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Descriptive Finding

Gender differences in routine housework among one-person households: A cross-national analysis

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Gender differences in routine housework among one-person households: A cross-national analysis

Joan García Román¹

Abstract

BACKGROUND

Housework has long been associated with gender roles, with women traditionally burdened as the primary caregivers in many societies. However, most studies focus on the general population or on couples. This study explores the often overlooked domain of housework in one-person households, where the negotiation of tasks and roles is absent and individuals are solely responsible for their domestic chores.

OBJECTIVE

Drawing from data collected across 19 countries, the research examines the time allocated to housework by men and women, shedding light on gender disparities in one-person living situations.

METHODS

Data come from time-use surveys available in several harmonized databases. The analysis focuses on routine housework tasks, encompassing cleaning, food preparation, cooking, and laundry, which tend to show pronounced gender differences. The study is based on descriptive estimates by country and type of living arrangement, and multivariate regression to predicted gender gaps in routine housework in one-person households by country.

RESULTS

Results indicate the existence of gender disparities in routine housework among individuals living in one-person households. Despite variations across countries, the United States and Canada display a lower gender gap, while Italy and Serbia maintain higher inequality. Greece, South Africa, and South Korea show moderate gender differences, similar to Nordic countries, which are usually considered the most egalitarian.

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FINDINGS

The persistence of gender disparities in routine housework remains evident in one-person households, although it is less pronounced than in other living arrangements.

CONTRIBUTION

The study underscores the enduring gender gap in housework, highlighting distinct standards and cross-national variations among one-person households.

1. Introduction

Housework is not a gender-neutral domain; instead, men and women tend to conform to their expected gender roles (Domínguez-Folgueras 2022; West and Zimmerman 1987). According to these gender role expectations, housework is often considered a feminine activity, with women typically upheld as primarily responsible, while male stereotypes suggest that men should avoid housework (West and Zimmerman 1987). Scholars have developed several theories from various perspectives to explain why women tend to do more housework than men. The most common perspectives include economic exchange, time availability, and gender theory (Domínguez-Folgueras 2022). According to the first two theories, the division of housework is rational and gender-neutral. From the economic exchange perspective, women do more housework because they have fewer resources than men; thus their position is worse in the negotiation of gendered tasks (Becker 1981; Lundberg and Pollak 1996). The time availability perspective considers that individuals will do more or less housework depending on the disposable time they have (Aassve et al. 2015). In contrast, the “doing gender” perspective considers, as stated above, that housework is not a neutral domain and that the greater domestic workload is a result of the gender identities, values, and existing social norms that individuals learn starting in childhood (Domínguez-Folgueras 2022; West and Zimmerman 1987). However, most studies that apply these theories focus on the general population or on couples (Altintas and Sullivan 2016; Kan et al. 2022; Pailhé, Solaz, and Stanfors 2021). Much less is known about the time devoted to housework among individuals living in one-person households. For those living alone, there are no negotiations over roles and task division, as only one person is responsible for doing and/or planning housework duties. Moreover, studies that evaluate gender differences in time spent on housework in one-person households are often limited to specific countries. To my knowledge, there are no studies that explore this topic from a cross-national perspective.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the literature by exploring the time devoted to housework in 19 countries from various regions of the world. Previous studies from the United States have shown that women in one-person households tend to perform more

housework than men in one-person households, although they also do less housework than married or cohabiting women (Chao 2022; Cheng and Sayer 2023). Time spent on housework by individuals in one-person households is also influenced by their available time, resources, internalized gender identities, expectations, and cultural beliefs (Cheng and Sayer 2023; Thébaud, Kornrich, and Ruppanner 2021). It is reasonable to expect that the behaviors related to housework by men and women in one-person households will exhibit similarities to what is observed in the general population in each country.

2. Data and methods

In this study, I use time-use diary data from 19 countries collected from various harmonized databases. Time-use surveys are widely regarded as the most reliable data sources for measuring the distribution of time within a population (Sevilla 2014). The samples are drawn from the Harmonized Time Use Survey (HETUS) and the Multinational Time Use Study (MTUS), with data collected around the year 2010. From the original databases, I selected individuals who were 20 years old and older, resulting in a total of 390,514 respondents included in the analysis, of whom 63,309 live in one-person households. Table 1 provides specific details about the characteristics of the sample.

Table 1: Sample description

Country	Year	Source	N	One-person household
Austria (AT)	2008/09	HETUS	7391	1438
Belgium (BE)	2012/13	HETUS	9548	1296
Canada (CA)	2010	MTUS	13799	3487
Estonia (EE)	2009/10	HETUS	8658	1051
Finland (FI)	2009/10	HETUS	6326	895
France (FR)	2009/10	HETUS	26662	5909
Germany (DE)	2012/13	HETUS	21673	2742
Greece (EL)	2013/14	HETUS	12946	1798
Hungary (HU)	2009/10	HETUS	7649	1414
Italy (IT)	2008/09	HETUS	34120	5109
Norway (NO)	2010/11	HETUS	6403	1186
Poland (PL)	2012/13	HETUS	73160	11820
Republic of Serbia (RS)	2010/11	HETUS	6438	804
Romania (RO)	2010/11	HETUS	51604	10988
South Africa (ZA)	2010	MTUS	29608	4231
South Korea (SK)	2009	MTUS	33158	2460
Spain (ES)	2009/10	HETUS	17475	1713
United Kingdom (UK)	2014/15	HETUS	11474	1658
United States (US)	2010	MTUS	12422	3310
Total			390514	63309

Source: Author's calculation from HETUS and MTUS.

From the diaries of daily activities, I calculate the time that respondents reported spending on routine housework chores, which encompass cleaning, food preparation, cooking, laundry, and other clothing-related chores. These are considered the most disliked and traditionally feminine-coded housework tasks, where gender differences tend to be more pronounced (Altintas and Sullivan 2016).

In the analysis, I initially compute the time devoted to routine housework chores by individuals living in one-person households and compare these estimates with those of the population residing in other living arrangements. Living arrangements are classified based on household size and co-residence with a partner and children, resulting in the following categories: one-person households, couples alone, couples with children, and others. I calculate the average time spent by both men and women in each living arrangement. All results are weighted using weights provided in the harmonized datasets.

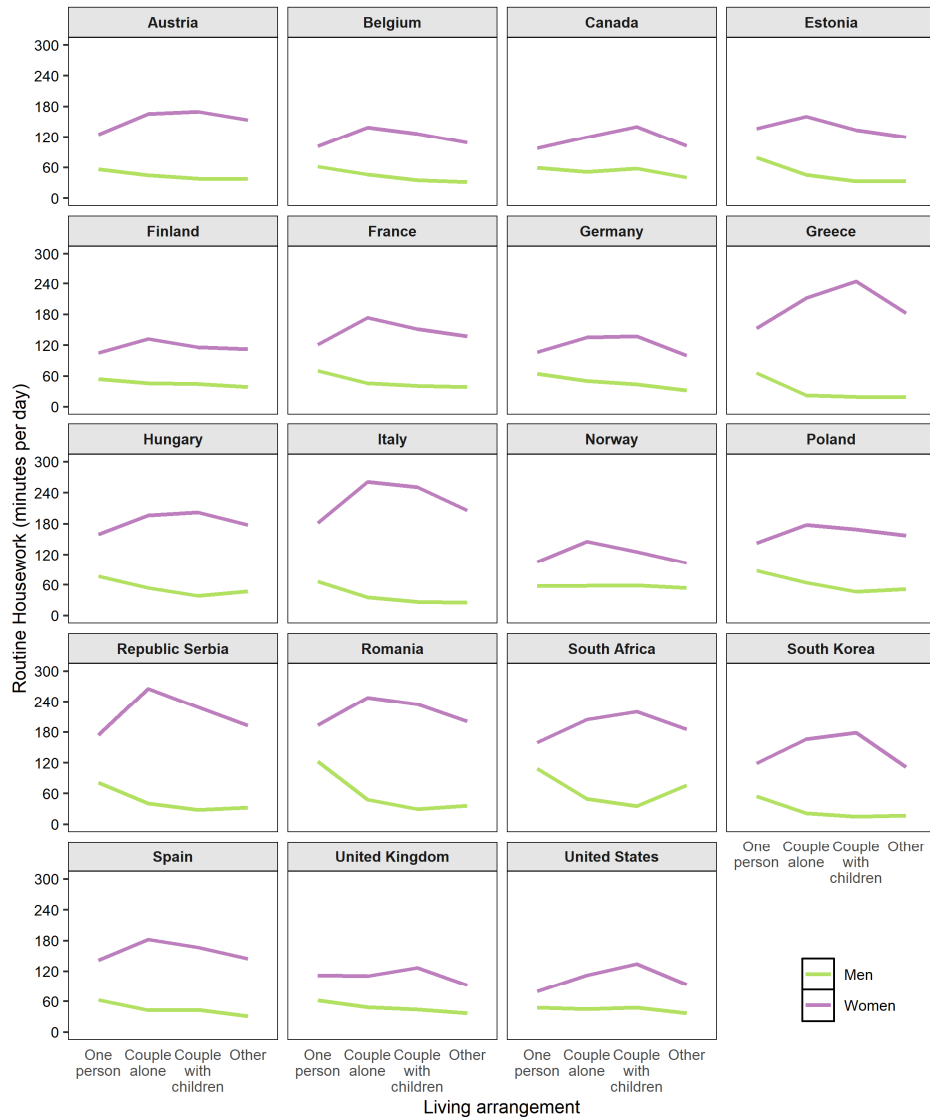
Subsequently, I focus on one-person households. First I estimate the time men and women spend on routine housework and compare the differences. Then I use general linear regression models to examine time spent on routine housework, with gender as the key variable, controlling for factors like country, age, education, time spent on paid work, and the day of the week. Gender differences in housework are evident across age groups, with significant disparities (García-Román and Gracia 2022). Education also plays a role: highly educated women tend to do less housework; men with higher education do more (Cheng and Sayer 2023; Sayer 2016). Weekday and weekend differences in housework patterns are also explored (Pailhé, Solaz, and Stanfors 2021). Additionally, I examine the relationship between routine housework and paid work, as time spent on one affects the other. An interaction between gender and country reveals significant variations across nations. Using these models, I calculate predicted routine housework values by gender and country, ultimately estimating the gender gap in routine housework by country.

3. Results

3.1 Routine housework time by living arrangement

Figure 1 illustrates the time spent on routine housework chores by men and women in four different household types. The estimates reveal that women generally engage in more housework than men across all living arrangements, including individuals living alone. However, the gender differences are less pronounced in one-person households.

Figure 1: Time spent on routine housework by women and men in different living arrangements



Source: Own calculation from HETUS and MTUS.

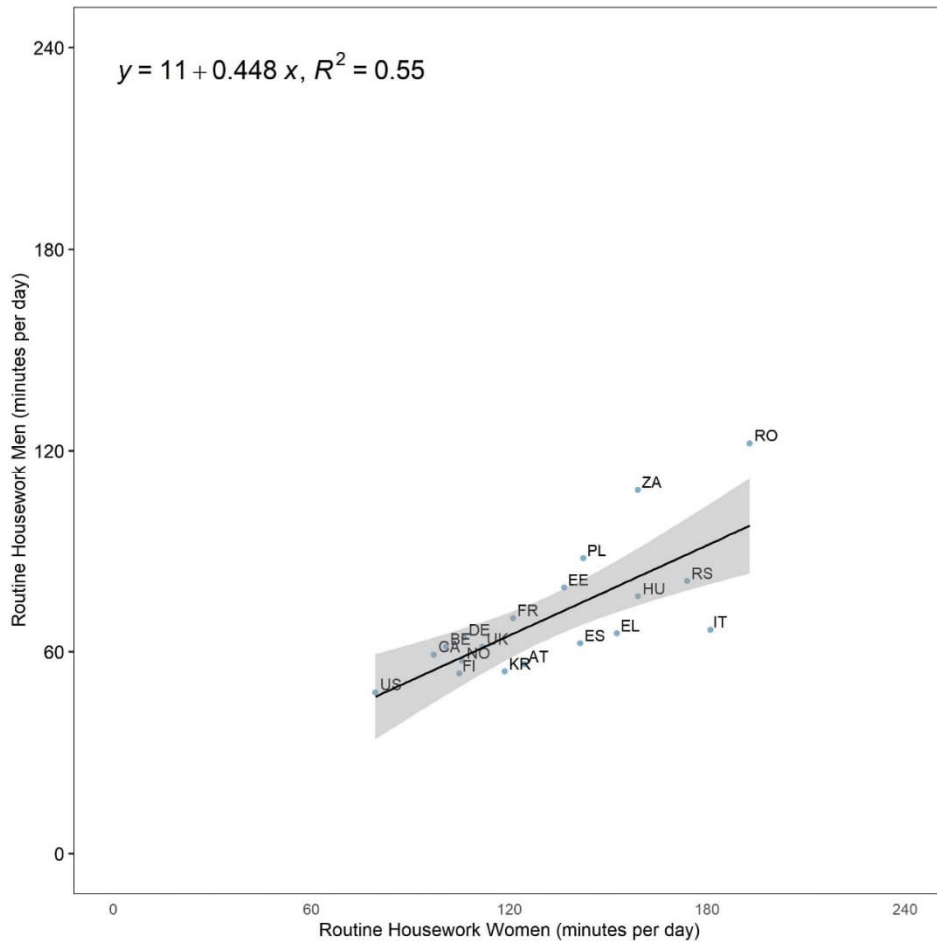
In one-person households, women tend to devote less time to housework than those in other living arrangements, while men tend to spend more time on housework than others. However, the extent of these variations differs among countries. When compared to those living with a partner and children, on average and across all countries in the analysis, women in solo households spend 40 minutes less per day on routine housework. The most significant differences are observed in Greece (91 minutes less for women in solo households) and Italy (70 minutes less), while the smallest differences are noted in Finland (11 minutes less) and the United Kingdom (14 minutes less). Estonia is an exception, as women in one-person households there spend three minutes more on housework than those living with couples and children. For men, those living alone spend an average of 24 minutes more on routine housework than those living with couples and children. The largest differences are in Romania (92 minutes more) and South Africa (73 minutes more). In contrast, for Norway, Canada, and the United States, there is almost no difference. Men's time spent on routine housework remains relatively stable across different living situations, as clearly seen in Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries, where the line on the graph remains almost flat for men.

3.2 Housework time among one-person households

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between housework time for men and women living in one-person households. The figure shows a positive association between the two measures, meaning that in countries where women spend more time doing routine housework, men also spend more time doing this work. This relationship differs from that observed for couples with children in previous studies (García-Román and Ophir 2023).

As shown in Figure 2, there is much more variation between countries in the time devoted to housework by women than the time devoted to housework by men. In countries where women dedicate more time to routine housework, they spend approximately three hours per day on this activity. Romania, Italy, and Serbia lead the rankings in this regard. Conversely, in countries where women spend less time on housework, the average is approximately one hour and 40 minutes per day, except in the United States, where it is one hour and 20 minutes. The countries with the lowest contribution to this activity by women are predominantly Anglo-Saxon, Central European, and Nordic countries.

Figure 2: Time spent on routine housework by women and men in one-person households



Source: Author's calculation from HETUS and MTUS.

Note: Country abbreviations are provided in Table 1.

For men, the greatest investments in routine housework are also observed in Romania (122 minutes per day), followed by South Africa (108 minutes). Notable investments – approximately 90 minutes – are made in Poland. The United States is another country where men spend less time on routine housework (48 minutes), while the

data for a considerable group of countries are situated around the one-hour mark. Similar to what we observe for women, this group includes Anglo-Saxon, Central European, and Nordic countries, but Mediterranean countries such Spain, Italy, and Greece are in the same range.

3.3 Predicted gender gaps in routine housework

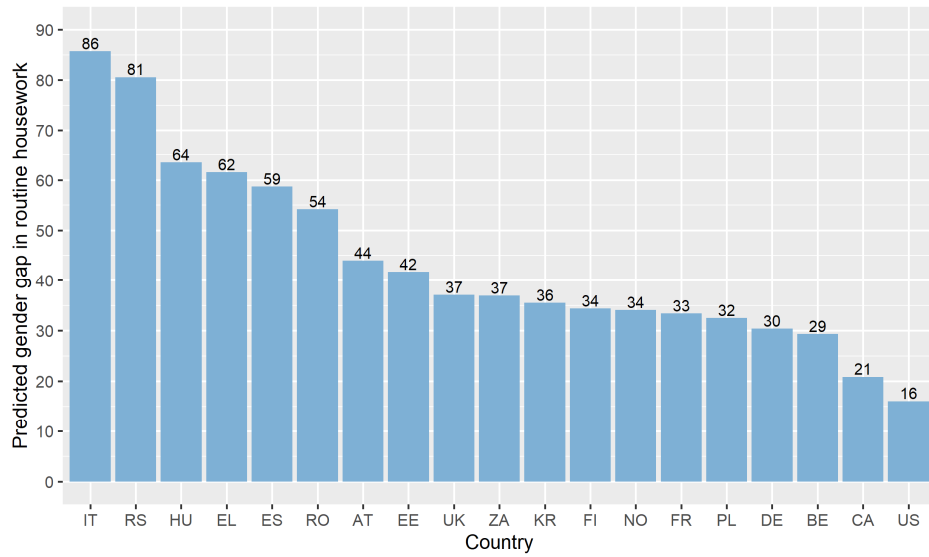
In the preceding section, we examined how gender disparities in routine housework evolve in one-person households. Additionally, we must consider the varying prevalence of one-person households across some key variables such as age, level of education, day of the week or employment status, along with disparities observed across different countries (Esteve et al. 2020). The predicted gender gaps in routine housework, derived from models that account for factors such as age, education, weekday or weekend, and time allocated to paid work, serve as a concise measure illustrating gender inequalities in one-person households across the countries included in our analysis. All coefficients of the models are available upon request.

Figure 3 illustrates the predicted gender inequalities within each country. Based on the figure, four distinct clusters of groups can be identified, delineating the magnitude of anticipated inequality levels. Notably, the most significant gender inequalities in one-person households are observed in Italy and the Republic of Serbia, with predicted gender gaps exceeding 80 minutes per day in both instances.

The subsequent group of countries, encompassing Hungary, Greece, Spain, and Romania, demonstrates a predicted gap of approximately one hour. Moving to another significant cluster, which includes Nordic and Central European countries along with Poland, South Africa, and South Korea, the projected gender gap ranges between 30 and 45 minutes.

Conversely, Canada and the United States display comparatively lower gender gaps, with estimates of 21 and 16 minutes, respectively.

Figure 3: Predicted gender gap in routine housework in one-person households, minutes per day



Source: Author's calculation from HETUS and MTUS.

Notes: Model control by age group, level of education, weekday or weekend, and time spent on paid work. The model also includes an interaction between gender and country. Country abbreviations are provided in Table 1.

4. Conclusions

Despite advancements in women's status and the reduction in gender inequalities across Western societies, a substantial gender gap persists in housework, particularly concerning routine tasks. However, there is limited information about individuals living alone and whether gender differences in housework chores are present within this living arrangement. Similar to findings in previous country-specific studies, our findings for multiple countries from different regions of the world indicate the existence of gender disparities in routine housework among individuals living in one-person households. While these differences are less pronounced than in other living arrangements, they remain significant. The reduced disparities may result from women allocating less time to housework in one-person households compared to those living with others, while men tend to engage more in housework when living alone. From a demographic perspective, understanding these gendered patterns in one-person households offers insight into evolving household structures and the persistence of gendered behaviors, even in the

absence of traditional family dynamics. The gender differences in time spent on routine housework among individuals living alone may reflect personal choices rather than social mechanisms of “doing gender.”

The total amount of housework needed in a household is assumed to depend on the number of family members. Consequently, increasing the household size implies that an increasing share of housework will typically fall on women. However, basic housework is necessary even for individuals living alone, and the necessary time differs between women and men, reflecting distinct standards for each gender in performing housework.

This study shows that notable variations exist between countries, not always aligning with patterns observed in the overall population. Countries exhibit a positive relationship between men’s and women’s time spent on routine housework. Italy and Serbia show the largest gender gaps in routine housework in one-person households, also ranking high in gender gap measurements for the total population. Interestingly, Greece, despite having significant gender inequalities in routine housework, does not fall into this group. Conversely, the United States and Canada display the lowest levels of gender gap, reflecting similar behaviors in terms of housework for men and women living alone. This parity may be attributed to women spending less time on routine housework in these countries, where attitudes toward housework and standards for performing housework (e.g., reliance on ready-to-eat food, less emphasis on cleaning, and availability of more technological devices) appear more similar and emerge more clearly among individuals living alone. South Africa and South Korea also show lower gender gap differences in routine housework in one-person households, similar to Nordic and Central European countries. Surprisingly, Nordic countries (mainly Finland and Norway), usually recognized for their egalitarianism, do not demonstrate this characteristic when only one-person households are considered. While welfare state policies and progressive gender attitudes in Nordic countries promote equality in task division within couples, this emphasis does not appear to extend to individuals living alone. This may reflect a lingering assumption that gender equality in domestic labor is primarily relevant within partnerships rather than for individuals. In that sense, individuals’ differences can be considered the reference point in each context, varying over the life course depending on cultural, social, and welfare state policy factors.

This study faces limitations due to data constraints and challenges in obtaining harmonized information. The process of harmonization for the main databases (MTUS and HETUS) constrained available information. Hence a priority of this study was to encompass the maximum number of countries possible. Another limitation of this study is the lack of information about respondents’ previous living arrangements. Exploring differences among individuals who have always lived alone (except for living in their parental homes) and those who were previously married or who have cohabited would provide valuable insights. Additionally, the study lacks information about domestic

service or external assistance enlisted for housework chores, which could significantly contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of housework.

In conclusion, gender differences exist in one-person households, albeit to a lesser extent than in the overall population. This suggests that gender disparities in routine housework persist even when there is no division of tasks or negotiations of roles, highlighting differing standards for housework between women and men. Nevertheless, the primary contribution of this study lies in introducing a cross-national perspective to the analysis of housework in one-person households. Cross-national variations in routine housework in one-person households present deviations from patterns observed in the overall population. The United States and Canada demonstrate the lowest gender differences, surpassing even the typically more egalitarian Nordic countries. Italy and Serbia remain among the most unequal, while Greece, South Africa, and South Korea exhibit lower differences.

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