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Descriptive Finding

**Housework time and task segregation:
Revisiting gender inequality among parents in 15
European countries**

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Contents

1	Background	504
2	Data and methods	505
3	Results	506
3.1	Total housework and gender inequality	506
3.2	Fathers' and mothers' housework by task	509
4	Conclusions	511
5	Acknowledgements	512
	References	513

Housework time and task segregation: Revisiting gender inequality among parents in 15 European countries

Joan García Román¹

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Although most countries show a general convergence in men's and women's investment in domestic labor, women continue doing more housework, especially among couples with children. However, cross-national descriptive estimates have focused exclusively on routine tasks, thus overlooking potential change in gender inequality in non-routine tasks, as well as the total housework investment, which varies significantly across countries.

OBJECTIVE

Our aims are twofold: (1) to provide the most recent estimates of housework investments from time-use diaries across all tasks, (2) to describe the relationships between total housework investment, gender inequality, and gender task segregation.

METHODS

Using the Harmonized European Time Use Survey (HETUS), we focus on different-sex couples living with children under the age of 18 across 15 European countries (n = 74,630). We measure housework across six primary tasks: cooking, cleaning, laundry, maintenance, gardening and pet care, and household administration.

RESULTS

Mothers continue doing more housework than fathers across all 15 countries. The gender gap in housework is higher in countries with higher levels of total housework investment. However, we also find descriptive evidence that non-routine 'male-typed' tasks might be becoming gender-neutral.

CONCLUSIONS

Housework scholars should re-visit the typology of task segregation and focus on a comparative investigation of the meaning and standards of housework and their relationship with gender inequality.

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CONTRIBUTION

This note draws attention to the role of the total housework investment in driving cross-national variation in gender inequality, and the importance of a comparative perspective within gender for understanding task segregation.

1. Background

Cross-national research consistently shows that women do more housework than men, especially among couples with children (Kan et al. 2011; Pailhé, Solaz, and Stanfors 2021). However, there has been a slow gender convergence wherein women have significantly decreased their housework investment, while men have only modestly increased their housework time (England 2010). These trends are unequal in magnitude and pace across countries, as some countries continue to be more egalitarian than others and some have reached a plateau (Altintas and Sullivan 2016; Kan et al. 2022). More importantly, housework continues to be segregated even in the most egalitarian countries – women invest more time in routine ‘female-typed’ tasks, such as cleaning, cooking, and laundry, which are less flexible, more time consuming, and less enjoyable, while men invest more time in non-routine ‘male-typed’ tasks, such as repairs, which are more flexible, less time consuming, and more enjoyable (Brini, Zamberlan, and Barbieri 2022; Carlson 2022; Kan et al. 2011).

Our aims in this descriptive note are twofold. First, we aim to provide the most recent estimates of housework time across 15 European countries, detailed by task and using time-use diaries. Cross-national studies often use stylized questions (how many hours) instead of time-use data, or focus exclusively on routine ‘female-typed’ tasks (Altintas and Sullivan 2016; Hook 2010), although some exceptions also consider other activities such as gardening, pet care, or other housework tasks (Kan et al. 2011). This approach is reasonable because routine housework is where gender inequality is most pronounced. However, it neglects to keep track of potential changes in whether and how the other tasks continue to be ‘male-typed’ or gender-neutral. Documenting time investments and gender inequality in non-routine tasks is crucial for understanding overall gender inequality.

Secondly, in the decades-long study of cross-national variations in housework, scholars have neglected to describe the total amount of housework that parents invest and its relationship with gender inequality or the levels of task segregation. The total amount of housework investment across countries is relevant for understanding task segregation and gender inequality because a high investment in housework could represent sub-optimal housing conditions (Treas and Tai 2016) or high cultural cleaning standards.

However, it is unclear how gender inequality in housework is related to overall gender inequality or task segregation. For example, are countries where people invest more in housework less equal? Or, in countries where people invest more in housework relative to other countries, do both men and women invest more, or does this relationship vary by type of task? Describing total investment across countries is crucial for opening new research venues about gender inequality and housework segregation.

This note focuses exclusively on different-sex couples with children. This is due to both the limited nature of the research note and because decades of research has consistently found that gender inequality in housework is most profound among couples with children, since in many countries the presence of children tends to reinforce a traditional division of household labor in couples (Abril et al. 2015; Kan et al. 2011; Kitterod and Ronsen 2013; Neilson and Stanfors 2014; Pailhé, Solaz, and Stanfors 2021; Schober 2013).

2. Data and methods

We use the Harmonized European Time Use Survey (HETUS). It is a dataset created by Eurostat from the national time use surveys conducted in Europe, which were collected between 2008 and 2015. We include the following 15 countries: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Estonia (EE), Finland (FI), France, (FR), Germany (DE), Greece (GR), Hungary (HU), Italy (IT), Norway (NO), Poland (PL), Romania (RO), Serbia (RS) Spain (ES), United Kingdom (UK). We exclude the Netherlands and Luxembourg because of inconsistency in household composition. In all figures the countries are classified into regions based on the United Nations Standard Area Codes for Statistical Use. We focus on different-sex couples living with children under the age of 18 ($n = 74,630$) because this is the group which experiences the most gender inequality in housework (Altintas and Sullivan 2017; Pailhé, Solaz, and Stanfors 2021).

We measure housework in minutes per day using the 3-digit-level code (the most detailed level) provided in the diary of activities. We do not include childcare because of its different nature, as is customary in housework studies (Sullivan 2013). We focus on six housework tasks: (1) Cooking: food preparation, baking, and preserving; (2) Cleaning: dishwashing, cleaning dwelling, cleaning garden; (3) Laundry: laundry, ironing, handicraft and producing textiles, etc.; (4) Repair and maintenance: heating and water, house construction and repairs, making, repairing, and maintaining equipment, vehicle maintenance, etc.; (5) Gardening and pet care: gardening, caring for pets, walking the dog, etc.; (6) Household Administration: shopping, commercial and administrative services, household management, etc. To calculate total housework for mothers and fathers, we sum the time invested in the six tasks described above. We also calculate the

total overall housework at the country level, which corresponds to the cumulative time spent by both mothers and fathers. We present averages computed at the country level for all the population as well as mothers and fathers separately. All estimates are weighted by the individual weight provided in the harmonized dataset to adjust for population characteristics and the oversamples of weekend days.

3. Results

3.1 Total housework and gender inequality

Table 1 reports the average minutes per day mothers, fathers, and both (i.e., the total investment) invest in six housework tasks across the 15 European countries in our sample. Overall, we observe great variance within and between countries in the amount of investment in each task and the gender gap. For example, mothers spend more time cleaning than fathers across all 15 countries (70 and 20 minutes respectively on average across the 15 countries). However, mothers' time investment in cleaning (a routine 'female-typed' task) ranges between 40 minutes on average in Belgium and 120 minutes on average in Italy. By contrast, fathers' cleaning time ranges between 8 minutes on average in Greece and 28 minutes on average in Norway. In other words, in the European countries included in our study the fathers that invest most in cleaning still invest less than the mothers who invest the least in cleaning.

By contrast, fathers spend more time than mothers doing repairs and maintenance, a non-routine, 'male-typed' task, in all but one country (Belgium); 24 and 15 minutes respectively on average across the 15 countries. However, fathers and mothers appear to have a similar range overall: Fathers and mothers in Italy invest the least time in repairs and maintenance (10 and 7 minutes, respectively) while fathers in Finland and mothers in Belgium invest the most time (42 and 43 minutes respectively, on average).

Table 1: Time spent in housework tasks by mothers and fathers by country (average minutes per day)

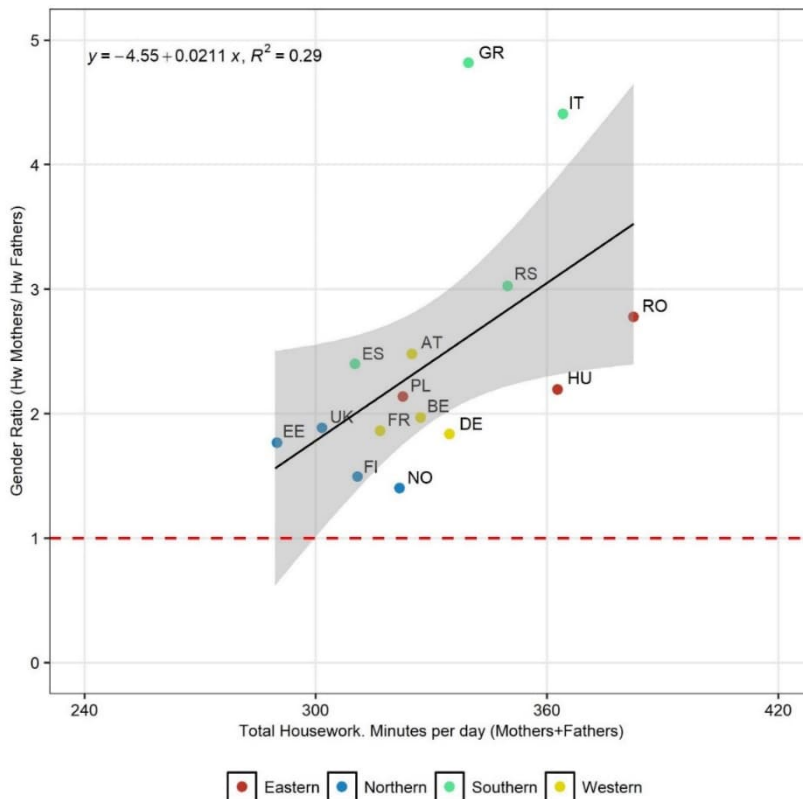
Gender	Task	Austria	Belgium	Germany	Estonia	Greece	Spain	Finland	France
Mothers	<i>Total housework</i>	232	217	217	185	282	219	186	206
	Cooking	67	52	50	66	100	69	46	59
	Cleaning	67	40	61	51	108	71	48	70
	Laundry	35	34	26	17	35	26	20	22
	Repair and maintenance	10	43	17	9	11	14	23	12
	Gardening and pet care	21	10	17	12	8	4	12	6
	Household administration	31	38	45	30	20	34	36	37
Fathers	<i>Total housework</i>	93	110	118	105	59	91	125	111
	Cooking	15	17	18	18	10	22	21	18
	Cleaning	19	15	23	14	8	19	21	20
	Laundry	3	2	2	1	1	2	2	2
	Repair and maintenance	26	33	28	34	13	15	42	33
	Gardening and pet care	13	16	17	16	13	10	12	14
	Household administration	17	26	31	21	14	23	27	24
Total	<i>Total housework</i>	325	327	335	290	340	310	311	317
	Cooking	82	69	68	84	110	91	67	78
	Cleaning	86	55	84	65	116	91	70	90
	Laundry	38	36	29	17	36	28	23	24
	Repair and maintenance	36	76	45	43	24	30	65	45
	Gardening and pet care	34	26	33	29	20	14	24	20
	Household administration	48	65	76	51	34	57	63	61

Gender	Task	Hungary	Italy	Norway	Poland	Romania	Serbia	UK	All
Mothers	<i>Total housework</i>	250	297	187	220	281	263	197	226
	Cooking	96	98	48	84	108	111	58	66
	Cleaning	74	120	58	67	82	86	48	70
	Laundry	32	32	21	18	45	31	21	26
	Repair and maintenance	10	7	17	10	15	9	18	15
	Gardening and pet care	15	4	13	11	16	8	13	12
	Household administration	23	35	31	30	15	18	39	37
Fathers	<i>Total housework</i>	114	67	134	103	101	87	104	104
	Cooking	17	16	28	22	11	14	22	18
	Cleaning	20	10	28	23	18	13	18	20
	Laundry	0	0	3	1	1	1	3	2
	Repair and maintenance	33	10	41	25	28	28	21	24
	Gardening and pet care	25	11	12	12	26	14	15	15
	Household administration	17	20	22	20	17	17	26	25
Total	<i>Total housework</i>	363	364	322	323	382	349	302	330
	Cooking	113	114	76	105	118	124	80	84
	Cleaning	94	131	86	91	99	100	66	90
	Laundry	33	32	24	19	47	32	24	28
	Repair and maintenance	43	17	58	35	43	37	39	39
	Gardening and pet care	40	15	25	23	42	22	28	27
	Household administration	40	55	53	50	32	34	64	62

Source: Own calculations from Harmonized European Time Use Surveys (HETUS 2010).

How much time do parents invest in housework in total? Figure 1 visualizes the cross-national pattern of the total amount of housework investment across all tasks (measured as the sum of the mothers' and fathers' total time) and its relationship with gender inequality in housework (measured as the women/men ratio of total housework time). Overall, across all countries, mothers' total housework time is higher than fathers' (the ratio is higher than 1 across all countries). However, we observe a positive correlation wherein countries with higher total investment in housework also have higher levels of gender inequality in housework (corr = 0.54, $p < 0.05$).

Figure 1: Total time invested in housework and gender inequality in housework



Source: Own calculations from Harmonized European Time Use Survey (HETUS 2010).
 Abbreviations: AT Austria, BE Belgium, DE Germany, EE Estonia; GR Greece; ES Spain; FI Finland; FR France; HU Hungary; IT Italy; NO Norway; PO Poland; RO Romania; RS Serbia; UK United Kingdom.

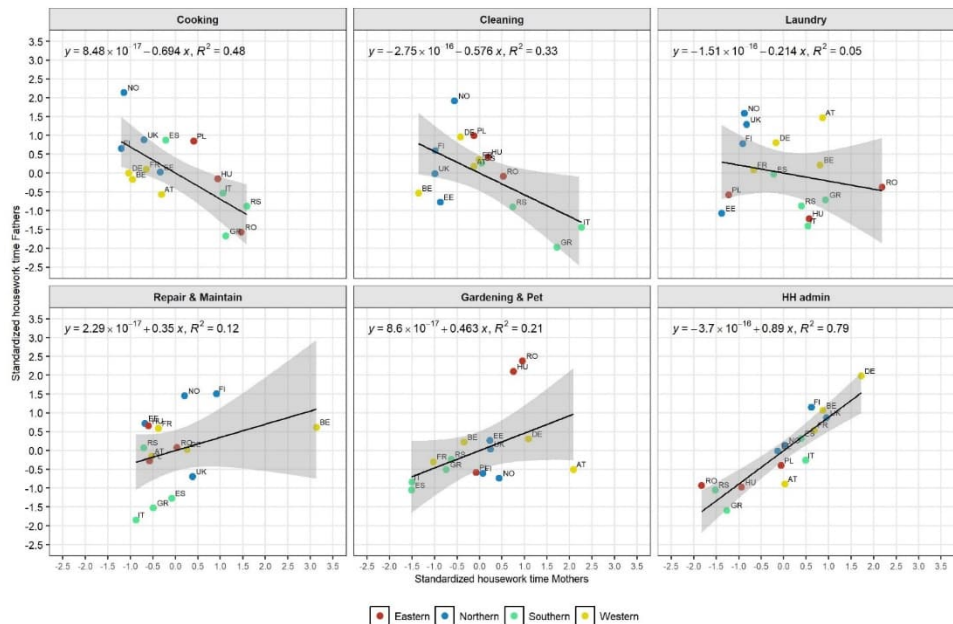
The highest housework investment is observed in Romania (382 minutes on average), where mothers spend about three times more than fathers. However, gender inequality is highest in Italy and Greece, where mothers invest four times more than fathers and the total housework time is among the highest (364 and 340 minutes respectively). By contrast, the country with the least total investment in housework is Estonia (290 minutes), followed by the United Kingdom (302 minutes), Spain (310 minutes), and Finland (311 minutes). Except for Spain, the gender ratio in these countries is less than two. Finally, Central European countries and Poland are in the middle of this spectrum. Taken together, the results demonstrate a regional gradient (with few exceptions) and suggest that the higher the investment in housework, the more unequal it is.

3.2 Fathers' and mothers' housework by task

While Figure 1 shows the total investment in housework in general, there is still cross-national variation in the total investment in each task. Some tasks might be more time-consuming than others. However, which task is more time-consuming might vary across countries and have different implications for how tasks are segregated between mothers and fathers (Table 1). To better understand the dynamics between the total investment in a particular task and gender inequality, Figure 2 plots the amount of time mothers and fathers invest in each task across the 15 countries. We standardized housework time within gender so all tasks have the same scale, in order to situate mothers and fathers in comparison to their counterparts in other countries. This approach offers a different perspective on the sex segregation of tasks, beyond the gender gap measure which compares mothers and fathers within countries.

The top panel of Figure 2 presents results for cooking, cleaning, and laundry; i.e., routine tasks that are usually classified as 'female-typed'. We observe a negative association between mothers' and fathers' investment, particularly for cooking and cleaning. In all countries, fathers spend a very small amount of time on laundry. In countries where mothers invest relatively more time than women in other countries, fathers invest less time than other fathers. Similarly, in countries where mothers spend less time cooking and cleaning than mothers in other countries, fathers invest more time than fathers in other countries. This pattern reinforces our existing knowledge, wherein routine 'female-typed' tasks drive much of the gender inequality in housework. But it also demonstrates that in countries where mothers do more compared to other mothers, fathers do less compared to other fathers.

Figure 2: Time spent by women and men on each housework task. Minutes per day standardized by task and gender



Source: Own calculations from Harmonized European Time Use Surveys (HETUS 2010).

Abbreviations: AT Austria, BE Belgium; DE Germany; EE Estonia; GR Greece; ES Spain; FI Finland; FR France; HU Hungary; IT Italy; NO Norway; PO Poland; RO Romania; RS Serbia; UK United Kingdom.

Shifting the focus to the bottom panel, we observe a different pattern for maintenance and repairs (a non-routine task often labeled as ‘male-typed’) and tasks such as gardening and pet care and household management (gender-neutral tasks). Here, we observe a positive correlation between mothers’ and fathers’ time. In countries where mothers invest relatively more time than mothers in other countries, fathers also invest more than other fathers. This pattern is reasonable in gender-neutral tasks – the relatively more time that is expected or necessary for the tasks applies to both fathers and mothers because the task is gender-neutral.

However, this is not the pattern that is expected for ‘male-typed’ tasks. Because ‘male’ and ‘female’ tasks are segregated, the more time fathers invest, the less time mothers are expected to invest. But this is not the case in our results. In countries where fathers invest relatively more time on maintenance than fathers in other countries, mothers also invest more time than other mothers. Spain, Greece, and Italy are the

exception to this pattern, where both mothers and fathers invest relatively less time on repairs than their counterparts in other countries.

The results in Figure 2 and Table 1 also underscore the heterogeneity at the task level across countries, and demonstrate that the same task requires different time investments. For example, mothers in Serbia, Italy, Greece, and Romania invest the most time in cooking, and mothers in Italy and Greece invest the most time in cleaning. Fathers in Norway invest the most time in cooking and cleaning. However, mothers and fathers in Germany invest most time in household management, mothers in Austria and fathers in Romania and Hungary invest most time in gardening and pet care, and mothers in Belgium and fathers in Norway and Finland invest most time in repairs. Moreover, the results also show that although some regional patterns unfolded as expected (e.g., a South–Central–North gradient), there were also exceptions in each region (e.g., Poland and Spain).

We also conducted a robustness check among couples without children in the household. The results showed that the association between the standardized time childless women and men spend on household tasks is weaker across most tasks, further reinforcing our choice to focus on couples with children.

4. Conclusions

Housework continues to be unequal across the 15 European countries in our sample. In all countries, even the Nordic countries that are considered the most egalitarian, women do more housework than men. However, using the most recent time-use data available in Europe (HETUS), we also draw attention to the relationship between gender inequality and total investments in housework.

First, we found that gender inequality is greater in countries where parents' total overall investment in housework is higher. This pattern suggests that the above-average housework investment is performed by mothers. Similarly, gender inequality is lower in countries with smaller housework investment. Housing conditions (Treas and Tai 2016), work–family policies (Noonan 2013), and cultural housekeeping standards (a topic that has received scant scholarly attention) are likely driving this pattern. Future research should investigate in more detail how cultural standards regarding housework vary across countries in order to enhance our comparative understanding of gender inequality both within couples and within society more broadly. Future research should also further disentangle these contributing factors.

Second, by focusing on parents' total investment in each task and comparing mothers and fathers to their counterparts in other countries, we found descriptive evidence that the sex segregation of tasks might be shifting. When mothers invest more

time in cooking and cleaning than other mothers, the fathers do less than other fathers. However, we also found that for tasks traditionally considered more ‘male-typed’, when fathers invest more time than other fathers, mothers also invest more time than other mothers. This pattern was also evident in tasks that are considered gender-neutral. In other words, ‘men’s’ tasks are becoming more gender-neutral, but ‘women’s’ tasks continue to be the responsibility of women.

This pattern suggests much more housework in total for mothers in countries with higher total investments in housework, as the additional need or expectation to invest more in all tasks falls disproportionately on them. Therefore, to fully understand the barriers to men’s participation in housework it is necessary for housework scholars to shift their focus to the meaning of different routine and non-routine housework tasks and cultural standards of housework.

Our results reinforce Carlson’s (2022) recent findings from the United States and suggest that gender equality in housework requires that couples share all housework tasks instead of ‘dividing and conquering’ different tasks, especially when the tasks are divided according to whether they are ‘female-typed’ or ‘male-typed’. Future studies should also develop new housework task segregation measures and investigate how different cultural meanings and standards of housework shape task segregation and overall gender inequality in housework across different countries.

5. Acknowledgements

This study is based on data from Eurostat, Harmonized European Time Use Survey, 2010. The responsibility for all conclusions drawn from the data lies entirely with the authors.

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