

Distr.: General
20 November 2017

English

United Nations

Economic Commission for Europe

Conference of European Statisticians

Work Session on Gender Statistics

Belgrade, Serbia

29 November – 1 December 2017

Item 4 of the provisional agenda

Measuring time use and valuing unpaid work

Antecedents of gender inequality in household work among Italian couples

Note by the Italian National Institute of Statistics*

Abstract

Still today Italy is one of the European country with the largest gender differences in household work: in 2014 women living in a dual-earner couple carry out 69.1% of the housework performed by the couple, 73.7% of domestic work. However, over the past five years, between the last two editions of the Time use survey (2008/09 – 2013/14) the male contribution increases, resulting for the first time a reduction of gender asymmetry due to Italian men, while previously this reduction was mainly due to the cut made by women in domestic work.

This paper focuses on the changes taking place in the Italian couples, and tries to analyze, through regression analysis, what are the characteristics more associated with a better division of household work in couples, considering three possible theoretical explanations for the persistence of gender inequality in household work: time availability, relative resources, and conformity with traditional gender ideology. The 2013-2014 edition of the Italian Time Use Survey has a set of new questions on the perception of gender roles in couples, useful to understand the persistence of traditional gender role approach, in particular in the south of the Country.

Keywords: Gender, intra-household allocation, division of labour, family interaction

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1. Gender equality is one of the fundamental values of the European Union and there is a strong emphasis on gender equality in the labour market. The Strategic Engagement for Gender Equality 2016-2019 recalls this by underlining the importance of increasing female labour market participation and equal economic independence, and reducing gender pay, earnings and pension gaps and fighting poverty among women.
2. In the last 11 years (2005-2016), female employment rate in the EU28 has risen from 60% to 65,3%, but in 2016 the gender gap in employment is still 11.6 percentage points. Only the North European countries are close to the EU2020 employment target of 75% for both men and women. In contrast in Greece and Italy female employment rates are the lowest in the EU28, 46.8% and 51.6% respectively.
3. There is, however, one type of work where women clearly out-perform men, that is the unpaid work. In fact women devote significantly more time to household work than men almost anywhere in the world. This type of work is essential for the quality of lives of households, but the way it is shared between women and men is a major source of gender inequality.
4. According to the data from national time use surveys compiled by the OECD, women in Portugal, Italy and Ireland carry out more than 70% of the unpaid work. An equal sharing of this work would certainly impact on women's career opportunities. These comparative analysis show clearly that in Italy there is still a problem with gender roles.
5. So focusing on the Italian case, in 2014 the situation recorded by the last Time use survey regarding the time spent in household work is still very different between men and women. Gender differences in these activities are already evident at 11-14 years: girls have 13 minutes more of household work and 29 less of free time in a day. But it is during adulthood, between the ages of 25 and 64, that the differences become more acute. So let's move on to see the situation of people in these age classes. In particular, following the situation of people who live in pairs.
6. If we analyze the total workloads (paid work and household work) for people living in couples, we can state that it is not uniform among all types of adults: the dual earner couples with woman between 25 and 44 years and with young children, show a very complex daily life. In this type of couple, fathers arrive to dedicate 8h22' to total work, while mothers arrive to 9h07'.
7. For time reason, this work will focus on this type of couple that for the complexity of time management is the most representative of the gender gap situation in Italy. In fact the workload is such that cooperation between partners and a good division of labour should be the rule, while we know from the previous editions of the survey that in the past the burden was heavily on women. Furthermore, the use of private services like domestic help or babysitter continues to be very marginal: only 7.7% use domestic help and 4.5% babysitter. Therefore, for the great majority, household work remains entirely dependent on the family.
8. But what has changed over the 25 years that the Time use survey allows us to monitor for the situation of highest workload? The total workload increased for men in couple while it decreased for women. While the time devoted to the other major activities is quite stable. In particular mother have reduced their household work (-37'), although they still do not see any consequence in their free time, but rather the increasing in time spent on travel (+35'). While Fathers have increased household work (+42'), largely subtracting it from their free time and from time spent on personal care.
9. Detailing the activities that compose household work, we can see that in these 25 years Mothers have reduced greatly the time spent in domestic work (-1h10') while have increased childcare (+ 41'). While Fathers have increased a bit the time spent in domestic work (+ 13' in 25 years), and a little more the time spent in childcare (+33').

10. These trends led to a redistribution of family workloads. Visible through the trend of the asymmetry index, that is, the share of household work done by women on the total work done by the couple. There are positive signs for gender equality in 2014 for parents aged 25-44 living in dual earner couples: for the first time the asymmetry index in household work falls below the 70% threshold. Threshold that in previous editions was achieved only by couples with higher education degrees and resident in the north of the country.
11. The asymmetry index in childcare dropped more rapidly (61.2%), falling below the threshold of 70% already in 2008-2009. In the last edition of IT-TUS new information on gender ideology has been added, and the results confirm that many gender-related stereotypes have not been totally overcome even among the couples in which both partners work, and even among the same women, particularly in the south of the country.
12. At this point we have tried to understand through multivariate analysis: What are the antecedents of the Italian gender gap? What is changing: the population's structure or behaviour? we wondered what are the characteristics that in 2014 have more impact on the level of equity in the distribution of household work between men and women in dual earner couples. There are three main theoretical approaches that try to explain the gender division of unpaid work and on the reasons why women carry out more housework than men.
13. The relative resources approach, the time availability and the gender ideology perspectives suggest the use of these three variables as predictors of the gender gap in unpaid work. Thus we attempt to simultaneously test these three different perspectives to explain family time allocation within Italian couples.
14. Following those theoretical approaches the explanatory variables include: the couple's assortative features, some family characteristics and some local variables .
15. The hypothesis of relative resources is confirmed by the model: when women earn more than men, gender asymmetry in household work is reduced by an average of 3.8 points, lowering significantly the female burden in terms of household work.
16. While the model does not provide a clear picture of the effects that can fully confirm the time availability hypothesis, when women works for a number of hours during the week at least equal to that of men than gender asymmetry is reduced, but this is not very significant. More significant are the effect of daily time spent in paid work: sixty minutes more of men's paid work increase female burden of 3 points, while an hour more of women's paid work decrease asymmetry of 2,4 points.
17. The hypothesis of gender ideology is fully confirmed: when man disagree with male breadwinner model the asymmetry is reduced by an average of about 4 points.
18. A lower female burden is also related to context variables such as geographical area and female age class: living in the Northern Italy reduces asymmetry by about 6 point respect to the South, just like being in the 25-34 age class instead of 55-64. Also female educational level and male professional status have an impact on asymmetry in in household work: having an high educational level or having a white collar or a blue collar partner reduces by 4 points female burden. Lastly the presence of young children improves the division of tasks among the partners, reducing female burden by about 3 points.
19. More generally, we wondered how much of the changes observed over the last 25 years in the time spent in household work by adult couples comes from a change in behaviours and how much from a change in the structural features of these couples?
20. In order to analyze the causes of variation in time spent in household work, taking into account all the structural variables affecting the population's time, distinct linear regression models was carried out by year and gender, and then a Shift & share analysis was carried out, which allows us to

distinguish the share of change due to the structure of the population from the share due to different behaviours.

21. This analysis suggests that: For men changes in time spent in household work are mainly due to a change in their behaviour (71.4%) and, to a minimum, to structural changes (21.8%). While for women, changes are due both to changes in the structure of the population (higher employment rates and education levels) and behaviours (cut to time devoted to domestic work).
22. Italian couples are slowly moving towards a more equal distribution of household work between men and women. Factors more associated with gender equity in times are: Younger age; Higher female educational level; Male disagreement with traditional gender roles; Lower gender gap in earnings.
23. What is changing: For men changes in time spent in household work are mainly due to a change in their behaviour; For women changes are due both to changes in the structure of the population and behaviours
