understood as shaping gender relations (Laperrière & Orloff in Risman et al 2018: 227).

The institutional vehicles used by the welfare states in order to promote or protect their desirable, valuable norms, attitudes or behaviors in a certain period of time also interact with individual-level factors, above explained. Scholars mention here the time lag that interferes between the three pillars – culture, structure and action and emphasize the bidirectional relation regarding them, as the “influence that macro-level norms and regulatory systems have on individual-level socialization and interaction is recursively linked to the influence that marital and peer interaction has on the public discourse” (Sullivan in Risman et al 2018: 381). This perspective is useful in understanding the changes in housework division (micro-level) as a consequence of transformations suffered by the regulatory systems (macro-level) and shifts at cultural level.

Nevertheless, welfare states became aware, decades ago, of the general importance of gender in defining their political regime, legislative tendencies, economic forecasting, as the silent, necessary and usually unpaid housework, mostly performed by women arrived as a well-consolidated theme in the public discourse. But things were not always the same, as this interest and social awareness are the result of feminist scholars who emphasized the contribution of women's housework, contribution on which both men and states relied, considering it available so that husbands could participate in the paid workforce, while wives had to face multiple challenges and barriers or remain silent and unpaid in their housework and care, a "second-class status" (Laperrière & Orloff in Risman et al 2018: 229).

Despite the actual acknowledged existence and importance of the "gender issue" in any developed economy, trends in beliefs and behaviors are not uniform, neither within countries, nor between countries and time positioning is another criteria that can describe variation (Voicu & Tufiş 2012; Lee et al 2010; Inglehart & Welzel 2005).

3. Policies and strategies addressing the gendered division of labour

Gender mainstreaming is a common feature of actual European policies, while gender equality is frequently mentioned as a central objective of the European Union, according to the Treaty on European Union, where the second article enumerates solidarity and equality between women and men among pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance and justice as common values of the Member States (Treaty on European Union 1992). Moreover, the third article of the same treaty enumerates full employment together with a balanced economic growth as actions meant to be implemented at the Union level. The European Commission uses The Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019 as the framework for the actions towards gender equality. The areas on which this strategy focuses are: "increasing female labour market participation and economic independence of women and men, reducing the gender pay, earnings and pension gaps and thus fighting poverty among women, promoting equality between women and men in decision-making, combating gender-based violence and protecting and supporting victims, promoting gender equality and women's rights across the world" (European Commission 2017). The key areas of action mentioned in the Gender Equality Strategy emerged from the Gender Equality Barometer (2017). According to the recorded answers, approximately three quarters (76%) of the Europeans considered that tackling inequality between men and women should be a priority for the European

Union. The proportion of those who see actions regarding inequality between the two genders as a “must to” for creating a fairer society is even greater (91%). We can see from these directions of action that labour market feminine participation is clearly set on the wall, while housework remains in the back, as we can deduce that gender equality and women`s rights promoting may also refer to the private domain.

One remark has to be done here, regarding the legal status of the European legislation, which is not directly mandatory for the member states, unless nation-states adhere to these regulations and then adopt internal legislative acts that transpose European regulations into national law.

After introducing some of the key European strategies and legislative instruments that address the gender balanced division of labour, in the following section we will see, using the data issued by Eurostat, how different or similar men and women are regarding the work they do, inside or outside the house, the time dedicated to such activities and disparities in their earnings, shifting the analysis from the desires` level to the achievements` one.

4. Gender gap or gender convergence in the division of labour

Eurostat aims to provide a “statistical portrait” of the life of men and women in Europe, stating in its online publication preamble that there are large differences between the lives of female and male European citizens, but there are also similarities (Eurostat 2019). We will begin with the data about housework and childcare, focus on employment patterns, careers and earnings afterwards, with some remarks regarding education, as it influences both labour-market implication and housework, indirectly.

The average employment rate for men in the European Union in 2018 was about 74%, while for women was around 63%, with Romania situated below these values, closer to the end of the ranking. For the same year, 2018, unemployment rates were oppositely distributed, as more women were unemployed than men (7.1% compared to 6.6%). On average, more women than men had part-time work arrangements – 3 women out of 10, 1 man out of 10. Part-time work is seen as an aspect contributing to a better work-family balance.

Besides the employment rates and the proportion of part-time work, management and decision positions held by women and men are frequently analyzed. Although the trend for the last decades was an increase in the number of female managers, the gender gap persists, as the share of women in such positions was not over fifty percent in 2018, in any of the Member States

(Eurostat 2019). The European average of female managers was around 34%, with Romania situating slightly under it (32%). Such data show that men continue to occupy higher positions than women, in all European countries, despite all actions aimed to foster gender-balanced working environments and management. Furthermore, managers proved to be the professional category defined by the largest pay-gap, at the European Union's level. Thus, European female managers receive approximately three quarters from the income of a male manager, when speaking about hourly earnings (Eurostat 2017). All other categories of professions were characterized by the same direction of the pay-gap, women earning on average 16% less than men, with various patterns, differing according to labour market sector and country. In Romania, female workers enjoy some of the smallest differences in earnings, compared to men – 3.5% (Eurostat 2017). These comparisons regard the hourly pay, not the total amount of women's and men's earnings, as different work arrangements could less impact such an indicator, which still remains sensitive to other individual features, concerning education, previous experience, availability for longer hours and legal constraints. Eurostat (2017) also tells us that occupational gender segregation still affects labour market and women are underrepresented not only in management positions, but in other better-paid sectors, while their number outrages the number of men in domains characterized by lower earnings, as clerical support workers or services and sales workers.

Obviously, the access to a certain profession is conditioned by a series of structural and institutional contingencies, together with individual factors, as competency, aptitudes, interest or availability, for example. Nevertheless, education plays a key role here and the European actual trend is the higher proportion of women than men with a tertiary education level (Eurostat 2018). When looking at the numbers, we see that regarding basic education about 22% of both women and men with ages between 25 and 64 have at most completed lower secondary education level. The equal shares of men and women with low education level completed could be explained by legislative policies concerning alphabetization, because in Europe elementary school became compulsory years ago, so children of both sexes were included in the educational process.

If we shift our attention to the medium level of education, represented by upper-secondary education and post-secondary non-tertiary education, the pattern slightly changes, as more men than women, 48% compared to 44%, had completed the medium level of education in 2018 (Eurostat 2018). Regarding tertiary education, the balance changes, the data from the same report showing that the share of European women who graduated tertiary education was above the share

of men. Thus, 35% of European women and 30% of men aged 25 to 64 had successfully completed tertiary education in 2018. Despite the fact that the share of women that have completed tertiary education outnumbers the proportion of men, in Europe, management and decision positions are still to a greater extent occupied by men. Considering the European context, obviously preoccupied to foster women inclusion in the upper positions, one may expect that the imbalance regarding these higher positions will change in the following years, if we see higher education as an access key to these positions.

Women implication on the labour market is certainly also conditioned by the work that has to be done at home, as other scholars emphasized this interrelating previously – “Women’s exit from the labour market, therefore, is less structured by age or the opportunities and constraints of the labour market and more by household care needs” (Vlase & Preoteasa 2017: 9). Moreover, the European statistical bureau draws attention on the different occupation rates, in relation with the number of children (Eurostat 2018). Employment rates are greater for women with one child (72%) compared to women without children (67%) and almost imperceptibly increased for those with two children, reaching 73%. When the number of children is at least three, women employment rates decrease to 58%, while for men is situated around 85%. In the case of masculine population, the fathers of two children registered the higher employment rates, of about 91%. From this data we can see that the increasing number of children increases the differences in employment rates between women and men, with the female population looking after children and the household. Therefore, our analysis will move to data regarding the division of such activities between the representatives of the two genders, among the European countries.

Analyzing housework and childcare activities, Eurostat data for 2016 show us that 9 in 10 women aged 25 to 49, mothers of under 18 children, were involved in their children’s care on a daily basis, while only 68% of males did that. The most egalitarian countries from this perspective proved to be Sweden, with 96 percent of women and 90 percent of men declaring that they take care of their children on a daily basis, together with Slovenia (88% for women and 82% for men). On the opposite pole, Mediterranean countries, Greece and Malta registered the greatest differences between the two genders regarding childcare. Here, the proportion of females involved in childcare activities daily was almost double than that of men’s – 95% for women and 53% for men in Greece, and 93% and 56% in Malta. Romania was situated below the European average (92% of women and 68% of men), but the difference between males and females was greater than

the average EU difference. Here, 89% of females declared that they are involved in childcare daily, while only 55% of males participated in such activities.



Figure 2. Daily childcare and education of children, 2016 (% of adults aged 25-49 taking care of and/or educating their children everyday)
 (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/infographs/womenmen/bloc-3d.html?lang=en>)

Sweden and Greece were again situated at the two opposite ends of the scale measuring involvement in cooking and housework, where the differences between the representatives of the two genders were even larger. Thus, for the entire European Union, 8 in 10 women cooked and/or did housework daily, while 3 out of 10 men were engaged in such chores. Greece held the top position regarding the largest differences between women and men (85% compared to 16%), followed by Italy with 81% of women and 20% of men). In this case, for Romania the differences between men and women regarding housework and cooking are smaller than the European average, showing a smaller gender gap than in other countries.



Figure 3. Daily cooking and housework, 2016 (% of adults aged 18 and over cooking and/or doing housework everyday) (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/infographs/womenmen/bloc-3d.html?lang=en>)

Worth mentioning here is the situation of Greece, where the difference between the unemployment rates of women and men was the largest among the European countries (24.2% for women and 15.4% for men). Furthermore, Sweden, described by an egalitarian division of domestic duties is the country that leads the ranking of employment rates, for both women and men. Here part-time work arrangements are common for both genders.

The data presented in this section are convergent with previous research that draw attention on the existing gender gap regarding household work, while the labour market disparities concerning men and women work enrolment reduced for the last decades (e.g. Voicu, et al 2008).

5. Conclusions

The dual-earner couple seems to be the modal family in European countries and Romania also, with different patterns regarding the type of employment (full-time or part time, for example). In the same time, availability of technological apparatus meant to ease humans` work reduced the time and effort consumed with domestic labouring, but many activities still have to be accomplished by men and women while care and children upbringing remain defined by human

interaction. European strategies aim to foster gender-balanced policies, women inclusion in the workforce, fighting thus their dependency, reducing the gap in earnings, pension and promoting on discriminatory criteria. Such recommendations can be translated into national legislation and they interact, from the country level, with individual factors that shape gender beliefs, the gendered division of labour, in general and housework and care in particular.

From the data above discussed becomes obvious that higher employment rates for women does not necessary involve a corresponding increase in men`s housework activities. While labour market can be certainly defined by trends towards greater convergence between the representants of the two genders, household chores, together with childcare register a much slighter pace in the rhythm of change. Furthermore, the change is rather defined by decreasing rates of women implication in housework activities, than by men`s greater involvement in this sector, as Altintas and Sullivan (2016) showed.

For Romania, the agrarian background, together with the communist period, defined by a full-employment policy, may contribute to a greater similarity between women and men regarding the labour market, compared to other European countries. Previous studies showed that women`s participation in the workforce is associated with more equalitarian gender beliefs (Alwin, Braun and Scott, 1992). Furthermore, economic insecurity that followed the communist period, made the need for two wages an acute one, determining Romanians to find jobs inside or outside the country. Nevertheless, at home, the natality-forcing policies could only bring supplementary burden on women shoulders and foster inequalities. The impact of such country-level characteristics is obviously shaped by individual-level features, as discussed in a previous section. Investigating such explanatory interactions could be seen as a following step of this article, because the aim of the present paper was to explore and describe how labour division is structured for the two genders, in terms of gap and convergence.

The rapidity of social and demographic transformations, as extensive migration, population aging, changing in family patterns and functions, all request further research aiming to explore how paid and un-paid work can meet in a favorable way for both women and men, what strategies mitigate this interaction, how roles restructure for certain categories of persons (single parents; double caregivers –children and elderly; unemployed or refugees, for example), focusing in the mean while on country-level structures and institutions that influence such relations.

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